

# HEROES AT WORK

A Department of Labor program helps wounded warriors find jobs and works to debunk TBI and PTSD myths in the workplace.

By Jeanne Kouhestani, Associate Editor

**M**eg Krause found herself lying in a mud puddle at 3:00 in the morning, without a weapon and convinced terrorists were chasing her through downtown State College, Pa. She had hit rock bottom with undiagnosed post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) more than a year after completing a one-year tour in Iraq as an Army medic.

Mike Bradley spent three years in Iraq and three years at Walter Reed Army Medical Center recovering from a severe traumatic brain injury (TBI) received when his vehicle hit an improvised explosive device (IED). He retired from his Army career as a medic and started sending out resumes. With only two responses (both negative) to the hundred or so resumes he had sent, he gave up, resigned to living on disability payments.

Ryan Kules spent weeks in a coma after his vehicle hit an IED in Iraq. When he awakened, he didn't remember the explosion that had killed his comrades and taken his arm and leg—most likely because he also suffered a TBI. He spent a year in recovery at Walter Reed before transitioning out of the Army.

Today, these three wounded warriors are valued employees in the civilian world—offering clear examples that veterans suffering from TBI and PTSD not only can successfully transition into the civilian workforce, but also make outstanding employees as they apply the values and intangible skills gained during their military service.

Meg Krause recently graduated from Penn State University with a bachelor's degree in public relations and now works on public education campaigns for Concepts Inc., a public relations firm in Washington, D.C. She has resumed her military career, as well: after leaving Active Duty in 2006 after more than four years of service, she joined the Army Reserve and is currently a staff sergeant, the non-commissioned officer-in-charge of the 365th Engineer Battalion Medical Treatment section. Mike Bradley, who is on a Navy contract for security consulting firm Halfaker and Associates LLC in Washington, D.C., does emergency management at a Navy operational center, providing 24/7/365 situational awareness for Navy operations. Ryan Kules is director of the Warriors to Work program of the Wounded Warrior Project, based in Jacksonville, Fla. Running the program from his home and traveling to trade shows, career fairs, and meetings across the country, he has helped place hundreds of severely wounded veterans in jobs nationwide.

## AMERICA'S HEROES AT WORK PROJECT

The plight exemplified by these wounded warriors is all too common. A 2008 study by the Rand Corporation states that one in five veterans returning from Iraq or Afghanistan suffers from PTSD or depression. Thousands of returning veterans—Active, Reserve, and National Guard—with these conditions are now or soon will be seeking or resuming jobs in the private sector. Ron Drach, director of government and legislative affairs at the Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), said this alarming statistic,

[Continued on Page 28](#)



## AMERICA'S HEROES AT WORK





# Walking the Walk

Dawn Halfaker knows all about the difficulties disabled veterans face when transitioning into the workforce. A former Army officer, she spent a year at Walter Reed recovering from a severe injury sustained in Iraq. When she was ready to enter civilian life, she hit a wall until she stumbled across an opportunity to do consulting work for the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency. She used her combat experience to leverage that opportunity into others, and in 2006 founded Halfaker and Associates, a security consulting firm.

"I knew right away I wanted to hire veterans to do the work," Ms. Halfaker said. "I knew the skill sets they had and the culture they were used to—the band of brotherhood and sisterhood developed in service. That's what I was looking to achieve in my company." At the end of her first year in business, she put together an initiative to hire wounded veterans, focused on transitioning them from the military service to civilian jobs. Although the program is open to all wounded vets, she has recognized that it is often harder for veterans with TBI and PTSD to get job opportunities.

"TBI and PTSD are things most people don't really understand," she said. "They are a forgotten population, in a sense, and, really, a more at-risk population. That's why I think it's very important that we reach out to these folks and make sure they are plugged into something that is giving them a sense of purpose, of daily accomplishment, of being part of a team, of being contributors to society, with the ability to earn discretionary income at the same time."

Halfaker and Associates is plugged into wounded veteran employment placement services, using every opportunity to reach as many wounded warriors as possible. The company follows relevant human resource laws and has an interview process ensuring that only qualified candidates will be offered positions. Some of the placement services carefully prescreen the candidates for each position opening to create matches that are most likely to be successful for both the veteran and the employer.

