





# A 'JOURNEY TO SERVE'

## Recruiting Veterans to the Funeral Service Profession

by Steve Walker

THE DEATHCARE PROFESSION has been challenged for years with difficulties in recruitment of talent. This has only gotten worse with the coronavirus pandemic. But veterans constitute a talent pool that is often overlooked by hiring managers in the funeral service profession.

"There are nearly 270,000 honorably discharged veterans annually. Research indicates that eighty percent of them don't have a job lined up," says Jim Price, president of the International Cemetery, Cremation, and Funeral Association (ICCFA) Educational Foundation. "The skills that they take away from their military service experience are incredible, but employment and life lessons from our funeral service professionals could be priceless."

Veterans around the world are highly trained and skilled individuals with the desire to serve deeply ingrained in their very beings. But they often find that they have difficulty in obtaining civilian jobs when they are discharged from military service. This is a shame, and now the ICCFA Educational Foundation and the Funeral Service Foundation (the charitable arm of the National Funeral Directors Association) are working to change that.

### ***A Journey To Serve***

*A Journey To Serve* is a new campaign designed to recruit military veterans into funeral service. This joint project, also endorsed by the Funeral Service Association of Canada, will provide veteran recruitment resources for owners and hiring managers in the funeral profession. Funeral homes, cemeteries, cremation facilities, suppliers, mortuary science programs and funeral associations will all be able to use these resources to learn how, and why, they should strongly consider hiring veterans into their service.

In a *New York Times* story published March 7, 2020, reporter Jennifer Steinhauer wrote that veterans "are often hampered by the difficulty of converting skills

gained in wars to private-sector jobs, a lack of strong professional networks and a culture of treating veterans as charity cases."

Underemployment is a distinct problem faced by veterans. They are 37 percent more likely to find themselves underemployed than civilians, according to a recent LinkedIn study. Often possessing skills equal to or greater than their non-veteran counterparts, veterans may not have the certifications required by many employers and thus get passed over for jobs for which they are highly qualified otherwise.

For these reasons, many vets find themselves without jobs or working in fields in which they have no interest and that are far below their capabilities. Many veterans

report they would like to be considered for different jobs—ones that would better utilize their skills.

The number-one thing that transitioning military members report they need is employment assistance. “I am grateful that our profession’s two 501(c)(3) nonprofit foundations have come together to form *Journey To Serve* initiatives to recruit and retain veterans,” says Jim.

A *Journey To Serve* had its virtual kickoff on April 22, 2021, at [www.journeytoserve.com](http://www.journeytoserve.com). This is an opportunity for professionals to learn about the new program and how to leverage the many customizable veteran recruitment resources it offers. See sidebar for a complete list of resources announced at the kickoff.

The “service” part of the funeral profession shines during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other mass-fatality disasters. Patience and understanding are paramount in dealing with families who have lost loved ones. Many veterans—especially those who have seen combat—have personal experience in this area. They are trained to serve with honor and dignity and to always act in a trustworthy manner. These are the same values we wish to exhibit to families in their times of mourning.

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### Why Hire Veterans

The alignment of values and skill sets between veterans and those in the deathcare industry—such as resilience, discipline, organizational skills, desire for achievement, team building, and the ability to thrive in extremely stressful situations—are all reasons to consider hiring veterans.

Like funeral service professionals, they are accustomed to managing well in crisis situations, such as the current pandemic, and are well-equipped to help families memorialize and remember their loved ones.

In a study conducted in 2013 by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs titled “Veterans in the Workplace: Recruitment and Retention,” 60 percent of respondents reported that veterans comprised less than a quarter of their total workforce. Almost all had experience hiring vets, and more than half indicated having a formal set of policies and programs for recruiting veterans and National Guard and Reserve members.

Great Britain’s Institute of Leadership and Management conducted a study leading up to the 100th

anniversary of the end of World War I, known there as Armistice Day, called *Tales of Transition: Reformulating the Challenge*. The study concluded:

Former military employees make a huge contribution to the civilian workplace. But our findings suggest service leavers are frequently not afforded opportunities to enter the civilian workforce at a level corresponding to their equivalent military skill sets. This not only limits people’s individual capacity to leverage their skills, it limits corporate potential and ultimately UK productivity, too.

