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Thriving Beyond Service

STRATEGIC PHILANTHROPY FOR THE
MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN TRANSITION

Taylor Evans, PhD, Glorimar Aragon, and Sylvie Raver, PhD

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The Milken Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank focused on accelerating measurable progress on the path to a meaningful life. With a focus on financial, physical, mental, and environmental health, we bring together the best ideas and innovative resourcing to develop blueprints for tackling some of our most critical global issues through the lens of what's pressing now and what's coming next.

About Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy

Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy advances the strategic deployment of philanthropic capital to create a better, more equitable world.

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Disclaimer

While many organizations and philanthropic endeavors are referenced as examples in this publication, inclusion is not an endorsement.

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Foreword

The transition from military service to civilian life can be profoundly challenging. It may seem obvious, but with less than 1 percent of the total US adult population currently serving in the active-duty military, it is worth underscoring—especially for those of us who have not served.

This is a multifaceted, deeply personal journey that impacts not only veterans but also their families, communities, and the systems surrounding them. And yet, despite the significance and complexity of this transition, support for our veterans remains fragmented, uncoordinated, and often ineffective.

In the veterans funding space alone, an estimated [45,000 nonprofit organizations](#) are working to support this population. That number should give us pause. How can tens of thousands of organizations with no shared performance standards, limited central navigation tools, and inconsistent incentives to collaborate possibly use resources effectively or deliver the impact our veterans deserve?

The truth is, they can't. And the data reflect it.

Despite billions in federal and nonprofit spending each year, the veteran support ecosystem lacks transparency and coherence. Insufficient outcome measurement, limited coordination, and a lack of shared data lead to inefficiencies, duplication, and poorly targeted services. The issue is not a lack of programs or resources. The problem is that far too many programs often don't have their intended effects.

We see the consequences in the numbers. The US Army [missed its recruitment goals](#) in 2022 and 2023 by nearly 25 percent, falling short by over 15,000 troops each year. In addition, [60 percent of veterans self-report being underemployed](#), and [military spouse unemployment has remained stubbornly high](#), hovering around 20 percent for the past decade, four times the national average. Most concerning, veteran suicide rates remain unacceptably high, accounting for [20 percent of all suicide deaths](#) despite making up just 6 percent of the US adult population—roughly 18 lives lost every day. These numbers should both alarm and energize us to work together to design a better way forward.

The Veterans Community Initiative offers just that: a new path defined by a shared vision, bold collaboration, measurable approaches, and a commitment to lasting impact. This strategic philanthropy guide is a call to action. For funders, it lays out a framework for more strategic, data-driven philanthropy. For organizations, it champions performance, transparency, and collective alignment. And for all of us, it presents a challenge: If not us, who?

Veterans are worthy of all our support. Their service and sacrifice should earn more than gratitude. They deserve a strong, enduring commitment to their well-being and success. Supporting veterans should not be relegated to a niche category of philanthropy. It is a responsibility we all share, one that intersects with mental health, education, workforce development, family well-being, and civic strength.

It's time to give smarter—together.

Cayley Tull

President

Tullman Family Office

Mary Ann Roeser

President

The Duchossois Family Foundation

Executive Summary

Military service is a profound form of public service and a uniquely selfless profession. Each year, approximately 200,000 service members leave the military—a process known as the military-to-civilian transition (MCT). Whether anticipated or sudden, this transition has no universal timeline or single pathway. Veterans and their families must often manage multiple challenges simultaneously: securing employment, housing, and other basic needs; navigating federal benefits; establishing physical and mental health care; relocating and integrating into new communities; and redefining their identity and purpose post-service. These demands are intensified by the abrupt shift from a highly structured military environment to a civilian world that requires greater personal autonomy.

Comprehensive support is essential to assist veterans in navigating the MCT and avoiding the risks of mental health challenges, unemployment, and family stress that can prevent veterans from thriving in civilian life. When veterans are supported in this transition, they are better positioned to contribute their leadership and skills to their communities, which reinforces the value of military service. Moreover, when military service is visibly honored through strong post-duty support, it enhances public trust in the armed forces and strengthens national security by encouraging future generations to serve.

In recognition of veterans' service and sacrifice, a broad network of stakeholders—including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic institutions—provides a wide range of support to them. These efforts span employment training, homeownership assistance, health care, mental health services, and benefits navigation. However, despite significant investments of time, capital, and care to help veterans and their families navigate the complexities of the MCT, the current system still falls short in fully meeting the diverse and evolving needs of all who undergo this critical life change.

In 2024, Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy partnered with the Tullman Family Office and The Duchossois Family Foundation to examine unmet needs, funding trends, and systemic challenges within the veteran support ecosystem. One goal of this partnership was to develop a public-facing investment guide for current and prospective funders, nonprofit leaders, and policymakers so they can understand the current state of the field, inform organizational strategies, and identify opportunities for strategic collaboration across sectors. Our analysis involved extensive research, interviews with over 80 experts, and analysis of funding data from more than 17,000 organizations active in the veteran support ecosystem. The assessment findings reveal stark gaps: While many organizations contribute meaningfully, efforts are often fragmented, with groups focusing on specific aspects of transition—such as health, economic opportunity, and community connection—at varying levels of scale, coordination, and efficacy.

This philanthropic guide outlines the key elements of the military-to-civilian transition and the current landscape of support systems. Building on this foundation, we identify strategic philanthropic opportunities to strengthen transition support across four priority areas. For clarity, the ecosystem-wide opportunities are introduced first, followed by an overview of the current state of the veteran transition support ecosystem, to provide the necessary context to understand the three core elements of the MCT—health and well-being, economic opportunity, and community—introduced separately in subsequent sections. Recognizing that progress in one area is most sustainable when aligned with advances across others, we recommend a comprehensive approach, and we have highlighted throughout the guide where investment in one element would have a ripple effect across other aspects of the MCT.

We hope this guide serves as an orienting framework for those already engaged in the veteran support ecosystem and inspires new funders to advance a more coordinated, comprehensive response to the needs of those who have served.

Strategic Philanthropic Opportunities to Support the Military-to-Civilian Transition

Philanthropic Priority A

SUPPORT VETERAN ECOSYSTEM REFORM AND INNOVATION

Opportunity A.1: Increase Resource Navigation Efficiency for Veterans, Families, Veteran-Serving Organizations, and Funders

Philanthropy can strengthen the veteran support ecosystem by promoting and incentivizing alignment, transparency, and collaboration. Key actions include enhancing resource navigation, conducting data-informed assessments of modern MCT needs, scaling technology-driven platforms to navigate resources, and enabling cross-sector partnerships to improve support for veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach A.1.1:** Strengthen the Veteran Support Ecosystem Through Alignment and Transparency
- **Approach A.1.2:** Lead Data-Informed Assessment of Modern Transition Needs
- **Approach A.1.3:** Scale Data-Driven Resource Navigation Platforms to Improve Access and Anticipate Veteran Needs
- **Approach A.1.4:** Catalyze Cross-Sector Collaboration Through Strategic Co-funding Initiatives

Philanthropic Priority B

ENHANCE VETERAN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Opportunity B.1: Expand Understanding of Veteran Brain and Mental Health

Philanthropy can invest in predictive models for mental health trajectories, expand underfunded research on mild and repetitive traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), and scale both innovative and proven mental health treatments. Together, these efforts can improve early intervention, treatment access, and long-term outcomes for veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach B.1.1:** Understand the Continuum of Mental Wellness to Improve Predictive Power
- **Approach B.1.2:** Expand Mild TBI Research and Care
- **Approach B.1.3:** Advance Novel and Effective Veteran Mental Health Therapies

Opportunity B.2: Enhance Health-Care Access and Delivery

Philanthropy can improve health-care access for veterans and their families by integrating Department of Veterans Affairs and community systems through regional health networks to enhance coordination, continuity, and outcomes.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach B.2.1:** Develop an Integrated Health Network to Optimize and Scale Support

Philanthropic Priority C

ADVANCE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity C.1: Increase Opportunities for Career Advancement

Philanthropy plays a critical role in advancing career opportunities for veterans and military spouses, supporting skill building, education, and training initiatives that foster professional and financial fulfillment. By driving collaboration and supporting scalable, data-driven models, philanthropy can ensure long-term success in the civilian workforce for veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach C.1.1:** Address Underemployment Through Data Collection and Collaboration
- **Approach C.1.2:** Expand Transferable Skill-Building Opportunities
- **Approach C.1.3:** Integrate Veteran Experience to Improve Care and Expand Career Pathways
- **Approach C.1.4:** Invest in Entrepreneurship Pathways
- **Approach C.1.5:** Enhance Veteran Support in Higher Education

Opportunity C.2: Address Basic Needs and Financial Stability

Stable housing, food security, and financial stability are foundational to a successful transition from military to civilian life. Philanthropy can play a vital role by funding and scaling programs that meet basic needs and build long-term financial resilience for veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach C.2.1:** Prioritize Short-Term Housing and Food Security Support
- **Approach C.2.2:** Fund Efforts to Prepare Veterans to Overcome Financial Hardship

Philanthropic Priority D

INCREASE COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Opportunity D.1: Strengthen Advocacy and Reframe Public Understanding of Veterans' Transition and Support Needs

Philanthropic support for policy reforms can strengthen the overall support ecosystem by bolstering advocacy efforts for veterans, families, and caregivers. Philanthropy can also help shape the public narrative and reframe the understanding of military service through targeted storytelling and education, fostering a more inclusive, informed approach to supporting veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach D.1.1:** Bolster Advocacy Efforts for Veterans, Families, and Caregivers
- **Approach D.1.2:** Reframe Public Understanding of Military Service and the Veteran Experience

Opportunity D.2: Enhance Transition Support for Military Families

Acknowledging the MCT and adapting services to center the family unit's economic stability, safety, and well-being can meaningfully enhance transition support. This philanthropic opportunity would advance comprehensive, family-centered solutions during the MCT.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach D.2.1:** Develop a Family Transition Framework
- **Approach D.2.2:** Support Holistic Solutions to Safety Concerns in Veteran Families and Communities

An Imperative for Comprehensive Support for the Military-to-Civilian Transition

Veterans are former service members from one of the six branches of the US military: Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Navy, and Space Force. Separation from active duty, whether voluntary or involuntary, marks the start of the MCT, a complex and often lengthy process. During this transition, veterans face life-altering decisions, such as where to relocate their family, what civilian career to choose, and how to secure physical and mental health care. Many veterans report that fully adjusting to civilian life can take five or more years, with evolving health, economic, and community needs throughout the journey.

To support this transition, veterans may engage with a vast network of services spanning the federal government, nonprofit and private sectors, communities, and individuals. Access to these services is shaped by factors such as discharge status, era of service, and geographic location, as well as each veteran's unique needs and circumstances.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks catalyzed a major shift in MCT support, ushering in a new era of national security awareness and public commitment to supporting returning service members. Since then, federal, nonprofit, and philanthropic efforts have expanded significantly, with the establishment of thousands of veteran-serving organizations, particularly focused on the needs of post-9/11 veterans.

DEFINING VETERAN

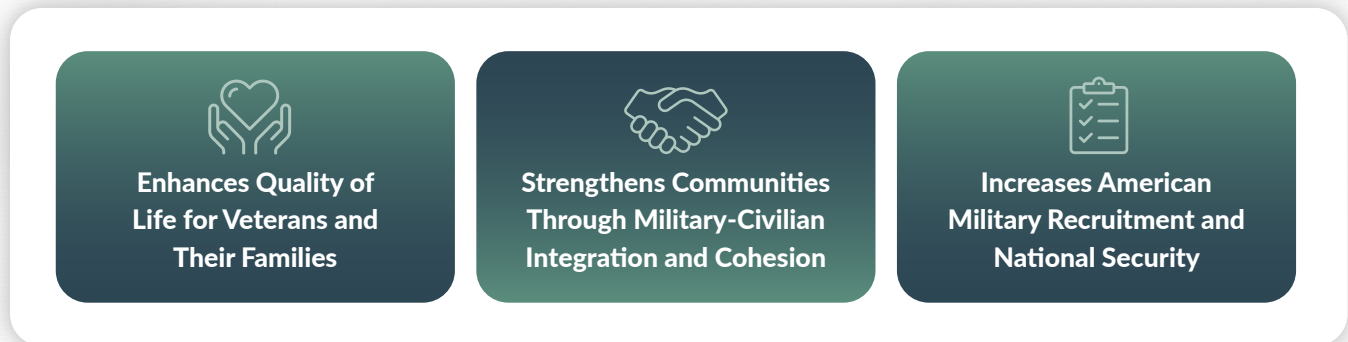
The term *veteran* is used to describe a former service member. United States Code Title 38 defines a veteran as “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable.”

However, outside of the government, many organizations supporting veterans—nonprofits and philanthropy specifically—use a more inclusive definition of *veteran*, encompassing former service members regardless of discharge status and length of service, and all members of the National Guard and Army Reserve, members of the US intelligence community, and other shadow roles often at the forefront of national security operations.

This report uses an inclusive definition of *veteran* that includes all service members regardless of branch, discharge status, or length of service, to capture needs overlooked by traditional channels of veteran support.

While attention to the MCT has fluctuated with military conflicts, policy priorities, and societal focus, the importance of comprehensive support remains clear. Effective MCT support enhances veterans' quality of life, strengthens civilian communities through deeper military-civilian connections, and bolsters national security by supporting an all-volunteer force **(Figure 1)**, thus benefiting veterans, families, and the nation as a whole.

Figure 1. Outcomes of Comprehensive MCT Support



Source: Milken Institute (2025)

A Comprehensive Transition Support Framework

To better understand and organize the essential elements of MCT support, the Milken Institute developed a comprehensive framework, depicted in **Figure 2**. This framework illustrates how each element of MCT support, though distinct, is interdependent and collectively essential to addressing the personalized needs of veterans and their families. The core elements include physical and mental health care; access to basic needs, such as food, housing, employment, and education; and strong family, peer, and community connections. The veteran support ecosystem encompasses all stakeholders dedicated to providing comprehensive transition support across these elements of thriving.

Figure 2. Four Core Elements of a Comprehensive Military-to-Civilian Transition



Source: Milken Institute (2025)

A MULTISECTOR VETERAN SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

Due to the complexity of and number of stakeholders within the veteran support ecosystem, the following sections present only an overview of sectors and their ongoing challenges.

