



Veteran unemployment rate dips, but crisis deepens for ex-military women

By Bill Briggs, NBC News contributor

American businesses are carving out more room for veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan – finally driving the overall unemployment rate for that group into single digits in September. But joblessness for the U.S. women home from war continued to climb, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Friday.

The portion of post-9/11 veterans seeking work fell to 9.7 percent last month, compared to 10.1 percent in August and 11.7 percent in September 2011, according to BLS figures.

However, nearly one out of five women who served in the military at home or abroad during the two wars is now without a job, the new BLS statistics show. As the U.S. troop drawdown continues in Afghanistan, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 female vets surged to 19.9 percent in September, compared to 14.7 percent a year earlier and 12.1 percent in August.

“More women were deployed than ever before but an awful lot of them are single moms who face the challenge of coming home,” said John E. Pickens III, executive director of VeteransPlus, a nonprofit that has offered financial counseling to more than 150,000 current and former service members.

“Someone has been taking care of their kids, and now they want to refocus their lives on being mom. Often, though, the kind of employment that may be available to them is not sufficient to help them meet that dream of both working and being that stable mom,” added Pickens, a combat medic with the U.S. Army Special Forces and the 82nd Airborne Division in the early 1970s.

And while many companies trumpet their patriotic side by plucking male combat veterans and plunking them into corporate roles, women who served with some of those same guys often are not viewed by employers with the same level of admiration, Pickens has been told by some of his female clients. In short: Women who logged time in the war zones don’t earn the same level of prestige - or employability - as do U.S. males who recently were in the line of fire.

“They are misunderstood and challenged in a number of ways,” Pickens said. “Typically, folks look at male veterans returning as warriors who we need to honor, and say we need to do what we can for these warriors. Women, unfortunately, don’t carry home that same mantel as a warrior. But they certainly have served beside the men and, in many cases, have done a lot of things that put themselves at risk.”

Women comprise about 15 percent of the U.S. military, said Genevieve Chase, founder of American Women Veterans, a foundation that works to improve the lives of women veterans and their families. She served in Afghanistan in 2006 and remains in the U.S. Army Reserves. She earned a Purple Heart for injuries sustained in a blast in Helmand Province when a car-packed with explosives smashed into the truck in which she was riding. She describes herself as “currently unemployed” - and has been, she said, for almost all of 2012, living off of what’s left of her savings.

“A huge part of it is we come home and we don’t wear the warrior archetype on our sleeves,” Chase said. “We do come home and the American public doesn’t understand what we do overseas; they don’t quite know how to receive us, don’t know how to relate to us. Even some of our brothers, even some of the men who we served with, don’t quite know how to relate to us.”



Still, some U.S. companies, including Citi and Ryder, have shifted hiring priorities and are hiring more former service members, helping to trim the jobless rate among post-9/11 veterans, Pickens said. Ryder has put ex-military folks into driving and technical positions. Citi is helping move people from the battlefield to Wall Street.

“Certainly, I think some companies, big and small, are realizing these men and women make excellent employees because of their commitment to duty, because of all the traits instilled in them in the military,” Pickens said. “And the more that easily recognizable companies like Ryder, like Citi are seen hiring veterans, the more other smaller businesses and organizations will say, ‘My goodness. Look at this. Maybe I should I check this out?’”

But the mission to re-employ more ex-service members is far from complete, contends a leading veterans group whose chief executive officer said he remains “deeply concerned” about the lack of attention paid to the issue by America’s political leaders - particularly its presidential candidates.

During Wednesday night’s debate, for example, President Barack Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney both failed to adequately address pressing veterans issues - including the fact that post-9/11 veterans remain strapped with an unemployment rate that’s higher than the rest of the U.S. workforce, said Paul Rieckhoff, CEO and founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a nonprofit group with more than 200,000 members.

“Veteran joblessness was not mentioned once,” said Rieckhoff, an Iraq veteran who called the latest unemployment statistics “appalling,” noting that roughly 250,000 post-9/11 veterans are now out of work.

“It’s something most Americans don’t realize until we are reminded. And this (lack of candidate attention) is in such contrast to the last two presidential elections, when Iraq and Afghanistan and the troops were such a centerpiece,” he said.

“Because the war (in Iraq) has ended doesn’t mean the people who served there have just gone away — I mean 2.4 million of them were in Iraq and Afghanistan, and tens of thousands are still over there. There are long-term social, financial and human costs to being at war for 10 years. The candidates have a moral obligation to focus on those folks. The war may be over for the civilian population. But for us, in many ways, it’s still going on.”