In an attempt to curb the high homelessness rate among veterans due to the inability to acquire jobs offering a decent living wage, the Veterans Administration (VA) has partnered with the National Cemetery Administration and Homeless Veterans Community Employment Services to develop the Cemetery Apprenticeship Program. Started in 2012 as a pilot, the program trains veterans as caretakers at VA national cemeteries.

Veterans take great pride in their work. It’s ingrained in them in boot camp and continually throughout their service to country. Funeral service professionals also

take great pride in their work of caring for the bodies of the deceased with great care and respect. This is all the more reason why veterans are well-suited for a career in funeral service.

“Natural leadership and teamwork, problem solving and decision-making, honesty and attention to detail,” all beneficial qualities in the funeral profession, notes ICCFA Executive Director Nadira Baddeliyanage. “If you could find a job candidate with these qualities, I’m sure you would hire them on the spot. This is exactly the type of employee every employer needs and these are the very qualities that you will get when you hire a veteran.”

### Veteran Richard Houston Funeral Service Account Manager

Richard Houston served as a sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps for eight years, a time he describes as “a rollercoaster of friendship, camaraderie, tragedy, and problem-solving.” Today, he’s an account manager at webCemeteries, where he works with funeral professionals and guides them through talking to families during difficult times.

Richard experienced several challenges during his transition between service and civilian life, including combating the stigma that veterans are troubled or uneducated. He and many others continue to disprove this misconception while bringing compassion and knowledge to the job every day.

“Veterans are very regimented and scheduled, and they understand the value of time,” Richard says. “We are the first to serve and the last to leave.”

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— Nadira Baddeliyanage

### **Veteran Jack Lechner Mortuary Science College President**

Jack Lechner had a rare dream as a boy—to become a funeral service professional. After his beloved grandmother passed away when he was 8 years old, he remembers the funeral director being warm and kind to him. They even let him ride in the hearse as he paid his final respects. This bittersweet memory has driven Jack to pursue his dream.


After working as a licensed funeral director in New Jersey for 10 years, Jack joined the U.S. Army to see the world and continue to serve a purpose bigger than himself. Thirty years later, he now serves as president and CEO of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. “In the funeral service, just like in the military,” says Jack, “there are no do-overs. You need to get things right the first time at a critical time in peoples’ lives.”

### **Scholarships for Students**

The Funeral Service Foundation and ICCFA Educational Foundation have announced two scholarships

for veterans interested in studying mortuary science. Each scholarship will be valued at \$5,000 and the first will be offered in the fall 2021 semester. The second scholarship will be available for the spring 2022 semester. The hope is that the program will continue for the foreseeable future. The application and review process will be administered by the Funeral Service Foundation. More details on these scholarships will be available soon on the *Journey To Serve* website at [www.journeytoserve.com](http://www.journeytoserve.com).

### **Time for Action**

“I urge you to embrace the *Journey To Serve* campaign and include a sentence in your job listings that encourages veterans to apply,” says Nadira. “You’ll get a great set of applicants and will already know that they have the strong skill set to serve their community with integrity and a sense of purpose.” 

**Steve Walker** is a freelance contributing writer for *Memento Mori*.

## **What’s Inside The *Journey To Serve* Toolkit**

- Website: [www.journeytoserve.com](http://www.journeytoserve.com)
- Introductory video: <https://vimeo.com/525202203>
- 30- and 60-second radio spots
- Sample social media posts
- Hyperlocal Facebook tools
- Slide deck for funeral professionals on how to use the recruiting tools
- Key talking points about a Journey To Serve
- FAQs about recruiting veterans
- Postcard (brochure)
- Print and digital ads
- Retargeting program
- Press releases
- Communication plan (how to market the recruiting tools)

### **PLUS: Veterans Resources**

- Slide deck for veterans: Why consider the

funeral profession?

- Blog post: GI Bill apprenticeships in funeral service
- Quiz: How to know if funeral service is right for you
- Comparison sheet: What funeral service career is a good fit for your training/rank?
- Links to funeral service job boards
- Links to mortuary science and funeral service schools and training programs
- Links to funeral service-specific info and applications

### **Important Links to Reports**

- A *Journey To Serve*: [www.journeytoserve.com](http://www.journeytoserve.com)
- LinkedIn Veteran Opportunity Report: <http://bit.ly/VetOppsRpt>
- VA Recruitment and Retention Report: <http://bit.ly/VARecruitment>
- ILM (UK) Tales of Transition: Reformulating the Challenge Report: <http://bit.ly/TransitionRpt>