Federal Government

Federal support is designed to operate nationally, guiding veterans through the transition to civilian life primarily through legislative (see **Appendix**) and agency-led initiatives. Three core agencies lead this effort: the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Labor (DOL). While the DOD supports service members during active duty, the VA plays a central role post-service, particularly in addressing veterans' physical, brain, and mental health. Within the VA, the Veterans Health Administration delivers health care and drives biomedical innovation, and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) manages pensions, disability compensation, and benefits tied to education and post-service employment. The DOL primarily focuses on advancing veterans' employment through job training and workforce development, which are key factors influencing long-term health and economic well-being.

However, diffusion of responsibility across stakeholders, narrow programmatic foci, and evolving administrative priorities can significantly influence federal funding for veteran support. For example, while the DOD and VA each play essential roles on either side of the transition process, no single agency is solely responsible for overseeing the full continuum of support. Programs like the Transition Assistance Program, which involve collaboration across multiple agencies, reflect a shared commitment but can make coordination and funding more complex. Federal programs typically operate at a national scale with defined scopes, which can make it challenging to address the full range of individualized transition needs.

These dynamics, along with changes in administrations that can shift funding and policy priorities, contribute to a support landscape that is responsive but sometimes fragmented. In this context, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations are well positioned to complement federal efforts, helping bridge gaps and strengthen support for veterans and their families.

Nonprofit

Veteran-focused nonprofit organizations—as many as 45,000—operate in parallel with government stakeholders, offering services that reflect the diverse needs of transitioning veterans. Those offerings range from direct services to advocacy. Regardless of their operating models, nonprofit organizations serving veterans and their families, termed broadly as *veteran-serving organizations*, are integral to a holistic support system that addresses the multifaceted needs of veterans transitioning to civilian life. A specific subgroup of veteran-serving organizations, termed *veteran service organizations* (VSOs), is accredited through the VA to assist veterans in navigating and applying for VA benefits, such as health-care services.

The ecosystem's wide-ranging composition—including organizations of different sizes, service offerings, funding models, and geographic reach—enhances its ability to address complex challenges. However, this diversity also introduces obstacles, particularly around fundraising, strategic coordination, and long-term sustainability. In the absence of standardized accountability metrics or consistent impact tracking, it can be difficult to distinguish high-performing organizations, presenting challenges to transparency and accountability to the public.

The lack of performance standards has also made it harder to make informed funding decisions and contributed to a competitive funding environment that may inadvertently discourage collaboration among veteran-serving organizations, negatively affecting veteran support.

Additionally, fluctuating interest in military and veteran-related issues can affect funding levels, creating uncertainty for nonprofit organizations, even as demand for their services remains steady. Addressing these challenges presents an opportunity to improve coordination, increase transparency, and strengthen the nonprofit sector's overall impact on veteran support.

Philanthropy

Philanthropy plays a critical role in sustaining and advancing support for veterans and their families post-service. Funders—including private and public foundations, corporate philanthropy, and individual donors—are integral to comprehensive veteran transition support and bolster direct services and research initiatives across health, economic, and community domains. Philanthropy's adaptability and flexibility are uniquely valuable, allowing it to respond to emerging needs and fill critical gaps. However, these same qualities can create challenges in navigating a complex support ecosystem that often lacks transparency and coordination.

Philanthropic funding in the veteran space tends to mirror broader sector trends, prioritizing issues like housing, employment, mental health, and financial stability. While many civilian-focused funders share these goals, they may not recognize the alignment with veteran-focused efforts, missing opportunities for partnership. Limited transparency between funders and service providers reinforces silos, resulting in an ecosystem segmented by issue area and population and reducing the potential for crosscutting impact. Concerns about the sustainability of philanthropic support have also grown amid shifting priorities. Interest in veteran-related initiatives often fluctuates with political and social climates, military conflict, and changes in federal leadership.

There is an ongoing call for the philanthropic community to remain engaged and transparent with one another in pursuit of more collaborative, sustainable veteran transition support.

While there are notable successes within individual areas of veteran support, efforts often remain siloed. Government agencies, nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector typically concentrate on specific elements of the transition experience rather than addressing the full continuum of needs. This fragmented approach creates an uneven landscape that places the burden of coordination on veterans and their families, who must independently piece together support from multiple sources.

It also poses challenges for funders seeking to adopt a holistic yet strategic approach, as they must identify where needs are most acute and where philanthropic investment can achieve the greatest impact. Ongoing engagement, collaboration, and transparency across philanthropic actors are essential to ensure stable, long-term support for veterans and their families. Alongside addressing focused gaps in support across health and well-being, economic opportunity, and community, philanthropy has a powerful opportunity to approach these systemic challenges by investing in the infrastructure that underpins the ecosystem itself.



PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY A

Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation

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Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation

To ensure a meaningful and lasting impact, the veteran support ecosystem must be optimized through greater coordination, shared development of goals and measures of impact, and a unified commitment to improving outcomes. Philanthropy can drive systemic reform (**Figure 3**) that improves the efficiency and navigability of this system by investing in data-informed resource navigation, setting accountability standards for veteran-serving organizations, and funding comprehensive assessments to realign support systems with modern veteran needs.

Figure 3. Philanthropic Opportunities to Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation

Opportunity Area	Approach	Primary Elements of Impact			
		Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity A.1: Increase Resource Navigation Efficiency for Veterans, Families, Veteran-Serving Organizations, and Funders	Approach A.1.1: Strengthen the Veteran Support Ecosystem Through Alignment and Transparency	✓			
	Approach A.1.2: Lead Data-Informed Assessment of Modern Transition Needs	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Approach A.1.3: Scale Data-Driven Resource Navigation Platforms to Improve Access and Anticipate Veteran Needs	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Approach A.1.4: Catalyze Cross-Sector Collaboration Through Strategic Co-funding Initiatives	✓			

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

OPPORTUNITY A.1

INCREASE RESOURCE NAVIGATION EFFICIENCY FOR VETERANS, FAMILIES, VETERAN-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS, AND FUNDERS

Philanthropy plays a crucial role in strengthening the veteran support ecosystem by promoting alignment, transparency, and collaboration. Key actions include enhancing resource navigation, conducting data-informed assessments of modern MCT needs, scaling technology-driven platforms to navigate resources, and incentivizing cross-sector partnerships to improve support for veterans and their families.

Approach A.1.1: Strengthen the Veteran Support Ecosystem Through Alignment and Transparency

The complexity and lack of clear performance standards across veteran-serving organizations create challenges for organizations and funders, hindering transparency, coordination, and impact. Philanthropy helps shape the ecosystem but often operates in silos, making strategic funding and collaboration difficult. By building and aligning around common metrics, codeveloping definitions of organizational effectiveness, and creating tools to help stakeholders identify high-performing organizations by focus area, funders can elevate transparency and cohesion. These efforts would promote data-informed decision-making, reduce duplication, and direct support toward the areas of greatest need and measurable impact.

Approach A.1.2: Lead Data-Informed Assessment of Modern Transition Needs

The needs of veterans and their families continue to evolve, but many current approaches to support are based on outdated assumptions, leading to inefficiencies, duplication, and critical gaps. A data-informed assessment of modern transition needs could help identify which solutions must be developed, scaled, or updated while surfacing underrecognized milestones that require attention and investment. This effort would provide valuable insight to veterans, families, veteran-serving organizations, and funders alike. With the right partners and scope, philanthropy is well positioned to galvanize attention, drive this assessment, and help transform how the ecosystem supports today's transitioning service members.

Approach A.1.3: Scale Data-Driven Resource Navigation Platforms to Improve Access and Anticipate Veteran Needs

Resource navigation remains a significant burden for veterans and their families, who often spend considerable time locating services across a fragmented ecosystem with inconsistent eligibility requirements and organizational inefficiencies. Technology-enabled platforms like [Combined Arms](#) and [Unite Us](#) have made progress in streamlining access, but their impact is constrained by geographic reach. Philanthropy can catalyze the scaling of these technologies nationally, building a centralized platform that not only eases access to community, state, and federal resources but also generates data to strengthen referral networks and develop predictive models that anticipate veteran needs.

Approach A.1.4: Catalyze Cross-Sector Collaboration Through Strategic Co-funding Initiatives

Despite a shared desire to reduce redundancy and improve coordination, meaningful collaboration in the veteran support ecosystem remains the exception rather than the norm due to competitive funding and a lack of

transparency and standardization. Siloed military-civilian systems and limited engagement from funders outside the traditional veteran space further constrain cross-sector collaboration, even when mission overlap exists in areas like mental health, housing, and caregiver support.

Philanthropy has an opportunity to model efficiency and catalyze collaboration through co-funding initiatives, leveraging mechanisms—such as pooled funds, specialized grant offerings, prizes, innovation competitions, and accelerators—that incentivize partnerships among veteran-serving organizations and between veteran- and civilian-focused organizations. This approach could encourage the codevelopment of solutions based on shared priorities while using the individual organizational strengths of funded service providers and helping to integrate veteran support into civilian systems. Taken further, co-funding opportunities could be aligned with agreed-upon common metrics of organizational effectiveness to elevate high-performing veteran support providers and encourage consolidation within the field. These collaborative efforts could result in a stronger, more unified ecosystem better equipped to meet the evolving needs of veterans and their families and better positioned to use powerful, streamlined data to inform storytelling.

State of the Field

This section includes an overview of the veteran support ecosystem, including stakeholders and funding.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND FUNDING SUMMARY

The transition from military to civilian life is a deeply personal and nonlinear journey that requires support across all dimensions of life. While individualized support is necessary, the veteran support ecosystem is crucial in providing systemic support and infrastructure, with investment and impact spread across three primary stakeholder groups: the federal government, nonprofit veteran-serving organizations, and philanthropy. Although many initiatives yield secondary and tertiary impacts across multiple dimensions of transition, the interconnected nature of veteran support is often undermined by siloed efforts. Despite shared goals and significant potential for synergy, many organizations operate independently without a shared understanding of organizational effectiveness and impact, leading to duplication of services and inefficiencies in funding.

Figure 4 provides an overview of selected stakeholders that are referenced in and/or contributed to this report. Check marks indicate each group's primary areas of impact on the veteran support ecosystem to illustrate how different stakeholders contribute to the MCT.

The check marks do not capture the entirety of each organization's programmatic offerings or the scale of organizational support across different elements of veteran support. Furthermore, many of the nonprofits in this ecosystem also provide grants to other nonprofits and implement direct service programs. Therefore, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations have been combined in Figure 4 to encompass the breadth of organizational models. *Health and Well-Being* includes physical and mental health care; *Economic Opportunity* encompasses access to basic needs, such as food, housing, employment, and education; and *Community* refers to family, peer connections, and community support. *Ecosystem* denotes the building and maintenance of foundational infrastructure, such as data and knowledge resources, as well as field and capacity building. The veteran support ecosystem encompasses all stakeholders dedicated to providing comprehensive transition support across these elements of thriving.

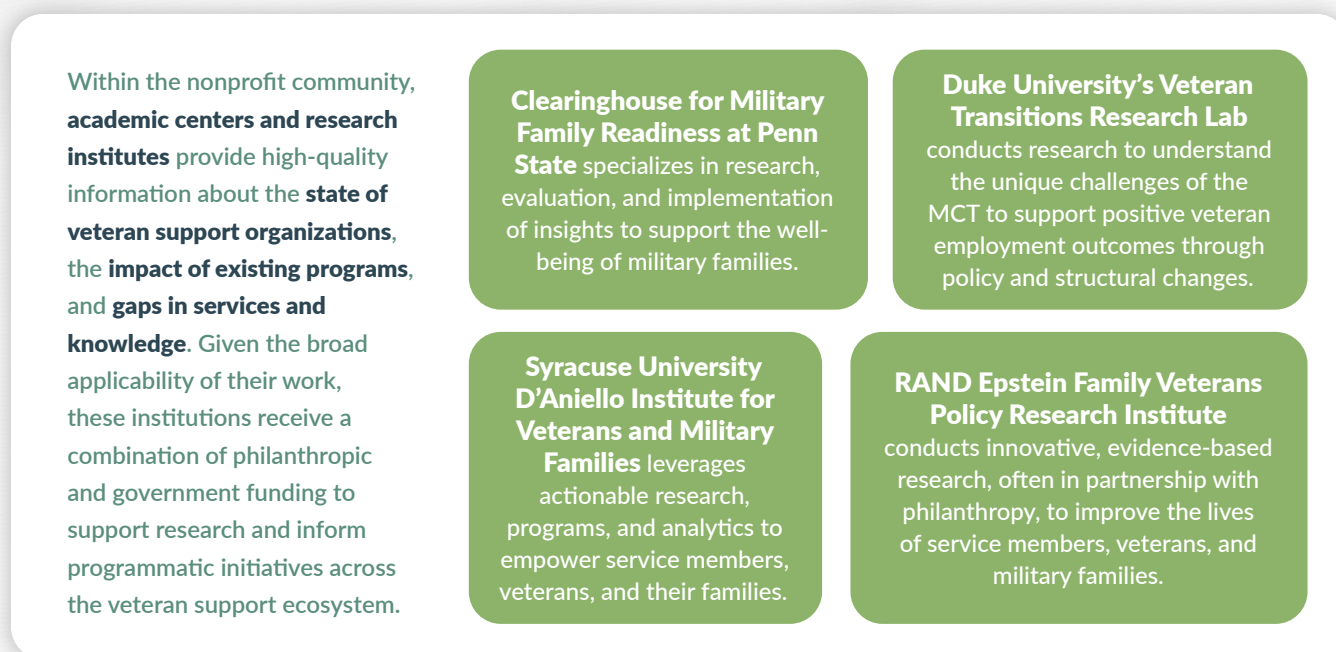
Figure 4. Select Stakeholders and Their Primary Impact Areas Across Core Elements of Transition Support

Stakeholder Group	Select Stakeholder	Ecosystem	Health and Well-Being		Economic Opportunity			Community	
		Infrastructure	Physical Health	Brain and Mental Health	Basic Needs	Employment	Education and Training	Family	Community and Connection
Federal Government	Department of Defense	✓				✓			
	Department of Labor	✓				✓	✓		
	Department of Veterans Affairs	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Nonprofits and Philanthropy	A. James and Alice B. Clark Foundation	✓							✓
	Blue Star Families	✓						✓	✓
	Bob Woodruff Foundation	✓							✓
	Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State	✓							
	D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families	✓				✓	✓	✓	
	Elizabeth Dole Foundation	✓						✓	✓
	Gary Sinise Foundation				✓			✓	✓
	Headstrong Project			✓					
	The Heinz Endowments	✓				✓			
	Hire Heroes USA					✓		✓	
	Home Depot Foundation				✓	✓			
	Military Family Advisory Network	✓						✓	
	Paralyzed Veterans of America	✓	✓	✓					
	RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute	✓							
	Stop Soldier Suicide			✓					
	Team Red, White & Blue		✓						✓
	Veteran Transitions Research Lab	✓				✓			
	Veterans for All Voters								✓
	Walmart Foundation					✓	✓		
	Warrior-Scholar Project						✓		✓
	Wounded Warrior Project	✓	✓	✓				✓	

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

The ecosystem must prioritize ongoing evaluation to strengthen coordination and maximize impact. To this end, within the nonprofit community, select academic centers and research institutes (**Figure 5**) represent neutral third parties that rigorously analyze quantitative and qualitative data to identify where support is concentrated, where high-impact organizations are delivering measurable results, and where critical gaps remain. With increased and sustained investment, these institutions are well positioned to expand their reach and help scale evidence-based practices across the broader ecosystem.