So far, the system has worked beautifully for Halfaker and Associates. "The wounded warriors we have brought into the program are still with the company or have been promoted, moved to a government job, or gone on to bigger and better things," Ms. Halfaker said. "We hire everyone for a career with us, but what we realize is that it's really that first job, that first transition, that's a) the most difficult, and b) the most important. We really try to have a comprehensive program that not only looks to hire employees but to empower them, train them, and mentor them."

Ms. Halfaker said that although accommodations are a continual dialogue between the managers and wounded warriors, most veterans don't need them. The employees go through a rigorous mentoring program where someone is constantly managing them and watching over them to ensure that if their needs change, the company steps up to meet those needs. "A lot of what we do is just being understanding," Ms. Halfaker said. "We make sure the clients they are working with understand someone may need to take extra breaks throughout the day, or take medicine at a certain time, or they can't sit or stand for long periods."

This hasn't posed a problem with other employees, she said, as the wounded warriors come to work and fall in with everyone else. "We're sensitive to not making them out to be different, and try to normalize their situation as much as possible. People need to be sensitive to not go overboard to accommodate someone. Certainly if they need an accommodation we'll do it, but we don't want to treat them any differently," Ms. Halfaker said.

Her words of advice to other employers? "Any company that brings veterans or wounded warriors into their organization is building a strong team, building a cohesive team, building a team of people committed to the organization and mission. They are building a team of people who know how to get things done and live by a certain set of values. A lot of people come up to me and say they want to hire wounded warriors. I say, 'Go out and hire them!' It's not about throwing an ad on the Internet. It's about going out and finding these placement organizations, building these relationships, and selling the company to the warrior. It's a lot of work; don't just say you want to hire them. Walk the walk, go out and do it."—JK

## Dawn Halfaker

Ms. Halfaker, right, founder of Halfaker and Associates, hired Mike Bradley because his combat experience translated into emergency management skills.

## Ryan Kules

Mr. Kules, a wounded Iraq War vet familiar with the symptoms of TBI, now helps severely wounded veterans land jobs nationwide.

## DID YOU KNOW?

**One in five veterans returning from Iraq or Afghanistan suffers from PTSD or depression.**

***We want that employer to act positively. That's all the more reason it's important for employers to be educated about TBI and PTSD...***

combined with the stigma attached to TBI and PTSD, is what helped create the America Heroes at Work project, the brainchild of the Office of Disability and Employment Policy and VETS.

America's Heroes at Work is an education and outreach project launched in August 2008 to help employers and the workforce development system



**Ron Drach**

Director of Government and Legislative Affairs at the Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS).

## Resources

The wealth of information on the America's Heroes at Work website is the result of a collaboration among the Department of Labor and other federal agencies, including the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and others that are listed on the site.

### **America's Heroes at Work Website & Contacts:**

- [www.AmericasHeroesAtWork.gov](http://www.AmericasHeroesAtWork.gov)
- E-mail address: [AmericasHeroesAtWork@dol.gov](mailto:AmericasHeroesAtWork@dol.gov) (for user feedback and success story suggestions)

### **Job Accommodation Network**

For personal assistance related to job accommodations for veterans with disabilities, employers can contact:

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)  
[www.jan.wvu.edu](http://www.jan.wvu.edu)  
800-526-7234 (voice)  
877-781-9403 (TTY)

### **Wounded Veteran Employment Placement Services**

(Note: see America's Heroes at Work website for a complete list)

### **Warriors to Work/Wounded Warrior Project**

<https://wtow.woundedwarriorproject.org/>  
202-425-9272

### **Hire Heroes USA**

<http://www.hireheroesusa.org/>  
866-915-HERO

understand the challenges presented by servicemembers with TBI and PTSD and help these men and women succeed in the workplace. Its centerpiece website contains tools, resources, and general information to help employers recognize symptoms of the disabilities and effectively implement accommodations, which often can be as simple as providing alarm clocks, checklists, or tape recorders, or offering mentoring, more frequent breaks, or flexible work schedules.

"The primary purpose of the site is to educate employers," Mr. Drach said. "Most employers know that hiring veterans with disabilities is the right thing to do, but because of the stigma and fear of the unknown, some are hesitant to hire veterans with head injuries or psychological conditions such as PTSD. The website is meant to dispel these myths."

