



Shannon's ETS (Expiration of Term of Service) Experience: How Engaging with Veterans Informs Researchers and Shapes Practice

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VETERANS' VOICE

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

Shannon, an Army Veteran, shares her experience with ETS and the subsequent challenges she faced during her transition to civilian life. The clarity with which Shannon shared her experiences helped a health services research fellow develop empathy for Veterans like Shannon. We wish to share Shannon's experience with others who conduct research with Veterans to help them also develop empathy for transition stressors that may be a root cause for many of the subsequent health and well-being challenges Veterans face.

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KEYWORDS:

Veteran Engagement;
Transition; ETS

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Downey, S., Helmer, D., &
Kamdar, N. (2021). Shannon's
ETS (Expiration of Term of
Service) Experience: How
Engaging with Veterans Informs
Researchers and Shapes
Practice. *Journal of Veterans
Studies*, 7(1), pp. 241–244. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.237>

I am an Army veteran living in a mostly civilian society. Less than 7% of the US population has taken the oath to serve and protect their nation (Vespa, 2020). They have not experienced what we, who have served, experience. Unless you went through basic training, wore the uniform, and made the sacrifices, you do not know what it is like to be a veteran. You do not know what it is like to have a drill sergeant yelling at you to stay awake for 24 hours straight. You do not know what it feels like to transition from a civilian to a soldier. You also do not know what it feels like to transition from a soldier back to a civilian.

In December 2019, I met a researcher who wanted to know about these experiences. My experiences, perhaps familiar to other Army veterans, were foreign to her. She did not understand my language; she had never heard of ETS or Transition Assistance Program classes, but she did recognize that the transition from active duty to civilian status was a critical juncture in my life. She wanted to know what I went through during my civilian reintegration. The following documents my response.

SHANNON'S ETS EXPERIENCE

“When a soldier separates from active duty, they go through a process known as out-processing, where they clear every station on post, such as the housing clothing issuing facility, finance, medical, etc. You are given a packet that requires signatures from various people at different stations. To get your final orders, you must have all the stations on the list cleared and signed off on. Additionally, there are briefings that must be done while you are transitioning out. It has been a while, but I want to say that there is a brief at the beginning and then the last week of out-processing in which you sit through many more briefs which tell you about all kinds of things.

The problem is that they are very standardized. No one is thinking about food security or housing. You're just trying to finish this epic process. This would be the perfect opportunity to introduce an assistant, or liaison of sorts, to guide and ensure successful navigation of the civilian aspect. Even when the soldier is out-processing, you're kind of left to your own devices. This is the beginning of a soldier's independence. I wish I could say I was one of those soldiers that was prepared for my ETS, but I was not. I was incapable of grasping the magnitude of struggle, rejection, adversity, and indifference that would collide with my so far effortless lifestyle. I was so ready to go. I was a soldier after all, so adapt and overcome was a motto that I embodied in my mentality. I was ignorant and fool-hearted and lacked the essentials of civilian existence. So, I rushed through absolutely all of my out-processing, just

checking the boxes as I went. I did not pay attention in most of the briefings. I packed my belongings and headed to Atlanta without a second thought of what leaving the Army would do to my quality of living.

I severely paid the cost for that in the long run. I had to learn everything the hard way, and believe me, it was not fun most times. If only there was someone that could have explained to me how important all those caveats that I was getting a brief synopsis of were, or just showed me how to initiate contact with the different places in the [Department of Veteran Affairs] VA and other organizations, like Combined Arms and Catholic Charities. My lack of planning set me up for failure. Things could have been much smoother had someone been there to guide me.

I was fortunate enough to get out with separation pay, so I had a substantial amount of money for the first few months until my disability kicked in. However, most soldiers probably don't have that luxury and instead go from paycheck to paycheck, which is eventually where I landed. Even on active duty, soldiers live paycheck to paycheck. The more money they get, the more they spend. Most soldiers have become accustomed to living somewhat lavishly. The change in pay after separation is a huge adjustment, but the change in lifestyle is the hardest element. You cannot eat out as much anymore or buy whatever you want whenever you want. That was very hard to adjust to. Nobody likes going backwards moneywise, especially with kids.

I separated June 2012 and I truly rushed through it all. In fact, they promoted me the day my orders released me, and to my dismay, I had already left for Atlanta and my new beginning. So, I had to turn around and return to base to get my corrected orders. Silly, really, because it did not change my separation money, but I guess it was principle.

Anyway, I believe that if at some point civilians could be paired with separating/retiring soldiers to assist with the transition, it would increase veterans' ability to be productive and stable members of society. The reality is that 22 veterans a day take their own lives (Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Suicide Prevention, 2016). This is completely preventable, and I believe this type of intervention would greatly reduce that number.