Figure 5. Academic Centers and Research Institutes

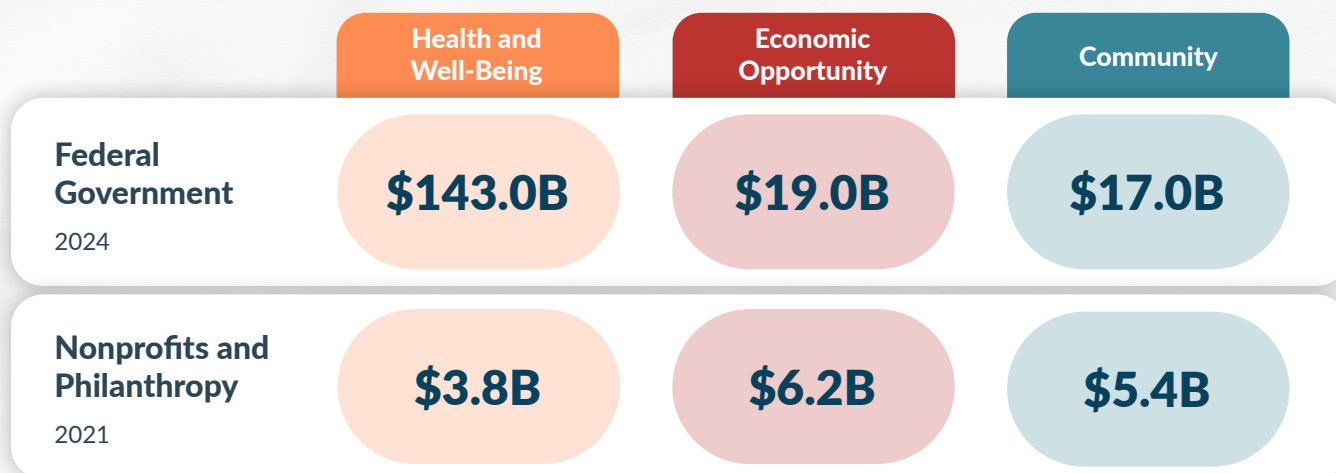


Sources: Milken Institute (2025), adapted from [Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State \(2025\)](#); [Veteran Transitions Research Lab \(2025\)](#); [Syracuse University D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families \(2025\)](#); [RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute \(2025\)](#)

The stakeholders in the veteran support ecosystem share responsibility for developing and funding services that address the diverse needs of veterans and their families. In early 2025, the Milken Institute analyzed funding levels related to health and well-being, economic opportunity, and community support across key government, nonprofit, and philanthropic stakeholders. The methodology of this analysis is summarized in the **Appendix**.

Figure 6 provides a high-level summary of funding directed into the veteran support ecosystem across elements of transition by federal government, nonprofit, and philanthropic funders. The figure uses the most recently available government budget (FY 2024) and the most recent complete Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax filing data (FY 2021). While the federal government primarily funds and delivers standardized services, particularly in health and well-being, nonprofit and philanthropic actors play a complementary role, significantly shaping support for veterans' economic and community needs. Community-focused initiatives receive the least federal investment, while many veteran-serving organizations provide support for military families and local engagement. In response, philanthropy has directed resources toward community-driven programs to amplify the impact of these organizations.

Figure 6. Overview of Funding Across Key Stakeholder Groups and Their Relative Scale Across the Core Elements of Transition



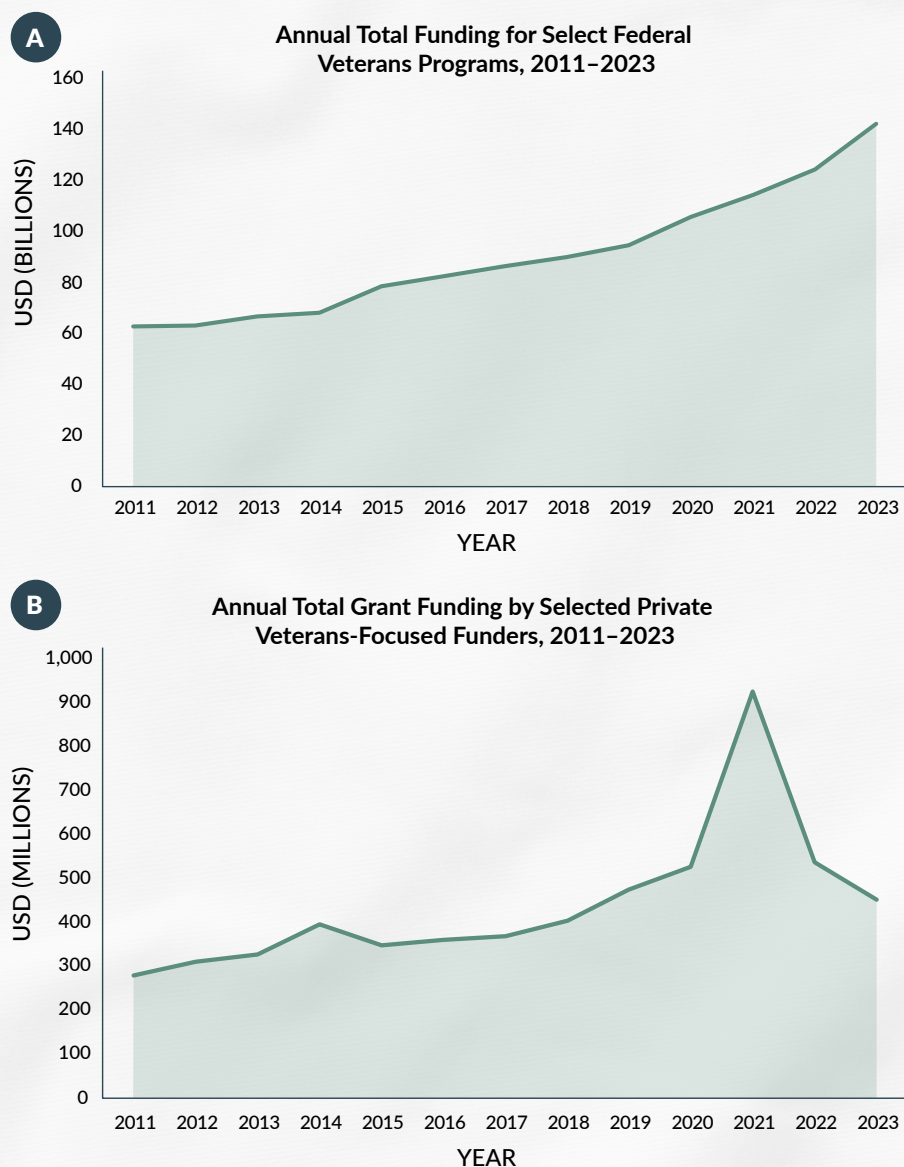
Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Limitations in data quality and availability prevent a complete longitudinal analysis of public and private funding into the veteran support ecosystem. However, a targeted analysis of investments by select stakeholders can provide additional insights into the current state of the veteran support ecosystem. A snapshot of federal and philanthropic investment between 2011 and 2023 is shown in **Figure 7**.

At the federal level, annual investment in federal programs supporting veterans, notably through the VA and DOL, has increased steadily from 2011 to 2023 (**Figure 7A**). Total annual investment has more than doubled in this time frame, rising from approximately \$60 billion to \$140 billion and reflecting the federal government's commitment to the evolving and long-term needs of the post-9/11 veteran population.

To examine trends in philanthropic support for veterans during the same period, we analyzed publicly available IRS tax filing data from a subset of funders with sustained commitments to the veteran support ecosystem—specifically those profiled in **Figure 4**. As shown in **Figure 7B**, total annual grantmaking from this sample reveals a more nuanced picture: Overall funding increased only modestly between 2011 and 2023, with a sharp but short-lived peak in 2021, likely responses related to COVID-19, followed by a return to prepandemic levels. While this analysis is not a comprehensive or fully quantitative account of all private funding for veterans since 2011, it offers insight into the general trajectory of philanthropic investment in this space.

Figure 7. Annual Funding Across Select Federal Programs and Select Funders, 2011–2023



Notes:

A) Annual total funding for select programs across the VA and DOL between 2011 and 2023, with data obtained from each agency's annual budget.

B) Annual total of grants made by select private funders between 2011 and 2023, with data obtained from annual IRS 990 filings by the selected stakeholders profiled in **Figure 4**. These include the Walmart Foundation, Home Depot Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, A. James & Alice B. Clark Foundation, Wounded Warrior Project, Elizabeth Dole Foundation, Gary Sinise Foundation, and Bob Woodruff Foundation*.

*Some of the funders included in this analysis are nonprofits that provide services to veterans and also distribute funding to community partners and thus serve as a dominant source of funding within the veteran support ecosystem.

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Philanthropy has a history of sustaining and scaling nonprofit efforts and, thus, has played a crucial role in the veteran support ecosystem, leading and influencing ecosystem priorities to expand the depth, breadth, and quality of support services for veterans and their families. Its flexibility and ability to incentivize stakeholders to model behaviors they aspire to see from others make it especially well suited to respond to emerging needs, cultural shifts, and gaps across the ecosystem. Through strategic investments to drive alignment, transparency, and collaboration, philanthropy can transform the efficiency and effectiveness of veteran support systems and help reshape the veteran transition experience. In addition to investment into the broader veteran support ecosystem, focused funding to address element-specific gaps is crucial to achieving comprehensive, collaborative transition support for veterans and their families.



PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY B

Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY B

Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being

Supporting the health and well-being of veterans is essential to their successful transition from military to civilian life. While the federal government remains the primary provider of veteran health services and a key funder of veterans-focused health research, nonprofits are enhancing and expanding care. Philanthropy (**Figure 8**) can catalyze progress to understand and address the complex mental and physical health needs of veterans; scale access to innovative, evidence-based care models that improve long-term well-being; and advance collaboration between veteran and civilian health systems to ultimately enhance health outcomes and streamline care.

Figure 8. Philanthropic Opportunities to Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being

Opportunity Area	Approach	Primary Elements of Impact			
		Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity B.1: Expand Understanding of Veteran Brain and Mental Health	Approach B.1.1: Understand the Continuum of Mental Wellness to Improve Predictive Power	✓	✓		
	Approach B.1.2: Expand Mild TBI Research and Care		✓		
	Approach B.1.3: Advance Novel and Effective Veteran Mental Health Therapies		✓		
Opportunity B.2: Enhance Health-Care Access and Delivery	Approach B.2.1: Develop an Integrated Health Network to Optimize and Scale Support	✓	✓		✓

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

OPPORTUNITY B.1

EXPAND UNDERSTANDING OF VETERAN BRAIN AND MENTAL HEALTH

Philanthropy has an opportunity to transform veteran mental and brain health by investing in predictive models for suicide prevention, expanding underfunded research on mild and repetitive TBIs, and scaling both innovative and proven mental health treatments. Together, these efforts can improve early intervention, treatment access, and long-term outcomes for veterans and their families.

Approach B.1.1: Understand the Continuum of Mental Wellness to Improve Predictive Power

Philanthropic investment can significantly impact veteran well-being by addressing pre- and post-service mental health. Funders can accelerate a shift toward upstream, predictive mental health solutions by supporting the development and validation of a digital model that integrates ecosystem data. Such a model could proactively identify suicide risk and guide early interventions, ultimately improving outcomes for veterans, military families, and, potentially, the broader population.

Simultaneously, a crucial opportunity exists to gain deeper insights into mental health at the onset of military service. This type of assessment represents an unmet need in veterans' health research. Philanthropy can support national research efforts, providing grants to capture and analyze mental and brain health data from individuals entering service. Integrating this pre-service understanding with interventions—such as proactive tools like Crisis Response Plans (which can be scaled) and technological innovations for early risk detection and data-informed modeling—addressing post-service challenges offers a comprehensive approach.

Approach B.1.2: Expand Mild TBI Research and Care

Current TBI research across the government and academia primarily focuses on severe cases, but mild and repetitive TBIs remain under-investigated and underfunded. Greater understanding of the full TBI spectrum, particularly mild TBIs, could improve prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and management of these brain injuries during and after military service. Philanthropy could support expansion of TBI research and clinical trials to include mild, repetitive cases and fund longitudinal studies to track TBIs' long-term effects on health and social needs.

Approach B.1.3: Advance Novel and Effective Veteran Mental Health Therapies

The growing need for personalized brain and mental health care has driven investment in new diagnostic, therapeutic, and treatment approaches, including psychedelics and technology-assisted therapies. Philanthropic support for ongoing or future clinical trials can help integrate these innovative therapies into mainstream care. In parallel, highly effective treatments for conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) already exist. Philanthropy can be crucial in scaling access to these proven treatments, including evidence-based nonpharmaceutical options and established medications. By improving access, philanthropy ensures veterans benefit from cutting-edge innovations and well-established, effective care.

OPPORTUNITY B.2

ENHANCE HEALTH-CARE ACCESS AND DELIVERY

Philanthropy can strengthen health-care access for veterans and their families by integrating VA and community systems through regional health networks that improve coordination, continuity, and outcomes.

Approach B.2.1: Develop an Integrated Health Network to Optimize and Scale Support

Many veterans and military families seek care from nonprofit or civilian providers after service for convenience or comfort, but these systems are often not designed with the needs of the military-connected community in mind, impacting care efficiency. Creating pathways to integrate and optimize support across veteran and civilian health-care systems could help veterans thrive after service. Research from the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University has shown that veterans' [health-related social needs are better addressed](#) when VA health centers and community-based organizations have stable and established partnerships.