Sometimes the employer of a Reservist or Guard member returning from combat may be the first to notice some symptoms. Sometimes the work environment may trigger symptoms before the veteran or his or her spouse is even aware there is a problem. "We want that employer to act positively. That's all the more reason it's important for employers to be educated about TBI and PTSD," Mr. Drach said.

Not all TBIs are severe; 80 percent are mild concussions and recovery will be complete. Others learn to live with the condition successfully. PTSD can be managed with therapy, medication, and proper workplace accommodations. "These individuals can and will be valuable and successful employees," Mr. Drach said. "Employers needn't be nervous."

Indeed, employment can be therapeutic in the rehabilitation process. According to a study by the National Council on Disability, people who gain employment after the onset of a disability report greater life satisfaction and adjustment than people who are not employed. "We believe that the earlier we can intervene and get someone with a disability back into the workforce, the better success that person will have over the course of [his or her] career," Mr. Drach said. "Employment enables veterans with TBI or PTSD to fully participate in society. Employment provides income, which is obviously necessary to an individual's and family's economic well-being, and helps build skills for future well-being. It also provides better social interactions and connections that can reduce isolation and create social capital. And bear in mind that when someone goes into a social setting, perhaps a party, often the first question they'll be asked is 'What do you do?' If they are working, they can proudly say, 'This is what I'm doing.' It adds to their social well-being."

DOL recently initiated a pilot program to match veterans with TBI or PTSD with appropriate employers in jobs for which they are qualified. Because of limited resources, the program is open only to veterans and employers in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

“The pilot program is really phase two of what we started as an education and outreach effort,” Mr. Drach said. “As America’s Heroes at Work is not meant to be a placement program, the pilot is more for qualitative research purposes. We want to test and see what best practices work on the job so we can enhance information on the website. The result is intended to further educate the employer community and those visiting the website.”

## OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Michael Bradley and Ryan Kules met while each was convalescing at Walter Reed. Their paths converged many months later when a friend sent Mr. Bradley’s resume to Mr. Kules, who by then was director of the Warriors to Work program. By the next day, Mr. Bradley had an interview request from Dawn Halfaker, founder of Halfaker and Associates.

A hundred resumes sent on his own had yielded only discouragement and stress. “Before, I was on my own. I didn’t have someone to help with the process,” Mr. Bradley said. “Once I got my resume to the right people, everything rolled quickly and smoothly.”

Mr. Bradley, who had served as a medic in Iraq, was worried that if he continued to work in emergency medicine in civilian life—the only field in which he had experience—the war memories the job evoked might prove to be too traumatic. However, that combat experience also had exposed him to emergency management, and that was enough of a tie-in to land him the job with Halfaker and Associates.

“When I did the interview, we went over the resume and tweaked it a bit to include more emergency management stuff, which is what they needed,” Mr. Bradley said. “They were very willing to help me get back into the workforce, basically to do what was best for me. That’s what meant the most—it was a very personal and comfortable interview.”

Mr. Bradley said he loves working at Halfaker and Associates, calling his employer “very understanding.” “So many employers are nervous to hire wounded vets with PTSD because people think they’re crazy. I think it’s improved over time, but employers still need to become knowledgeable about what TBI and PTSD are and understand that hiring vets is probably the best thing they can do. We’re loyal, we work hard. It really helped with my process because I had an employer who understood and was willing to work with me.

“Once I started working, one of my biggest fears was ‘will I be able to do it?’ I had a hard time remembering things,” Mr. Bradley said. “Working has helped me so much in my process. It’s given me a lot of confidence. I’ve been able to prove to myself that I can do it.”

Meanwhile, his boss, Ms. Halfaker, said Mr. Bradley “is doing a fantastic job and is one of our best performers.”

Ryan Kules first learned of the Wounded Warrior Project during his recovery at Walter Reed. He received one of the project’s signature backpacks, stuffed with useful items such as underwear, t-shirts and shorts, playing cards, CD players, and other items meant to provide comfort to wounded warriors and ease their transition from battlefield to hospital.