Most people don't grasp why the military is so successful. Partially responsible for this performance is the constant contact that the soldiers have with each other and their chain of command. It does not matter if you are a five-star general or a fuzzy patch private, soldiers communicate their needs, wellness, and goals every day. This dynamic organization hinges on people being their best, which is accomplished by constantly assisting one another in becoming their very best selves. Society tells us to be the change we wish to see, and in the military, you embody the transformation. When that

structure and support of the Army family is removed, all too often veterans' lives can become unstable. There is no one expecting you at morning formation and surely no one to take you to get an Army Emergency Relief loan. So, veterans' lives begin to crumble, but the immense amount of pride hinders a vast majority of people from even looking for help. We begin to self-medicate, take shortcuts, isolate, and adapt and overcome the best way we always have. The problem with that is that we cannot see the picture while we reside inside the frame. Before you know it, you wake up and wonder why, questioning what the point is of trying but never succeeding.

In the Army, you cannot be food insecure or homeless on active duty, because your chain of command would never allow it. They will stay with you through the good and bad, no matter what. No one in civilian society is committed to that effort for you. The buddy system is not available in the civilian sector, which is unfortunate. So, if we had someone who knew the types of things that we need to know, potentially life-altering information, and then the compassion to call and check on us, it would be tremendous and potentially, lifesaving.

It would also be very beneficial to have someone tell you about places that are incredible for vets, such as Combined Arms, Catholic Charities, Women Veteran's Alliance, etc., to build a civilian network that can also guide you. Most other veterans I have met also say they have learned almost everything about organizations primarily through other veterans.

My life was gratefully rescued by a fellow veteran on the bus one day. At the time, I was homeless, and he informed me of a place known to him as the drop-in center on 1418 Preston Street. When I arrived at this location, they provided me lunch and a beverage while I filled out paperwork. Then they led me to my social worker who inevitably assisted me in utilizing a veterans

housing voucher to rent my own home. Additionally, the drop-in center inspired me to return to school with my Vocational Rehabilitation and Education benefit. I share all this because my life was at a treacherously low point when, like an angel sent from heaven, this fellow veteran's word of mouth was the mustard seed that grew into the wonderful three-bedroom house of my own for me and my three children. I want there to be a person like that vet that saved me to be available for all soldiers. After all, they served, they deserve."

CONCLUSION

This engagement provided the researcher with a vivid and empathetic understanding of my struggles during my transition period. It is an example of how veteran engagement informs researchers. The researcher used knowledge of my personal struggles to help prioritize the areas that need attention to reduce the burden of negative social determinants on veteran health and wellness.

Others who wish to assist and support veterans, whether it be through research, clinical care, or social support, need to take time to listen to us and our stories. They need to ask us questions to learn from us. You may be an expert on a particular topic, but what you know may not directly translate to what we, as veterans, need.

I have another, more personal reason, for sharing my ETS experience. I hope that by telling my story, there can be one less soldier or veteran that must crawl, claw, and scratch their way out of poverty and destitution. I hope to increase the number of citizens who can reach out and establish a rapport and a connection with those who served in their communities. The VA, military, and society in general need to do more to facilitate smoother transitions for service members. We lose too many of our brothers and

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION	WEBSITE	DESCRIPTION
Combined Arms	https://www.combinedarms.us/	Combined Arms is a backbone organization that connects veterans to a network of organizations and institutions that provide comprehensive support to military members and their families as they transition to civilian life.
Catholic Charities	https://catholiccharities.org/	Catholic Charities assists families with a range of services including but not limited to food assistance, family counseling, and legal assistance.
Women Veteran's Alliance	http://www.womenveteransalliance.org/	Women Veteran's Alliance connects women veterans with networking opportunities for career development, resume writing workshops, and wellness programs.
Dress for Success	https://dressforsuccess.org/	Dress for Success is a global not-for-profit organization that empowers women to achieve economic independence by providing a network of support, professional attire and the development tools to help women thrive in work and in life.

sisters in their first year back in civilian society. What we need to recognize is that these deaths are not caused by one factor. It is a series of struggles and repeated injuries that bring some to the point of no return. My story has a happy ending, but that is not the case for all. Stronger support for veterans as they transition is imperative to our well-being.

For more information regarding the community-based veteran service organizations that assisted Shannon, please visit their websites:

FUNDING INFORMATION

This material is based upon work supported in part by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, Office of Research and Development, and the Center for Innovations in Quality, Effectiveness and Safety (CIN 13-413).

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States government.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Submitted: 05 February 2021 Accepted: 17 May 2021 Published: 13 July 2021

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