A regional integrated health network could be piloted to integrate health care across a referral network that includes a VA medical center and community providers to achieve interoperability and improve patient navigability and continuity of care. This model would build on existing federal efforts, such as the VA's Community Care Network, which links VA facilities with non-VA providers to expand access. While the VA offers pathways for eligible veterans to seek [care outside its medical centers](#) and has [tools to share electronic health information](#), extensive coordination remains limited. Complex referral processes, [eligibility restrictions](#), and ongoing interoperability challenges between medical systems continue to hinder seamless care. As a neutral convener, philanthropy is well positioned to pilot and evaluate a truly integrated approach—one that strengthens access, improves delivery, and centers the needs of veterans across systems.

State of the Field

Health and well-being support is one element of the constellation of support veterans need to thrive post-service. This section gives an overview of current veteran physical, brain, and mental health needs and supports during the MCT.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Military service places intense physical demands on the body, from operational strain to combat exposure and injury, frequently resulting in long-term health impacts. These effects are often recognized as service-connected disability (SCD). As of 2022, about 5.4 million veterans—nearly 30 percent—had an SCD, [almost double the rate in 2008](#). In contrast, the national disability rate remained relatively stable over that period, highlighting the unique physical toll of military service. Yet even beyond diagnosed disabilities, many veterans struggle to maintain their physical health after separation from the military, as the loss of structured routines and access to military fitness resources can make it difficult to prioritize exercise, rehabilitation, and preventive care.

Chronic pain is a leading physical health issue for veterans, often stemming from service-related injuries and stressors. [Defined](#) as consistent pain lasting more than three months, chronic pain [affects more than 65 percent of veterans](#) and exists at higher rates and with greater severity among veterans than among non-veterans. Veterans ages 20–64

are especially impacted, with younger veterans (ages 20–34) showing the [most significant disparity with non-veterans](#) (27.1 percent of veterans experience chronic pain, compared to 9.4 percent of non-veterans). Chronic pain contributes to mental health challenges like depression and anxiety, and can limit work productivity, affecting financial stability. Its complex impact underscores the need for integrated care approaches across veteran health systems.



SPOTLIGHT | Million Veteran Program Expands Veteran-Focused Biomedical Research

Advancing the understanding of veteran-specific health conditions like chronic pain can improve the diagnoses of and treatment for both veterans and civilians. Most veteran health research is conducted through the VA's Office of Research and Development and its Centers of Excellence. A key initiative is the [Million Veteran Program](#) (MVP), a large-scale longitudinal study launched in 2011 to examine how genetics, lifestyle, and environment influence health. With over 1 million participants, the program has generated important clinical insights into conditions such as lung cancer, heart disease, and suicide risk. As of [March 2025](#), MVP data have resulted in over 400 publications that are providing clinically relevant insights for enhancing disease risk prediction, improving diagnosis, and expanding potential therapeutic strategies.

BRAIN AND MENTAL HEALTH

The experiences of post-9/11 veterans have reshaped national attention on veteran health, particularly the impact of combat on brain and mental health. This population faces [elevated risks](#) for TBI, PTSD, and suicide, making these areas key priorities in both research and clinical care.

Traumatic Brain Injury

TBI, which occurs when the brain is damaged by physical force, has affected more than 500,000 veterans since 2000, according to the DOD [Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence](#). Most reported cases (82 percent) are mild TBIs, which often go undiagnosed due to their complexity and heterogeneity. While TBI diagnostic criteria and determination of the condition's severity have primarily required a loss of consciousness, there is increased recognition, with new medical understanding, that this threshold may fail to capture many veterans who never lost consciousness but still suffered acute and/or repeated traumas during training or combat. Even mild TBIs can cause lasting cognitive and neurological effects, highlighting the need for improved diagnostics and understanding of their long-term impact.

To this point, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services now recognizes TBI as a chronic condition, effective January 2025. This acknowledgment represents a significant milestone for expanding resources and benefits to veterans and civilians with brain injuries.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD, [first formally diagnosed among Vietnam veterans](#), can affect anyone but is notably prevalent among service members. About [7 percent of veterans report PTSD in their lifetime](#). However, rates are significantly higher for post-9/11 veterans (29 percent) than those in other service eras. Rates among post-9/11 veterans are likely influenced by factors such as the delayed formal recognition of the condition and reliance on data from VA health-care users, who may present with higher rates of PTSD.

While there is no pharmacological treatment approved primarily for PTSD, multiple evidence-based and experimental therapies exist to treat the disorder—including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure therapy, and Stellate Ganglion Block—and these therapies can be augmented by peer-to-peer support from within veteran cohorts. These nonpharmaceutical treatment options are highly effective when delivered frequently, consistently, and with wraparound supports (such as lodging and financial assistance) that minimize barriers to access and opportunities for treatment avoidance.

However, barriers to treatment remain, including a persistent stigma associated with seeking care for mental health conditions and the limited capacity of many treatment providers, which reduces overall access.

PTSD can be treated effectively with proper evidence-based care. Success depends on regular treatment, ongoing support, and follow-up. The promise of success with treatment highlights the need to improve access to quality mental health services.

While the VA remains the central mental health-care provider for veterans, academic centers and nonprofits have augmented the VA's capacity and expanded access with innovative models. Programs at academic institutions—such as the Emory Healthcare Veterans Program and the [Road Home Program](#) affiliated with Rush University—provide personalized treatment regimes, rapidly identify treatment nonresponders to adjust approaches, and expand access through widespread adoption of virtual care. These programs complement VA services while extending reach to underserved veterans.

The role of private-sector innovation is also growing. Noninvasive neurotechnology-based Magnetic Electroencephalogram Resonance Therapy (MeRT) and emerging psychedelic treatments like methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) are showing efficacy when used in combination with other evidence-based psychotherapies and represent the promising, personalized approaches under development. As these experimental and alternative therapies evolve (**Figure 9**), they not only advance care access and delivery for veterans but also influence broader mental health advancements across civilian populations.

Figure 9. Emerging Trends for Improving Veteran Brain and Mental Health



Advancements in Care Access and Delivery

Accelerated/concentrated care programs address logistical hurdles associated with mental health care, such as time, cost, and child care.

Personalized treatment recognizes the unique clinical and therapeutic needs of patients to provide optimal care.

The role of technology is increasing through the integration of digital diagnosis, treatment, and care delivery methods.

Provider education expands the pool of accessible providers trained to meet the health-care needs of veterans and their families.



Experimental and Alternative Therapeutic Strategies

Psychedelics, more specifically MDMA, can be combined with psychotherapy to treat PTSD.

Stellate Ganglion Block assists in quieting the sympathetic nervous system, reducing hypervigilance, and enhancing the efficacy of additional therapeutic strategies.

Complementary approaches build on treatment plans for increased personalization of care and can include offerings such as pelvic floor therapy, art therapy, and equine therapy.

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Veteran Suicide

Despite decades of investment and well-intentioned programming, veteran suicide remains one of the most persistent and devastating challenges facing the community. According to the VA's [2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#), the 2021 age- and sex-adjusted suicide rate for veterans was 78.1 percent higher than for non-veterans—the most significant gap since 2001. Between 2020 and 2021, the age-adjusted suicide rate for women veterans rose nearly 25 percent, with a 280 percent increase in firearm suicide for veteran women compared to their non-veteran peers.

Promisingly, the [2024 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, Part 1 of 2: In-Depth Reviews](#) indicates a ~24 percent decline in age-adjusted female veteran suicide rates between 2021 and 2022—an encouraging sign of progress. Conversely, male veterans saw a 1.6 percent increase in age-adjusted suicide rates during the same period, underscoring the continued need to understand suicide risk across the entire veteran population, scale effective interventions, and develop solutions upstream of crisis.

[Retrospective research](#) has identified risks for heightened suicidality during the MCT that include challenges with mental and physical health, housing, financial security, diminished sense of purpose, and social isolation. Understanding these underlying risks can help direct resources and interventions upstream of crisis. Scaling simple and effective tools like the [Crisis Response Plan](#) can also help direct resources and interventions. A Crisis Response Plan is a proactive and individualized plan that helps veterans acknowledge reasons for living, identify connections in their community, and note providers to contact in the event of a crisis.

Technology and innovation play a role in developing [predictive methods that identify at-risk individuals](#) and families and help mitigate risk factors. For example, the VA program [Mission Daybreak](#) has been repeatedly lauded as an important driver of suicide prevention efforts. It funds innovations in artificial intelligence, data science, and clinical medicine led by veteran-serving organizations, start-ups, and academic institutions to address the veteran suicide crisis.

Public-private partnerships are similarly advancing solutions to address the high proportion of firearm suicides in the veteran population. With firearms involved in [more than 70 percent of veteran suicide deaths](#), more initiatives are needed to address firearm storage and safety within the veteran community. The ongoing [partnership between the VA and the National Shooting Sports Foundation](#), a firearm industry trade association, is one such initiative.



SPOTLIGHT | Stop Soldier Suicide and Mission Daybreak

In 2023, the VA announced that [Stop Soldier Suicide](#), a veteran-serving organization founded in 2010 by US Army veterans, was the first-place winner of its [Mission Daybreak](#) program's grand challenge. Stop Soldier Suicide's Black Box Project leverages artificial intelligence and machine learning to detect patterns on digital devices entrusted to the organization by surviving family members of veterans who have died by suicide. These technological approaches are being used to build predictive models that identify veterans who are at the greatest risk for suicide and when interventions might be most effective.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Federal Government

Federal support for veteran health and well-being is primarily provided through the VA. More specifically, the [Veterans Health Administration](#) is the nation's largest health-care system and provides veterans with physical, brain, and mental health services. The [Veterans Benefits Administration](#) provides medical and financial benefits, including pensions, disability compensation, and benefits tied to education and post-service employment. These wraparound supports further health and economic well-being. Working in concert, these two arms of the VA are widely recognized as drivers of long-term health, biomedical innovation, and economic well-being for veterans post-service.

Nonprofits and Philanthropy

A group of veteran-serving organizations, termed *veteran service organizations*, are [accredited through the VA](#) to assist veterans in navigating and applying for VA benefits, including access to health-care services. While the VA is a central stakeholder providing high-quality health-care services, several challenges preclude the VA from meeting all

the health-care needs of veterans and their families. These include limitations to federal funding and selective veteran ineligibility, provider capacity, and geographic access.

Functioning in parallel with government stakeholders, some veteran-serving organizations are relied on for their ability to provide crucial support for veterans and their families across various dimensions of need, including health and well-being. Organizations providing health-care services, such as [The Headstrong Project](#), have stepped in to augment and personalize health-care services, particularly for the broader military community. In addition, organizations such as [Team Red, White & Blue](#) have created spaces—physically and digitally—for veterans to foster and maintain connections through physical activity.

Nonprofit providers can reach members of the military community who may be distrustful of or ineligible for VA services—including those with less-than-honorable discharges, military spouses, and caregivers. These organizations are deeply embedded in the veteran support ecosystem, offering not only trusted, timely care but also referrals to a broader network of services that address health, economic opportunity, and community connection.

Many nonprofits accelerate access by accepting informal referrals from VA providers, bypassing slow, bureaucratic processes. However, this limits access to federal reimbursement, making philanthropy essential to sustaining and expanding care. Flexible, impact-driven philanthropic investment—mainly from private foundations—can fuel innovative health-care service delivery, biomedical research, and advocacy, helping close persistent gaps in care for veterans and their families.

Private Companies

Lastly, private companies play a special and meaningful role in discovering, developing, and disseminating innovative technologies that enhance health care for veterans and civilians alike. Given the potential to generate a profit, private industry initiatives have different stakeholders, funding levels, and mechanisms than public-sector investments. Still, the advancement of brain and mental health care remains a leading priority of this sector, with particular focus on developing therapeutics to treat PTSD, including psychedelics.

PROMINENT MEMBERSHIP-BASED VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

The American Legion, American Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Vietnam Veterans of America—sometimes called the “Big 6”—are membership-based VSOs. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning, these organizations represent over 6 million veteran members. In addition to helping transitioning veterans navigate the complicated VA benefits claims process, these organizations prioritize veteran advocacy by lobbying for and influencing federal VA health-care and benefits policy.

FUNDING SUMMARY

In early 2025, the Milken Institute analyzed funding levels related to health and well-being across key government, nonprofit, and philanthropic stakeholders using the most recently available government budget and IRS tax filing data. Funding data for private industry stakeholders were not available.

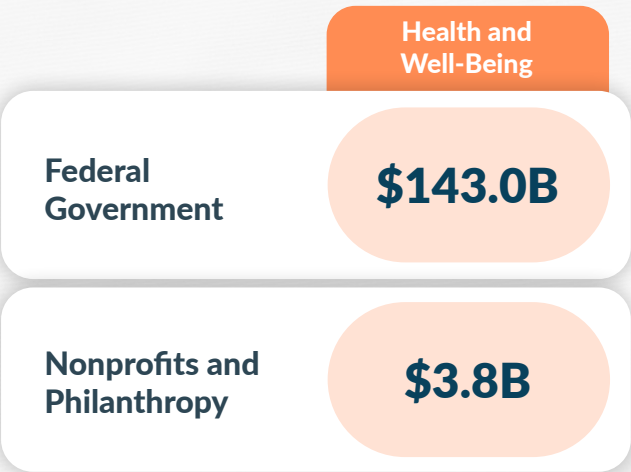
Our analysis of the primary programs outlined in the 2024 VA budget revealed an estimated \$143 billion federal investment via the VA to support veteran health care, including biomedical research, as shown in **Figure 10**. Diving deeper into Veterans Health Administration data, an analysis of medical program funding showed that top funding priorities in 2024, other than nonrecurring maintenance and leases, included telehealth (~21 percent), homelessness (~11.5 percent), suicide prevention (~11.2 percent), and education and training (~10.7 percent). Notably, the prioritizing of telehealth, mental health, and education aligns with emerging trends in veteran health and well-being, including the rising role of technology and expansion of provider education to meet increasing demand and personalization of services.

Given the nature of their tax filing status, data for nonprofit and philanthropic stakeholders were analyzed together using the methodology outlined in the **Appendix**. The analysis revealed an estimated total revenue of at least \$3.8 billion from nonprofit and philanthropic stakeholders related to veteran health and well-being in 2021, the year for which the most complete and recent dataset was available.

The magnitude of federal investment compared to nonprofit and philanthropic investment underscores the role of the VA as the country’s most extensive integrated health system and central provider of health care to veterans. However, nonprofit and philanthropic stakeholders continue to invest significant time and capital to meet the personalized health-care needs of veterans and their families.

In particular, two large VSOs—the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) and Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA)—fund and deliver important services across the ecosystem. In 2022, WWP allocated nearly \$54 million toward program services, including \$48 million in grants to veteran-serving organizations, research institutions, and local governments, and \$5.4 million in emergency financial assistance to individuals. Notably, WWP does not take government funding, underscoring the value of philanthropic contributions to essential service providers in the ecosystem. That same year, PVA distributed \$6.5 million to support research, local chapters, disaster relief, and scholarships.