After he left the hospital and transitioned into a job with a

government contractor, Mr. Kules had a chance encounter with an executive of the Wounded Warrior Project that landed him a job as the project manager for its Warriors to Work program. The program helps servicemembers who have been severely injured in combat return to the workforce, matching their skills to job openings, writing professional resumes, and practicing interviewing skills. The job enabled him to make a difference in the lives of others, like Mr. Bradley, who were facing challenges similar to his own. Mr. Kules has since helped hundreds of wounded veterans from all branches of the service, including Reservists and Guard members who don’t want to return to the jobs they held before they were injured during deployment.

When Meg Krause left active service with a clean bill of health, she had no idea she had PTSD. She assumed her nightmares and flashbacks were a typical reaction to being deployed, and she avoided such emotional triggers as war movies and large crowds. She joined the Army Reserve and enrolled in college to meld her combat experience with an academic understanding of political and foreign affairs for a future civilian career.

But about a year-and-a-half after her return from combat, her family and friends began to notice changes in her behavior. She started missing classes, but was afraid to get help because she didn’t want to lose her security clearance or miss a chance

### Michael Bradley

Mr. Bradley said that working for Halfaker and Associates has improved his confidence. “I’ve been able to prove to myself that I can do it.”



## DID YOU KNOW?

**PTSD can be managed with therapy, medication, and proper workplace accommodations.**

for promotion in the Reserve. It wasn't until a car backfire in the wee hours of the morning sent her careening back to Tikrit that she sought help from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

That decision, she said, helped her turn a devastating experience into a positive one. "I was at a point where I was about to screw things up," she said.

SSG Krause had been putting out resumes, with no luck. But once she started getting treatment for her PTSD, things started falling into place. The woman who would become her boss contacted her about a job opening, based on a referral SSG Krause received as a result of an internship on Capitol Hill the previous summer. Upon her graduation from college, she started working for Concepts Inc., using her military and PTSD experience to help develop resources for the America's Heroes at Work website and other client projects.

SSG Krause received accommodations that have helped her avoid hitches and bumps. But first, she said, she had to swallow her pride and ask for help. "She [her employer] did a lot of work with me when I first started to figure out my hours. She allows me to work from home and to make my own hours, so when I have a bad night with nightmares and flashbacks and I don't get

without her until she snaps back and rejoins the discussion. Having an agenda in front of her helps her keep track of where they are. Her contributions to discussions have yielded a bonus: when she speaks from the perspective of her military experience, she adds a new angle. "It's a confidence-builder that my experiences are continuing to have a positive effect even if it's just one person at a time or one meeting at a time," she said. "I am taking what could have been a horrible experience into some really positive outreach and education."

## HELP WITH THE TRANSITION

The Warriors to Work project and Hire Heroes USA are two placement organizations that prescreen veterans with TBI and PTSD and other injuries and match them with appropriate employers through their extensive networks. Both organizations help with resume writing and interviewing skills and keep candidates abreast of job openings. This process can help mitigate veterans' stress as they seek work in the private sector and helps employers who want to hire wounded veterans find qualified candidates.

Mr. Kules has found that the biggest fear of wounded veterans transitioning back into the workforce is that the skills they picked up in the military will not translate to the civilian sector. He educates them about the value of these skills and matches them with opportunities that not only meet their needs physically and mentally, but empower them. "We want to make sure that they are not going to work just to collect a paycheck but are enjoying the work they are doing," he said.

On the other side of the coin, educating potential employers about the value of those military skills is also a challenge, said Brian Stann, executive director of Hire Heroes USA, a program whose sole mission is to help match wounded warriors and veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan with civilian job openings.

"Most companies are looking for college graduates," he said. "We take on the task of educating companies on the intangible skills men in women who have served in combat have. What these companies often don't understand are the responsibilities that have been levied on these men and women over in Iraq and Afghanistan. We open their eyes a little bit to make them realize that a lot of veterans don't have college degrees but have some amazing qualities—qualities you're only going to find in military personnel: teamwork, honor, duty, commitment. They have executed these qualities in war, many under grave danger in the most extreme circumstances known on the face of the earth."

Mr. Stann said the Hire Heroes USA staff has mobilized to veterans hospitals and other facilities to provide day-long training seminars to help veterans develop job-search skills: writing a resume, articulating skills to show benefits to potential employers, doing mock interviews with corporate sponsors, and learning what to expect during a job interview. The training also stresses the importance of monitoring their e-mail and phone messages daily so they can respond to employer inquiries right away.