Figure 10. Snapshot of Recent Funding Across Veteran Health and Well-Being Stakeholders



Source: Milken Institute (2025)



PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY C

Advance Economic Opportunity

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY C

Advance Economic Opportunity

Military service has long been viewed as a pathway to economic opportunity, offering access to education, training, and stable employment for those who serve. But the sustainment of upward mobility after separation is not guaranteed. Economic stability is a cornerstone of a successful transition to civilian life, yet many active-duty families face financial stress driven by housing costs, frequent relocations, and underemployment. These challenges are often rooted in barriers to accessing basic needs, quality jobs, and education, all of which are closely tied to overall well-being.

Cross-sector solutions that improve access to jobs, education, and services are essential to long-term stability for veterans and their families. Philanthropy (**Figure 11**) can advance veteran economic opportunity by investing in data-driven models that expand access to basic needs, financial stability, employment, and education and training—critical components of a successful post-service transition. Focused giving and coordinated action can amplify existing efforts and drive sustained, systemic impact.

Figure 11. Philanthropic Opportunities to Advance Economic Opportunity

Opportunity Area	Approach	Primary Elements of Impact			
		Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity C.1: Increase Opportunities for Career Advancement	Approach C.1.1: Address Underemployment Through Data Collection and Collaboration	✓		✓	
	Approach C.1.2: Expand Transferable Skill-Building Opportunities			✓	✓
	Approach C.1.3: Integrate Veteran Experience to Improve Care and Expand Career Pathways		✓	✓	✓
	Approach C.1.4: Invest in Entrepreneurship Pathways			✓	✓
	Approach C.1.5: Enhance Veteran Support in Higher Education	✓		✓	

Figure 11. Philanthropic Opportunities to Advance Economic Opportunity, continued

Opportunity Area	Approach	Primary Elements of Impact			
		Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity C.2: Address Basic Needs and Financial Stability	Approach C.2.1: Prioritize Short-Term Housing and Food Security Support		✓	✓	
	Approach C.2.2: Fund Efforts to Prepare Veterans to Overcome Financial Hardship			✓	✓

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

OPPORTUNITY C.1

INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Philanthropy can advance career opportunities for veterans and military spouses, supporting skill building, education, and training initiatives that foster professional and financial fulfillment. By driving collaboration and supporting scalable, data-driven models, philanthropy can ensure long-term success in the civilian workforce for veterans and their families.

Approach C.1.1: Address Underemployment Through Data Collection and Collaboration

Veteran underemployment—often tied to the underutilization of military-acquired skills and credentials—limits economic mobility and well-being. Philanthropy can leverage both its funding and convening power to support efforts that [track education outcomes and employment trajectories](#), helping postsecondary institutions adapt their offerings and employers develop hiring practices that better recognize veteran talent. These insights can also inform the design of pipeline programs that connect veteran learners to high-demand fields, ensuring their inclusion in a rapidly evolving, skill-based workforce.

Approach C.1.2: Expand Transferable Skill-Building Opportunities

Veterans and their families need access to develop work-ready skills to succeed in the civilian workforce. Philanthropy can strengthen these efforts by funding proven organizations focused on providing skills training and work-ready credentials, partnering with other funders to amplify existing efforts to upskill veterans and military spouses, and investing in local and place-based partnerships that connect education providers with employers. Expanding access to high-quality, in-demand training across all sectors and trades helps ensure veterans and spouses are prepared to compete and thrive.

Approach C.1.3: Integrate Veteran Experience to Improve Care and Expand Career Pathways

Expanding veteran representation in health and mental health care offers a dual benefit: It creates meaningful career pathways for veterans and improves care through lived experience. Veterans bring unique insight into military culture, making them well suited for roles as mental health providers, researchers, and frontline health professionals. Philanthropy can accelerate this impact by funding dedicated spots for veterans in graduate health programs and supporting military cultural competency training for civilian providers. Integrating the veteran experience into care and research not only strengthens economic opportunity for those who have served but also can enhance outcomes for veteran patients, representing an opportunity for synergistic support and impact.

Approach C.1.4: Invest in Entrepreneurship Pathways

Entrepreneurship offers veterans and military spouses a flexible, mission-driven career path, but many lack the foundational knowledge and networks to succeed. Increased access to training, resources, and guidance can better prepare them to engage in the small business economy. Strategic funding to organizations supporting veteran and military spouse entrepreneurship can expand capacity and scale proven programs. Supporting [veteran- and military spouse–founded businesses](#) can also strengthen the broader small business landscape and reinforce entrepreneurship as a viable post-service pathway.

Approach C.1.5: Enhance Veteran Support in Higher Education

Many higher education institutions seek to recruit and retain veterans, but their resources are often tailored to traditional, first-year students. Equipping these institutions with increased military cultural competency is key to creating a shared language that better serves veterans and military-connected individuals.

Philanthropy can provide financial assistance to institutions committed to revamping, creating, or sustaining veteran initiatives. This could have a transformative impact on academic advising, peer mentorship, mental health, financial literacy, and career advising. Such initiatives would provide an incentive for institutions that may not otherwise have the resources to create or revamp these services. Additionally, funding data collection on veteran educational attainment and GI Bill usage can help identify gaps, inform future programs, and guide strategic investments in higher education for veterans.

OPPORTUNITY C.2

ADDRESS BASIC NEEDS AND FINANCIAL STABILITY

Stable housing, food security, and financial stability are foundational to a successful transition from military to civilian life. Philanthropy can fund programs that meet basic needs and build long-term financial resilience for veterans and their families.

Approach C.2.1: Prioritize Short-Term Housing and Food Security Support

Philanthropy can address housing and food insecurity by supporting organizations that conduct research to better understand risks and intervene early during the MCT to provide direct services to support these needs. Funders can support veteran-serving organizations that screen for housing and food security during evaluations to identify at-risk

families and leverage this information to intervene early during the MCT. Supporting resource navigation efforts at community nonprofits can also help veterans access services more quickly and prevent issues. Resource navigators can raise awareness of available programs, assist at-risk individuals, and provide feedback on service gaps. Scaling resource navigation platforms can further expand tailored support for veterans and families.

Approach C.2.2: Fund Efforts to Prepare Veterans to Overcome Financial Hardship

Transitioning service members often face acute financial hardship, which, if not addressed, can become a lasting issue. Financial literacy is crucial, as veterans are frequent targets of predatory scams. Funding programs that teach financial fluency can help veterans and military families manage financial challenges during and after the MCT. Additionally, supporting emergency cash assistance programs at the nonprofit level can provide timely relief and prevent short-term difficulties from turning into long-term financial problems.

State of the Field

Post-service access to economic opportunities remains a predictor of MCT success for veterans. The following section discusses current veteran economic opportunity needs—basic needs, employment, and education and training.

BASIC NEEDS

Access to safe, affordable housing and nutritious food is essential to long-term stability and well-being. According to the [National Coalition for Homeless Veterans](#), homelessness stems from interconnected issues, such as a lack of affordable housing, limited income, poor access to health care, and mental health or substance use challenges. Housing instability often begins during service, as frequent relocations—on average, every 2.5 years—can create financial strain, missed payments, and credit issues that persist post-service and erode financial stability. Housing instability can also take a toll on health and well-being, contributing to increased stress, disrupted access to medical care, and worsened mental health outcomes for both veterans and their families.

These setbacks can intensify the challenges of renting or buying a home and contribute to food insecurity, as [stable housing is directly correlated](#) to consistent food access. In 2023, 13.5 percent of all US households experienced food insecurity, compared to [20–25 percent of military families](#). Those most at risk include families new to military service, those who have recently relocated, households with children under 18, and active-duty families. Understanding the root causes of food insecurity is essential to building integrated, wraparound support that connects housing, employment, education, and health. Veteran-serving organizations like the [Military Family Advisory Network](#) and [Blue Star Families](#) are leading data collection efforts to better understand and address these challenges, and they are implementing multiple multi-stakeholder programs to provide direct food assistance support to veterans and military families.

**SPOTLIGHT | Reduction in Veteran Homelessness**

Housing is foundational to well-being, and housing insecurity—including homelessness—is closely tied to mental health challenges, family strain, and income instability. While the causes of veteran homelessness are complex, they are solvable through coordinated support. Since 2010, veteran homelessness has dropped 55 percent, driven by efforts from the VA, state agencies, and community partners. To date, Virginia, Delaware, Connecticut, and 85 communities have effectively ended veteran homelessness.

Programs that combine stable housing with integrated health and social services have proven especially effective. For example, Operation Homefront supports military families with housing and financial assistance, while Bastion offers intentional housing and wraparound care for veterans recovering from trauma. These models highlight how targeted, collaborative support can create lasting stability for veterans.

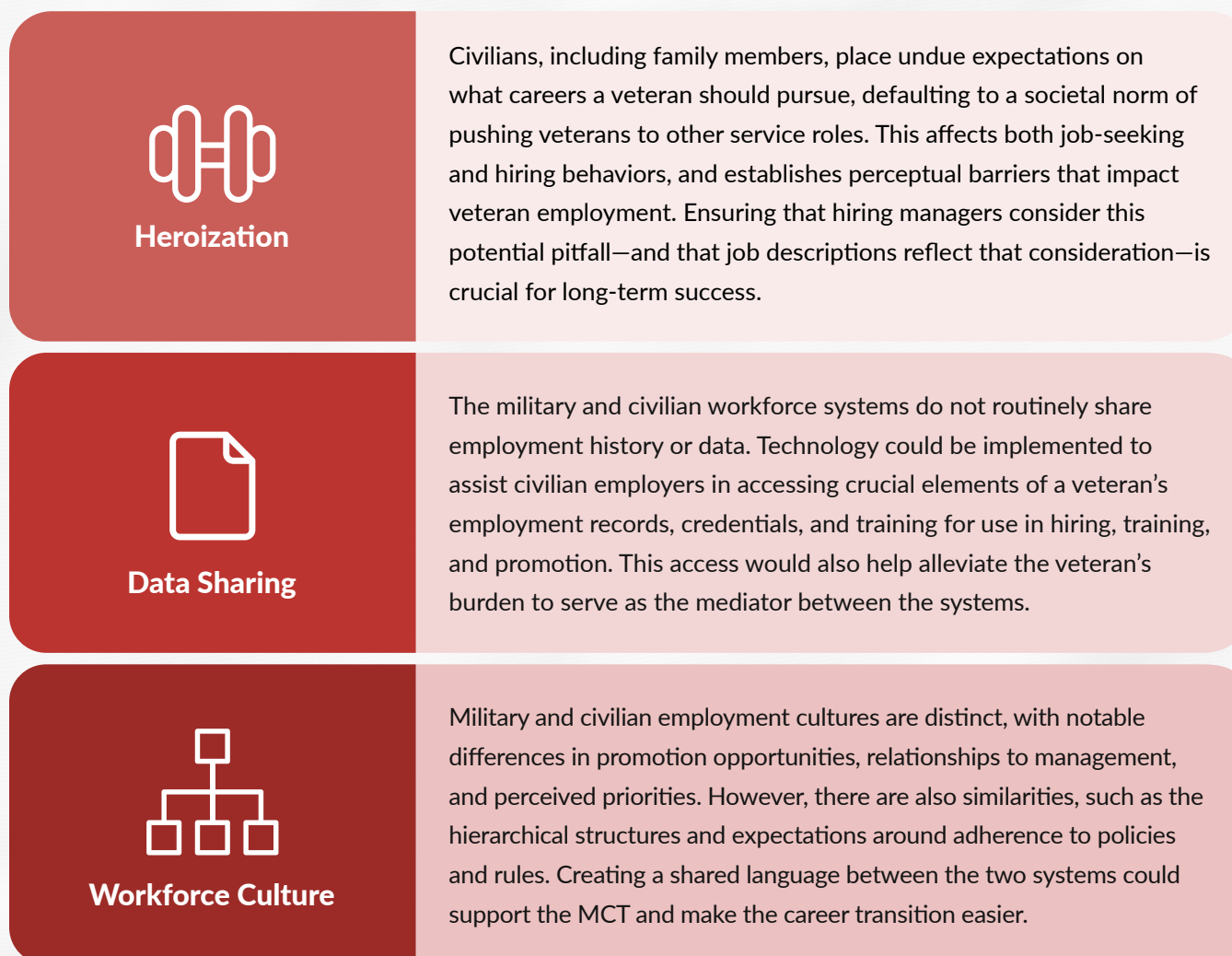
EMPLOYMENT

Employment is a critical driver of a veteran's MCT, contributing to economic stability, social integration, and mental well-being. By the end of 2010, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans was 12.1 percent, compared to under 9 percent for the non-veteran population. In response, veteran-focused hiring was prioritized across the US economy, and hundreds, if not thousands, of employment-focused nonprofits rose to help veterans navigate the workforce landscape and supplement federal career transition programs.

Likely because of these efforts, unemployment rates for veterans have steadily declined over the past decade. The 2024 annual average unemployment rate for veterans was relatively comparable, if not slightly lower, than for all Americans (age 18 and over), at 3.0 percent and 3.9 percent, respectively. However, important demographic differences persist, with veterans ages 18–34 experiencing higher unemployment rates than veterans at more advanced career stages.

Despite overall gains, these disparities highlight the need for more targeted strategies to support veterans, especially younger cohorts, in securing meaningful, long-term employment. While it's long been a focus in the veteran support ecosystem, securing meaningful post-service employment is rarely straightforward—many veterans cycle through several jobs before finding a fulfilling career.

Veterans have transferable skills but often face challenges translating their experience to civilian roles, navigating career interests, and overcoming concerns about identity or confidence. Addressing both institutional and personal barriers can expand opportunities and empower veterans to pursue careers with clarity and confidence. **Figure 12** outlines ongoing challenges to attracting and retaining veteran talent in the civilian workforce. These challenges can be addressed through targeted efforts to increase military cultural competency, collaboration across military and civilian workforce systems, and employer-led initiatives to integrate veterans into company culture.

Figure 12. Ongoing Challenges to Attracting and Retaining Veterans in the Civilian Workforce

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Enacting Best Practices and Resources to Employ and Retain Veterans

Across the academic, health-care, and technology sectors, there is growing momentum to bring more veterans into leadership and veteran-serving roles. The federal government remains the largest employer of veterans—with [veterans comprising about 25 percent of the federal civilian workforce in 2024](#), and the DOD and VA leading in veteran hires. However, [early data suggest that recent hiring freezes and layoffs](#) in the federal workforce in early 2025 have disproportionately affected veterans and military spouses.

As the public-sector workforce shifts, building pathways into the private sector for veterans is increasingly urgent—and a top priority across both public and private sectors. Multiple federal agencies, including the VA and DOL, have developed effective recruitment and retention strategies, and these are widely shared to help civilian employers better attract and support veteran talent. In addition, [the private sector has focused on actionable strategies](#) to overcome challenges in hiring and retaining veterans in civilian roles. Evidence-based best practices include translating military experience into

civilian job roles, implementing structured onboarding and mentorship, prioritizing skills-based hiring, and fostering an inclusive, military-friendly culture. Promoting leadership opportunities for veterans also ensures their lived experience informs more effective, veteran-centered employment solutions across sectors.

From Unemployment to Underemployment

While veteran unemployment has been trending in the right direction over the past two decades, [underemployment remains a major challenge](#) for the veteran population. Underemployment refers to low-wage employment or employment that does not use a veteran's full range of skills, experiences, and abilities.

According to a 2023 report from The Veterans Metrics Initiative, approximately 61 percent of veterans report being underemployed due to disparity among their skills, education, experiences, and their post-transition employment in the civilian job market.

Veterans may leave service with leadership experience, technical certifications, or advanced training that goes unrecognized in the civilian sector. For example, a veteran who led logistics operations in the military might be hired into an entry-level warehouse role, despite possessing management and supply chain expertise. Skills-based hiring, which prioritizes competencies over formal education or direct experience, offers a promising pathway to address this gap.

While many veteran-friendly employers have adopted this approach, its broader impact on veteran employment and underemployment remains underexplored. A [2023 McKinsey study](#) estimated that widespread adoption could add up to \$15 billion to the US economy over a decade. The nonprofit [Hire Heroes USA](#) has [piloted efforts to provide veterans and military spouses](#) with more options for skill development and validation by partnering with various training providers. Employers like [Walmart](#) are leading the way by promoting awareness of skills-based hiring to advance veteran hiring initiatives. Philanthropic and corporate partners are well positioned to amplify these efforts and help shape a more inclusive and skills-driven workforce.



SPOTLIGHT | Building Financial Fluency and Stability

Veterans and military families need strong financial literacy to prevent and navigate hardship, especially during the transition from service, when many face brief but significant income gaps. Even short-term loss of income can trigger long-term financial instability. Wraparound support and emergency financial relief—[like the assistance from Operation Homefront's Critical Financial Assistance Program](#)—can provide crucial short-term aid. Complementary efforts, such as financial education programs from organizations like [Operation Hope](#), equip veterans with the skills to manage complex financial situations and build long-term stability.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The [Post-9/11 GI Bill](#) has expanded access to education and training for veterans and their families, covering tuition, housing, books, job training expenses, and licensing fees and helping many pursue postsecondary credentials and new career paths. Free upskilling programs—such as those provided by the [DOD's SkillBridge](#) program and the nonprofit [NPower](#)—also support service members and veterans in building networks and gaining civilian workforce skills. However, these offerings are limited, and key gaps remain.

A lack of veteran-specific education data limits visibility into veterans' educational and career outcomes and prevents a comprehensive understanding of veterans' experiences, as well as resources and interventions that can be particularly impactful. [Efforts to increase data sharing](#) between government agencies and analysis by nonprofit research institutions are ongoing and are helping to track outcomes of Post-9/11 GI Bill users and uncover persisting gaps.

For example, a [2024 analysis offered a first look at the outcomes](#) for the 54 percent of eligible veterans who used these GI benefits. This analysis found that while the use of GI Bill benefits leads to higher rates of degree and credential attainment, the resulting gains in earnings vary and are often lower for veterans who attend for-profit institutions.

Separately, to meet the diverse employment needs of veterans, workforce development programs, philanthropy, and educational institutions have introduced their own initiatives, such as [scholarships](#) and [advocacy efforts](#), to boost postsecondary attainment among the military-connected population. Holistic data collection and analysis on education and workforce outcomes could significantly transform the landscape for veterans and their families by providing key insights on gaps and highlighting policy needs.

Further, veterans often face financial strain during periods of unemployment while pursuing education, and employers may overlook skills gained through military service. Philanthropy can help bridge these gaps by [investing in initiatives](#) that connect education to meaningful employment—for example, programs that provide wraparound supports, increase access to transferable skills, and build partnerships with community employers.

Navigating the Higher Education Landscape

While higher education can provide opportunities for economic mobility, traditional institutions often do not meet the needs of veterans, and veterans' identities may not be fully reflected in these settings. Despite this, veterans demonstrate resilience, with 20 percent earning degrees and continuing their education.

Balancing wraparound support with community engagement is key to addressing their needs without further isolating them from civilian students. Organizations like the [Warrior-Scholar Project](#) help veterans transition to college through offerings such as intensive, immersive academic boot camps. Many schools have dedicated veteran [support offices and initiatives](#) that collaborate with veteran-serving organizations and offer academic preparation, peer and wellness support, and opportunities for leadership development. By scaling these efforts, institutions can better accommodate veterans, leveraging their technical skills and lived experiences to foster academic, career, and personal growth.

Veterans are also often targeted by for-profit schools seeking to take advantage of the GI Bill, making it critical to sustain policies and practices that protect veterans' educational benefits from being exploited. Additionally, providing insight into higher education's "hidden curriculum"—the unwritten norms, rules, expectations, and social dynamics of higher education—can better prepare veterans to navigate and succeed in the academic environment.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 62 percent of student veterans are first-generation college attendees. Scaling initiatives that support first-generation students can dually support veterans in higher education.

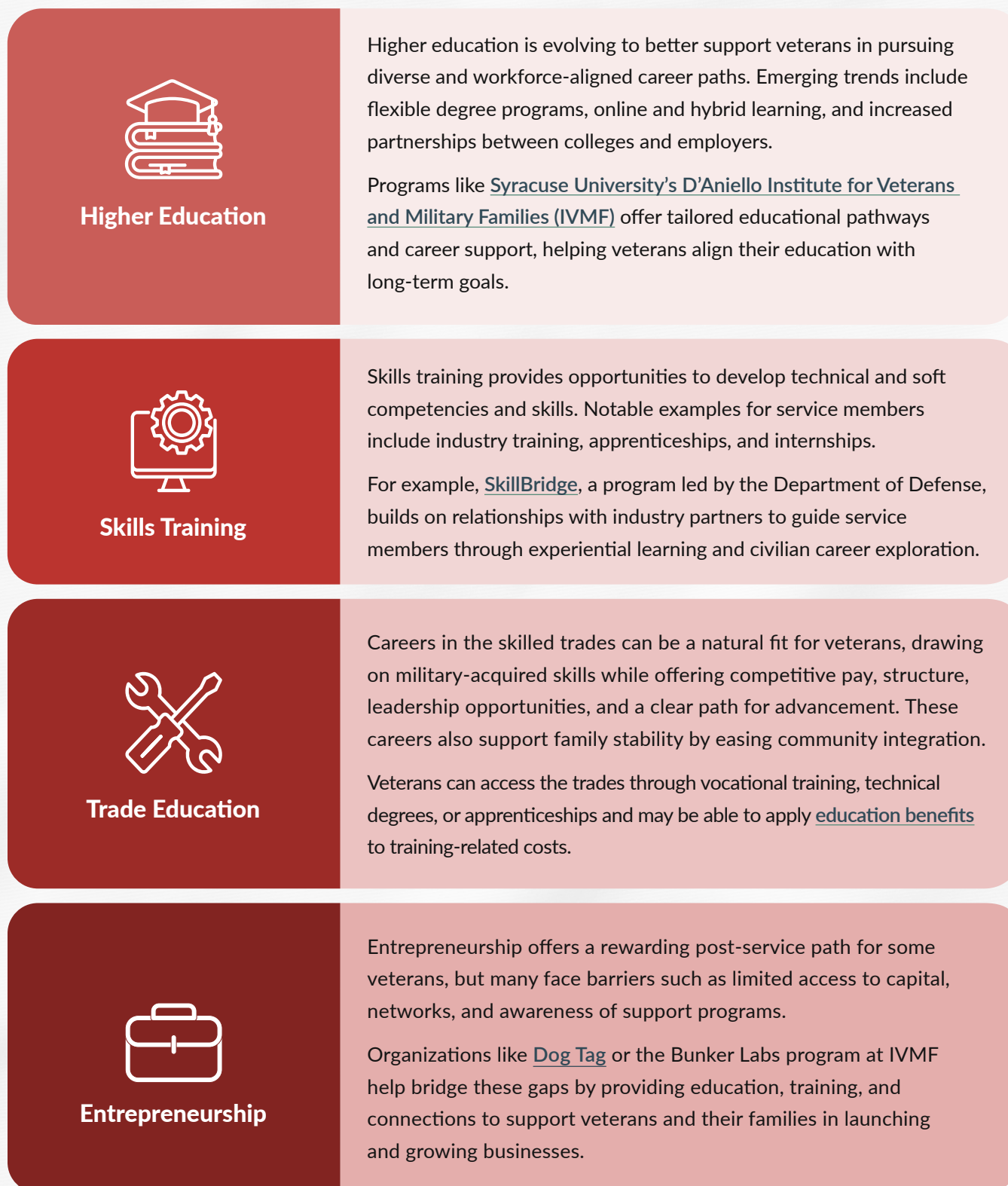
While education helps veterans gain credentials, the military service-to-college path may delay workforce entry and limit access to civilian internships or professional networks. As a result, veterans are often seen as either overqualified due to extensive workforce experience, or underqualified due to a lack of traditional career pathways and progression, pushing them into lower-paying positions and hindering long-term career growth. Ensuring employers understand the breadth of skills veterans possess, in combination with higher education, is crucial in developing a more comprehensive view of veterans' abilities and potential contributions to the workforce. Thus, data collection on veteran educational attainment and outcomes is necessary to build more informed pathways.

Preparing for Diverse Career Options

Several education and training pathways—outlined in **Figure 13**—can shape a veteran's post-service trajectory by exposing them to a range of meaningful and financially sustainable careers. These pathways include traditional two- and four-year degrees, workforce development and upskilling programs, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship training.

However, most of these programs are only accessible after military separation, limiting early planning when it's most critical. Preparing service members before transition is essential to ensuring long-term success. Programs like the [NPower SkillBridge](#) partnership offer a promising model, providing cybersecurity training during active duty to support direct entry into the civilian workforce. Expanding early access to education and training can better equip service members to explore diverse career pathways post-service and gain long-term economic mobility.

Figure 13. Emerging Trends in Education and Training to Support Diverse Veteran Career Options



Source: Milken Institute (2025)

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Federal Government

The US departments of Veterans Affairs, Labor, and Defense lead several initiatives and offerings to support veterans' economic opportunities after service. Examples include the [VA's readjustment benefits](#), which help veterans and their families transition to civilian life; the [Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service](#) (VETS), which promotes veteran employment at the federal and state levels; and the [Department of Defense's SkillBridge program](#), which connects service members with industry partners for civilian job training during their final months of service. As new administrations and legislation emerge, the federal veteran support landscape will continue to evolve, though progress at the national level often depends on securing or reallocating funding, which can pose logistical and sustainability challenges.

Nonprofits and Philanthropy

Veteran-serving organizations are essential partners in advancing veteran economic opportunity and complement federal efforts with tailored support for basic needs, employment, education, and training. These organizations serve veterans across the transition spectrum—from active duty to post-service—helping to prevent and address financial challenges. For example, the [Military Family Advisory Network](#) offers pre-transition programs, such as food assistance initiatives, to tackle the root causes of economic hardship early. Organizations like [Hire Heroes USA](#) and [Hiring Our Heroes](#) focus on post-service employment, while community-based groups—including local religious organizations, food banks, and charities—often fill critical gaps that fall outside the scope of traditional veteran-serving organizations.

Many of these organizations rely on philanthropic support to sustain and expand their impact. While some funders focus broadly on veterans or economic mobility, others target specific issues, such as homelessness. For instance, [The Home Depot Foundation's Veteran Housing Grants Program](#) has made significant strides in reducing veteran homelessness. The A. James & Alice B. Clark Foundation has been a major supporter of economic opportunity for veterans; it has substantially invested in workforce development programs, higher education access, and post-service career pathways. With the foundation set to sunset in 2025, new philanthropic leaders have a growing opportunity to step in and sustain, scale, or innovate in this space to continue advancing veteran economic opportunity.

FUNDING SUMMARY

Using the most recently available government budget and IRS tax filing data, the Milken Institute analyzed funding across key government, nonprofit, and philanthropic stakeholders (see [Appendix](#)).

Together, the VA and DOL contributed approximately \$19 billion to veteran economic opportunity in 2024 ([Figure 14](#)). Federal efforts through the VA, notably the VBA, provide economic support to veterans and their families through financial assistance, loans, education and training, and other services. However, these programs are based on VBA eligibility requirements and may not be available to some transitioning service members and their families.

Two flagship federal initiatives—the DOL VETS office and the Post-9/11 GI Bill—are primary drivers of veteran education, training, and employment. DOL VETS programs are expected to receive \$335 million in 2024, while the GI Bill is projected to account for approximately \$8.2 billion, or 47 percent, of the total federal investment in veteran economic opportunity across select programs (see [Appendix](#)). This significant investment highlights the need for comprehensive data collection to ensure that these funds lead to meaningful economic outcomes for veterans.

Using the most comprehensive data available, our analysis found that nonprofits and philanthropic stakeholders supporting veteran economic opportunity generated at least \$6.2 billion in revenue in 2021. This figure includes overlapping investments in areas such as health, well-being, and community, given the interconnected nature of veteran transition. Economic opportunity remains a core focus for many of these funders.

Philanthropy sustains the veteran-serving organization ecosystem, both by supporting efforts financially and by fostering collaborations to scale impact. However, philanthropic giving may shift in response to changes in federal support, economic conditions, and the rising costs of education and training. Ensuring that investment in economic opportunity for veterans and their families is sustainable and unwavering is an important step in protecting those who serve our nation.

Figure 14. Snapshot of Recent Funding Across Veteran Economic Opportunity Stakeholders



Source: Milken Institute (2025)



PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY D

Increase Community and Connection

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY D

Increase Community and Connection

Traditional MCT support has primarily focused on the individual veteran. This approach overlooks how military families, peers, civilian communities, and local support systems impact the transition process. If MCT support efforts expand to include family and broader community support, the transition experience can become more holistic, fostering long-term success for both veterans and their loved ones.

Through strategic, coordinated action, philanthropy (**Figure 15**) can invest in solutions that prioritize the entire family unit—advancing safety, economic security, and well-being—and support efforts to advocate for and communicate the vital role of family and community in the MCT.

Figure 15. Philanthropic Opportunities to Increase Community and Connection

Opportunity Area	Approach	Primary Elements of Impact			
		Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity D.1: Strengthen Advocacy and Reframe Public Understanding of Veterans' Transition and Support Needs	Approach D.1.1: Bolster Advocacy Efforts for Veterans, Families, and Caregivers	✓			✓
	Approach D.1.2: Reframe Public Understanding of Military Service and the Veteran Experience	✓			✓
Opportunity D.2: Enhance Transition Support for Military Families	Approach D.2.1: Develop a Family Transition Framework	✓			✓
	Approach D.2.2: Support Holistic Solutions to Safety Concerns in Veteran Families and Communities		✓		✓

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

OPPORTUNITY D.1

STRENGTHEN ADVOCACY AND REFRAME PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF VETERANS' TRANSITION AND SUPPORT NEEDS

Philanthropic support for policy reforms can strengthen the overall support ecosystem by bolstering advocacy efforts for veterans, families, and caregivers. Philanthropy can also help shape a narrative to reframe public understanding of military service through targeted storytelling and education, fostering a more inclusive, informed approach to supporting veterans and their families.

Approach D.1.1: Bolster Advocacy Efforts for Veterans, Families, and Caregivers

The federal government is a major stakeholder with significant funding dedicated to supporting service members, veterans, their families, and caregivers, and efforts to shape policies that center the family unit could help address ongoing challenges across the ecosystem. By joining ongoing stakeholder communities or funding organizations leading advocacy efforts, philanthropy can help build on existing momentum to ensure that US policies have a positive impact on service members, veterans, families, and caregivers. Such efforts can support a more holistic, integrated approach to veteran care, ensuring that the needs of veterans and their families are addressed in tandem, strengthening the overall ecosystem.

Approach D.1.2: Reframe Public Understanding of Military Service and the Veteran Experience

Public perception of veterans is often shaped by limited personal exposure and reductive media narratives, contributing to a perception of veterans as victims rather than assets to their communities. These misperceptions can compound transition challenges for veterans and their families while weakening public appreciation for the value and complexity of military service. Shifting these narratives is critical—not only for strengthening support systems for veterans but also for maintaining the integrity of an all-volunteer force and broader national security.

Philanthropy can advance a more accurate and inclusive understanding of military service by supporting targeted storytelling, public education, and cross-sector partnerships that amplify diverse veteran voices. Shared values and a collective sense of responsibility among veteran- and civilian-focused funders are essential to forming strategic partnerships that improve quality of life for veterans, their families, and the broader public. Strategic social impact campaigns that reflect these values can deepen civilian engagement, attract new funders to the veteran support ecosystem, and help build the cultural foundation needed for long-term investment in those who serve.

OPPORTUNITY D.2

ENHANCE TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

Acknowledging the MCT and adapting services to center the family unit's economic stability, safety, and well-being can meaningfully enhance transition support. This philanthropic opportunity would advance comprehensive, family-centered solutions during the MCT.

Approach D.2.1: Develop a Family Transition Framework

Military families undergo transition alongside the veteran, yet their experiences and challenges are often overlooked. While much attention is paid to the veteran's post-service journey, there is no clear definition of a successful family transition. Existing government resources, such as the [VA's Journeys of Veterans Map](#) and [Military OneSource](#), provide some, albeit limited, guidance tailored to family needs.

A comprehensive, data-informed family transition framework—shaped by lived experience—could define key milestones and preparation points to better support spouses, children, and other family members. In addition to guiding family-centered planning, such a framework would help veteran-serving organizations, funders, and policymakers identify gaps and deploy timely, targeted interventions.

Philanthropy has a critical opportunity to advance this effort by investing in scalable solutions, such as those that improve military spouse employment, and by elevating spouses as key stakeholders in policy and program design. Prioritizing the family unit in transition planning is essential to strengthening family readiness and ensuring successful outcomes for veterans.

Approach D.2.2: Support Holistic Solutions to Safety Concerns in Veteran Families and Communities

Veterans' experiences with high-stress situations and firearms pose distinct community safety concerns, particularly within military-connected families. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant but often overlooked issue, with underreporting, stigma, and fragmented services hindering effective prevention and intervention. Public-private partnerships are addressing broader safety concerns in veteran families. These efforts include initiatives focused on firearm safety and secure storage, which are critical given the heightened risk of firearm involvement in both suicides and domestic violence situations.

Philanthropy can lead by funding efforts that expand understanding of risk factors for IPV and other safety risks, raise awareness of available support, develop trauma-informed safety plans, and enhance referral pathways. By integrating firearm safety with IPV prevention and family support, this initiative would address the multifaceted safety concerns within veteran communities, ensuring a more comprehensive and responsive approach to protecting veterans and their families.

State of the Field

Community—whether through family, peers, or civilian connections—is essential to a successful MCT. This section outlines current community needs and support during the MCT.

FAMILY UNIT

A veteran's family plays a crucial role in transition success. Yet their sacrifices often go unrecognized, and they lack tailored support. Addressing the needs of transitioning families—including caregivers, who are often family members—is key to a successful MCT. Military spouses and children are integral to the veteran's well-being and decisions; however, most veteran support systems and programs were designed with a single service member in mind, overlooking both the family's layered needs and the impact of family support. A veteran with a spouse, children, or caregivers faces numerous decisions—including housing, employment, and health-care decisions—that impact the entire family's health and well-being.

Philanthropy can support targeted efforts to understand the modern needs of the family unit and engage military spouses, caregivers, and children in designing and implementing solutions, such as those led by the [Military Family Advisory Network](#) and [Blue Star Families](#). These efforts are essential to addressing the complex needs of family units during the MCT.

Military Spouses

Spouses of veterans and active-duty military—a population [currently estimated at over 12 million people in the US](#)—play a critical role in the MCT. They often manage essential responsibilities—such as child care, education, family financial management, relocation logistics, health care, and benefits navigation—while balancing their own careers. To support them, in 2019, the DOD launched the [Military Spouse Transition Program \(MySTeP\)](#), which provides resources throughout the military spouse experience. MySTeP's final stage—Stepping Beyond—prepares families for the transition to civilian life, but the program's self-directed nature places an additional responsibility on the spouse amid an already burdensome process. Despite such efforts, [military spouse unemployment](#) has remained stubbornly high, at around 20 percent for the past decade—four times the national average—due to challenges such as frequent relocations, limited access to child care, inflexible work arrangements, and barriers to education and career advancement.

Recognizing the central role spouses play in family stability and veterans' long-term success, several veteran-serving organizations are [developing programs](#) that [center the family unit](#). These initiatives expand access to affordable child care, promote telework and flexible employment, and support licensure portability across state lines.

However, such programs remain limited in reach and scale. Moreover, military families often face compounding stressors—such as delayed VA benefits, relocation challenges, and child care costs—that can heighten financial strain and marital distress. [Research on civilian contexts](#) shows that financial hardship is a strong predictor of relationship instability, and this can be further exacerbated in military families by health and economic challenges, exposure to trauma, and access to weapons. These overlapping risk factors contribute to [elevated concerns around community safety and IPV](#) in veteran populations. While resources like the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) offer broad support, more targeted research and prevention strategies are needed to address the dynamics of IPV in the veteran and military family community.

Caregivers

Broadly, caregivers provide care and/or assistance to individuals with wounds, illnesses, and injuries, including mental health conditions. Military and veteran caregivers, constituting [5.5 percent of the US population, or 14.3 million people](#), support service members both during and after their time in the military. Often unpaid, these caregivers—who are frequently spouses, children, friends, or neighbors—shoulder significant physical, emotional, and financial burdens. Their contributions are essential to the well-being and successful transition of veterans, yet they often face their own challenges, including limited access to support services, financial strain, and emotional stress.

Acknowledging caregivers' crucial role in the ecosystem, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation has specialized its focus to better understand and support military and veteran caregivers. In late 2024, the foundation, in partnership with the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute, [released the results](#) of a deep investigation into military and civilian caregiver demographics, needs, and support. Recommendations called for military and veteran caregiver support to be comprehensive and locally informed, encompassing mental health services, financial assistance, tailored and inclusive programs, integration into health-care teams, workplace accommodations, expanded home health care, and ongoing research and evaluation to meet their diverse and evolving needs.



SPOTLIGHT | Caregiving Support as a Shared Responsibility

Caregiving is a shared experience across military and civilian populations, with over [20 percent of American adults](#) providing some form of care. Advances in both military and civilian medicine have extended lifespans, increasing the prevalence of complex conditions, such as combat-related injuries and neurodegenerative diseases, which require long-term support. This convergence underscores the urgent need to invest in the health, economic stability, and community resources caregivers need to thrive. Examples of organizations providing related services include the [Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers](#), which [partners with the Wounded Warrior Project](#) to use evidence-based practices and cross-sector partnerships to address the diverse needs of caregivers through confidential coaching and virtual support. Engaging philanthropic and cross-sector funders focused on intersecting issues (like veteran support, brain health, and health equity) can elevate caregiving as a shared societal responsibility and drive systemic progress.

Military Children

Military children face unique challenges throughout their parents' military service and the family's transition to civilian life. Frequent relocations and separations can disrupt education, friendships, and mental health, shaping their overall life experience. Despite these hardships, military children often develop valuable skills, such as resilience, adaptability, leadership, and social awareness.

Philanthropy can invest in [programs that address their needs](#) while fostering stability, connection, and long-term opportunity. In addition to direct services, systems-level solutions—like coordinated school policies that minimize learning disruptions during relocations—can support smoother transitions. Prioritizing the well-being of military children not only supports their own development but also uplifts veteran and military families as a whole.

COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Building community with civilians can be challenging for veterans and their families post-service. However, shared experiences and values offer a powerful foundation for veterans to foster authentic connections with fellow veterans and civilians.

Veteran-to-Veteran Connection

Veteran-to-veteran connection is a powerful driver of trust, accountability, and belonging during the MCT. Shared experiences—ranging from the rigors of service to the challenges of reintegration—create an immediate sense of understanding and camaraderie that few other relationships can replicate. These peer bonds often serve as a critical bridge during transition; veterans can offer each other emotional support, practical advice, and a shared language for navigating change. [Veterans with strong peer networks](#) are more likely to engage in and complete programs, access resources, and feel empowered in their post-service identities.

Organizations across the veteran ecosystem leverage these connections through [peer mentorship models](#), [group-based interventions](#), and [community-building initiatives](#) designed to meet veterans where they are—culturally and geographically. Whether through structured peer support or informal connections, veteran-to-veteran networks can reduce isolation, promote mental health, and foster purpose and identity after service.

Strengthening Community with the Civilian Sector

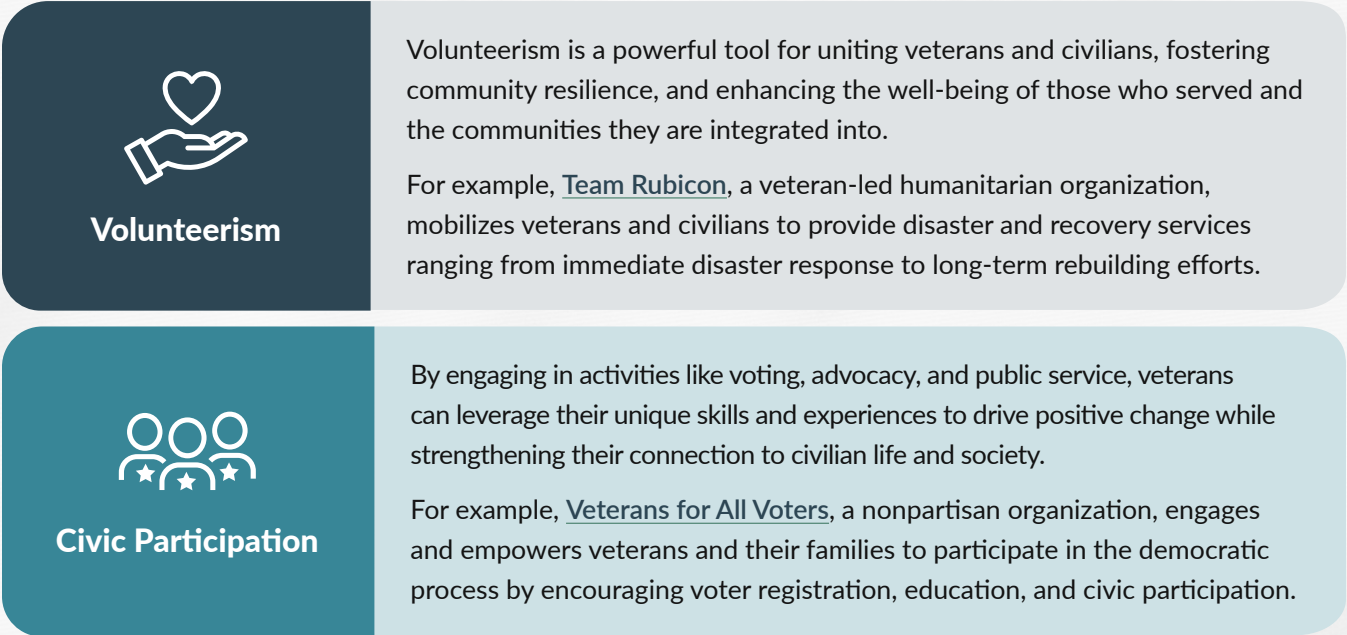
After service, veterans and their families often return to communities that may lack an understanding of military culture, which can exacerbate transition challenges and leave veterans feeling alienated. Ensuring veterans feel welcome and supported within their communities is crucial for a successful transition.

Witnessing a positive transition experience could encourage more Americans to consider military service as a pathway to economic mobility, civic duty, and community involvement. However, media and political narratives often focus on negative aspects of military service and transition, reinforcing differences between the military and civilian communities.

Providing opportunities for veterans and civilians to engage in values-driven collaboration—as outlined in **Figure 16**—is a powerful approach to fostering and strengthening communities. One example of such an effort is [The Mission Continues](#), which brings together veterans and non-veterans, including nonprofit partners and community leaders, to impact communities through leadership and volunteerism.

By focusing on shared values and goals, increasing civilian understanding of military culture and veterans' transition needs, and integrating support systems that recognize the skills of veterans and their families, communities can strengthen local leadership and veterans' social capital, and provide veterans with a sense of purpose and belonging.

Figure 16. Emerging Trends to Build and Strengthen Veterans' Communities



Source: Milken Institute (2025)

KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND FUNDING SUMMARY

Federal investment in the core MCT element of community and connection is often a result of a primary investment in veteran health and well-being through the VA or in economic opportunity through the DOL. While both departments contribute to community solutions through secondary impact, totaling an estimated \$17 billion between selected programs, the government's role is primarily focused on veterans themselves.

Nonprofits have long led the way in supporting military families and fostering peer and civilian connections. These organizations typically provide direct services to family members or create opportunities for veterans to connect with peers and civilian communities. For example, the [Military Family Advisory Network](#) focuses on the intersection of economic opportunity and community by addressing military families' financial and food security. Similarly, [Blue Star Families](#) and [Team Red, White & Blue](#) offer both physical and digital spaces where veterans, families, and civilians can build community around shared experiences and interests.

Figure 17. Snapshot of Recent Funding Across Veteran Community Stakeholders



Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Our analysis found that nonprofits and philanthropic stakeholders supporting veterans' community priorities and initiatives generated at least \$5.4 billion in revenue in 2021 (**Figure 17**). Embedded in the community, veteran-serving organizations have been instrumental in collecting data about needs, experiences, and opinions to inform the larger veteran support ecosystem. More specifically, Blue Star Families has established a national research infrastructure that leverages its trust and community to capture data on the state of military family support. The organization conducts an annual [Military Family Lifestyle Survey](#), publishing results with the larger community to inform systemic needs and ignite ecosystem-wide change.

While many organizations support initiatives that emphasize connection, few center community as the core focus of their giving. The [Elizabeth Dole Foundation](#) stands out in this space, prioritizing caregiver support—including military spouses, children, and civilians—as foundational to community well-being. Through coalition building, research, and data-driven advocacy, the foundation has cultivated a robust cross-sector community to advance support for caregivers, veterans, and the broader veteran support ecosystem. The recent [Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act](#) serves as a strong example of how coalition building can drive meaningful reforms in veteran care. These reforms can be expanded to ensure that veterans, their families, and caregivers all receive the comprehensive support they need.

A Call to Action for Strategic Philanthropy

Comprehensive support for the MCT ensures that the sacrifices of each service member are honored with lasting commitment from their nation and communities. September 11, 2001, marked a turning point in our nation's history and ushered in a renewed relationship with the military, characterized by increased attention and investment in MCT support. Ongoing investment in veterans' health, economic opportunity, and community needs is a shared responsibility. Acting on this moral imperative—by strengthening and optimizing existing efforts—improves the lives of veterans and their families; contributes to stronger, more resilient communities nationwide; and bolsters national security.

Addressing gaps and inefficiencies in the veteran support ecosystem requires stakeholders to integrate siloed efforts in pursuit of truly comprehensive support. Across sectors—government, nonprofits, philanthropy, and private industry—numerous well-intentioned initiatives have emerged to meet the diverse and evolving needs of veterans. While federal funders often prioritize standardized, scalable solutions, nonprofits and philanthropy are well positioned to address more personalized and nuanced challenges. By aligning and bridging these efforts, philanthropy can help unify support across systems and sectors, advancing a more cohesive and effective approach for all who have served.

Delivering the MCT support veterans and their families deserve is not a solo mission, and diverse experts and leaders have called for the need to do better, together. Cross-sector collaboration, grounded in a shared commitment to those who have served, enables both specialization and synergy, as the veteran support ecosystem strives for improvement and a higher level of collective achievement. With its flexibility and convening power, philanthropy can drive change by funding initiatives that foster innovation, scale effective solutions, and align stakeholders around shared values. By pursuing the opportunities outlined in this guide, philanthropists can address both targeted gaps in MCT support and broader system inefficiencies—acting on a shared responsibility and demonstrating that a rising tide lifts all boats.

Appendix

Stakeholder and Funding Methodology and Disclaimers

This section includes additional details on data access, analysis methodology, and limitations.

US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The Milken Institute analyzed stakeholder and funding trends of the federal government from publicly available budget data from the [Office of Management and Budget](#), [Department of Defense](#), [Department of Veterans Affairs](#), and [Department of Labor](#).

NONPROFITS AND PHILANTHROPY

The Milken Institute analyzed tax filing data from 2011 to 2021 for all electronic filers of Internal Revenue Service Forms 990, 990-EZ, and 990-PF. Data were aggregated from the [National Center for Charitable Statistics](#) and [IRS datasets](#). The Milken Institute developed a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria for identifying organizations serving veterans, including National Taxonomy of Exempt Entity codes and keywords related to veterans and the military. Organizations interviewed as part of the research for this project were also included.

Organizations filing Form 990 were identified using keyword searches by organization name, “doing business as” (DBA) name, “organization’s mission or most significant activities” (Form 990, Part I, line 1) categorization, and organization mission (Form 990, Part III, line 1). Organizations filing Form 990-EZ were identified using keyword searches by organization name, DBA name, and “organization’s primary exempt purpose” (Form 990-EZ, Part III) categorization. Organizations filing Form 990-PF were identified only by name. For 990-PF organizations, the research team linked annual extract data released by the IRS’s Statistics of Income program to National Center for Charitable Statistics’ cumulative Unified Business Master File to capture defunct organizations not included in the IRS’s Business Master File datasets. Extract data for 990-PF filers are not available for returns filed in 2017, 2018, and 2019 and were pulled manually for analysis included in **Figure 7**.

An initial analysis identified 18,205 organizations meeting criteria for inclusion. Milken Institute staff then manually reviewed keyword-identified organizations and removed 966, resulting in a sample size of 17,239. Researchers manually removed false positives (e.g., organizations containing keywords used in other contexts, such as “[Name]’s Army” or “Soldiers for [Cause]”), as well as veterans-focused organizations outside the scope of this project.

Out-of-scope organizations included those related to public monuments, memorials, and museums; historical societies dedicated to the preservation of military history; and organizations focused on public awareness or education but not provision of services to veterans. Reserve Officers’ Training Corps organizations, military schools, extracurricular organizations at military service academies, think tanks, cemeteries, and funeral services were also removed. The Milken Institute recognizes the importance of these organizations in the veterans ecosystem, but they were not considered transition services for the purposes of this analysis. Thematic keywords used to identify issue areas were not manually reviewed and may contain false positives.

Organizations that had a National Taxonomy of Exempt Entity code W30 (indicating military and veterans' organizations) but did not meet exclusion criteria were presumptively included and were not manually reviewed. During the manual review of keyword-identified organizations, the research team identified additional exclusion keywords that were then applied to W30 organizations for consistency.

Select US Federal Directives, Legislation, and Programs to Support Veterans and Their Families

The federal government influences veteran support through a variety of activities, including legislation passed through Congress. Those interested in following the progression and status of legislation related to veterans and their families can reference a [veteran bill tracker](#) maintained by the Wounded Warrior Project. In addition, the president has the power to influence short-term priorities and actions of the federal government by issuing executive orders. As commander in chief, the president has an opportunity—and responsibility—to highlight the needs of the military and veteran communities through this mechanism. **Table 1** summarizes recent legislation across several dimensions of veteran support.

Table 1. Recent Federal Activity Impacting Veterans and Their Families

Title	Description
Executive Order 13822: Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition from Uniformed Service to Civilian Life	Signed by President Trump in January 2018 , this executive order bolstered support for transitioning service members and particularly focused on a veteran's first year post-discharge, -separation, or -retirement. The order called for the development of a Joint Action Plan by the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Homeland Security containing reforms, and subsequent tracking of outcomes, to improve access to mental health resources. The Joint Action Plan was released in April 2018.
John S. McCain III, Daniel K. Akaka, and Samuel R. Johnson VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (VA MISSION Act of 2018)	The MISSION Act, signed by President Trump in June 2018 , established a new veterans Community Care program allowing eligible veterans to use local health-care providers instead of the VA. This is particularly impactful for veterans in states that lack a full-service VA facility because the legislation reduces the burden of traveling to receive care.

Table 1. Recent Federal Activity Impacting Veterans and Their Families, continued

Title	Description
<u>Executive Order 13861: National Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End Suicide</u>	Signed by President Trump in March 2019 , this executive order prioritized a cross-sector approach to end veteran suicide and develop both the 1) Veteran Wellness, Empowerment, and Suicide Prevention Task Force and 2) <u>President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS)</u> , a comprehensive roadmap to end veteran suicide. The Roadmap was published in June 2020.
<u>Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022</u>	Passed by Congress and signed by President Biden in August 2022 , the PACT Act is one of the largest expansions of VA benefits, health care, and research for veterans and their families. The act primarily focuses on Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 veterans with potential toxic exposures during service.
<u>Executive Order 14100: Advancing Economic Security for Military and Veteran Spouses, Military Caregivers, and Survivors</u>	This executive order, signed by President Biden in June 2023 , highlighted shared military-civilian experiences and conveyed military families as working American families. Building on executive orders 13583 and 14035, this order directed the development of the Government-wide Military and Veteran Spouse, Military Caregiver, and Survivor Hiring and Retention Strategic Plan (Military-Connected Plan), to be updated every four years. <u>The Strategic Plan</u> for fiscal years 2024–2028 was released in February 2024.
<u>Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (The Dole Act)</u>	Passed by Congress and signed by President Biden in December 2024 with bipartisan support, the Dole Act includes several broad reforms. In addition to the expansion of health-care services and coverage, veterans and caregivers will benefit from streamlined disability claims, job training, and employment opportunities. The act will significantly impact aging veterans and expand their ability to receive at-home care.

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Federal support applies nationally and provides broad support to our nation’s veterans’ transition into civilian life. Programs and initiatives provided by the US departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Labor maintain and advance efforts to support the MCT in tandem with legislative directives. Select programs across the departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor are highlighted in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Select Categories of Services Supported Through the US Departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor

		Programs	Description
Department of Veterans Affairs	Veterans Health Administration	Health-Care Services	Includes programs supporting ambulatory, dental, inpatient, mental health, prosthetic and sensory aid, and rehabilitation care
		Long-Term Services and Supports	Includes medical-care programs for long-term support (VA community living centers, nursing homes) and additional long-term services, such as adult day care
		Other Health-Care Programs	Includes medical-care programs supporting caregivers, Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA), dependent programs, homeless program grants, and readjustment counseling
		Intramural Research	Includes programs supporting research awards, infrastructure, and capacity for health-care delivery and innovation to improve veterans' lives
	Veterans Benefits Administration	Education	Includes several programs supporting veterans' education, including the Post 9-11 GI Bill, dependent's education and training, work-study programs, and licensing/certification benefits
		Veteran Readiness and Employment	Includes programs supporting veterans with costs related to subsistence, tuition, books, and supplies, as well as reemployment services, employment counseling, and job training for those with service-connected disabilities
		Special Assistance	Includes programs (such as grants for adaptive housing, automobiles, and equipment) supporting veterans who require individualized assistance

Table 2. Select Categories of Services Supported Through the US Departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor, continued

		Programs	Description
Department of Labor	Veterans' Employment and Training Service	State Grants (Jobs for Veterans State Grants [JVSG])	Supports the JVSG program; the program assists disabled veterans in pursuit of employment and serves wounded warriors and transitioning service members needing intensive services, as well as spouses and family caregivers
		Transition Assistance Program	An interagency program possessing a core component focused on veteran employment, transition to the civilian workforce, and measurement of employment outcomes
		Federal Enforcement of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA)	Investigates and enforces USERRA claims involving federal government employers; USERRA protects service members and veterans from employment discrimination
		National Veterans' Training Institute	Offers educational resources and training to staff providers to ensure quality service to veterans
		Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program	Promotes employment of veterans experiencing homelessness and is expected to support 18,000 veterans at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness; there is a particular focus on female veterans, veterans with children, and veterans transitioning from incarceration

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

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About the Authors

Taylor Evans, PhD, is a senior associate on the Science Philanthropy Accelerator for Research and Collaboration (SPARC) team at Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy. Her expertise lies in biomedical research, molecular genetics, rare diseases, and computational biology tools. At the Institute, she analyzes the biomedical research landscape to develop and support philanthropically funded projects across science and health disciplines. During her doctoral studies, Evans was a senior fellow at Johns Hopkins Technology Ventures, where she reviewed cutting-edge therapeutic and diagnostic technologies across biomedical disciplines to assess their value. She also engaged with industry stakeholders within the RNA therapeutics arena to support university-industry partnerships. Evans received a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences from Rochester Institute of Technology and a doctorate in cellular and molecular medicine from Johns Hopkins University. Evans is based in Washington, DC.

Glorimar Aragon is an associate director on the Environmental and Social Innovation team at Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy. Aragon advises individual philanthropists and family foundations on opportunities where capital can make the most significant impact. She specializes in education and workforce development, as well as in developing innovative strategies to create more pathways to prosperity for all. Aragon has a wide range of research expertise, from green energy technology to economic mobility, and her current portfolio focuses on identifying opportunities to increase veteran prosperity and examining the tech workforce pipeline. Most recently, Aragon worked on the design and operation of innovation competitions in the Milken-Motsepe Innovation Prize Program. She has also led several events that bring together stakeholders across sectors to develop shared priorities and frameworks for collaboration to amplify impact. Previously, Aragon worked with first-generation college students to help them enhance their higher education experience and access research opportunities. She has also worked with nonprofits and business associations to assess their workforce needs and identify talent. Aragon received a Master of Art in education transformation, focused on policy and advocacy, from Georgetown University and a bachelor's degree in law and society with a minor in psychology from American University. She was named a Gates Millennium Scholar and currently serves as a Big Sister in her local Big Brothers Big Sisters of America program.

Sylvie Raver, PhD, is a senior director on the Science Philanthropy Accelerator for Research and Collaboration (SPARC) team at Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy. Raver applies her expertise in neuroscience, neurodegenerative disease, mental health, and biomedical research to identify opportunities for philanthropic investments that can have a transformative impact on medical research and health. She provides guidance to philanthropists, families, and foundations and implements strategies to deploy philanthropic capital to advance research and health priorities. Raver has published work on biomedical strategy—with a focus on mental health, neurotechnology, and rare neurodegenerative diseases, such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—and was instrumental in developing a consensus definition for misophonia, a disorder of decreased tolerance to specific sounds or stimuli associated with such sounds. Prior to joining the Milken Institute, Raver worked for the Society for Neuroscience, where she led global programming and policy efforts around neuroscience training. Raver received a bachelor's degree from Lafayette College and a doctorate from the University of Maryland School of Medicine and conducted postdoctoral training at the National Institute on Aging.



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