"The majority of employers I've gotten feedback from say the warriors want to be the best employees that they have," Mr. Kules said. "They are respectful, on time, and have experience that other employees don't have." ★

### Meg Krause

SSG Krause notes that many of the accommodations employers can make for their employees who suffer from TBI and PTSD are everyday accommodations that would help the average person.



to sleep until 4 a.m., I'm able to sleep for a few hours and maybe not start until 11 a.m. That means I work a long day, but by no means am I penalized for being late to work. As long as the work gets done, she's flexible with what hours I work."

A Blackberry that helps her keep track of e-mail, meetings, and reminders is "almost the umbilical cord of my life," SSG Krause said. "Employers get very nervous when they hear the terms TBI and PTSD because of the stigmas attached, but in actuality, many of the accommodations are easy to make for veterans with these injuries. They are everyday accommodations that would help your average person."

SSG Krause admits that sometimes she zones out in meetings, but her understanding co-workers simply go on

# DoD Goes Modern to Fight PTSD Stigma

By Elizabeth H. Manning, Senior Editor

In 2003, the first survey to ask Soldiers in an active combat zone about their behavioral health and well-being found that 59 percent believed seeking psychological services could make them look weak. Nearly 50 percent thought their unit might have less confidence in them as a result. Soldiers saw such factors as significant barriers to seeking treatment for combat-related stress, anxiety, depression, and other emotional health issues.

Four years and four surveys later, the Army's Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) found the percentages have gone down, but not by much—50 percent and 45 percent, respectively, for the questions above. The latest round, called MHAT V, also noted a trend as deployments have racked up: while 12 percent of Soldiers exhibited signs of combat stress or depression during their first deployment, the proportion was up to 27 percent by their third. Reserve Component troops can feel especially isolated when they get home, and thus are more at risk.

These findings came at a time when troops were being disseminated into smaller outposts among the Iraqi population—an effective strategy for counterinsurgency, but not for accessing mental health services—and studies were beginning to demonstrate that the earlier that servicemembers sought treatment, the better their recovery.

The Department of Defense (DoD) decided it was time to follow up with a multimedia campaign to reduce the stigma of the psychological wounds of war. The hope was that convincing servicemembers, their families, friends, and employers that PTSD is a wound like any other, that healing and not “toughing it out” is the way to go, and that your credibility or career won't take a hit for seeking treatment would get help to more troops, and earlier.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has had a National Center for PTSD (<http://ncptsd.va.gov>) since 1989. But for the new campaign, DoD turned to its own Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE, [www.dcoe.health.mil](http://www.dcoe.health.mil)), established in November 2007. Called Real Warriors (<http://realwarriors.net/>), the outreach effort targets social networks to get the word out.

Social networks are the lines of communication for today's young adults, as well as a good share of older ones. In Facebook and MySpace, you and your network of “fans” can talk about yourself, share news, read about each other, upload photos or videos, and post comments. With a Twitter account, you can send out “tweets” of news to the computer or mobile telephone of everyone who has joined your group.

When DCoE conducted focus groups to ask what servicemembers thought a PTSD outreach campaign should look like and how it should work, two points stood out: they wanted real servicemembers, not celebrities, to talk to them, and

**Part of the stigma is that people think, 'If I ask for help, I'm showing weakness.' I think just the opposite; it takes real strength.**

MG David Blackledge, U.S. Army  
Real Warrior who shared his PTSD story online.

they wanted to be able to access the campaign—and through it, possibly, others dealing with PTSD—via social networks.

Within minutes of the Real Warriors launch in May, its Twitter account (<http://twitter.com/RealWarriors>) had 40 followers. DCoE uses it to announce new postings to its website, interesting news or articles published about PTSD, and conferences where it's setting up a Real Warrior booth. At presstime, the site numbered just shy of 400 followers, a number similar to its Facebook account (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Real-Warriors/61288747990>).

Measured against the more than 1.8 million servicemembers who have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the further audience of their families and friends, 400 is a drop in the bucket. But DCoE aims to keep the initiative going for at least three to five years, depending on funding. The longer it goes, the more materials and resources the agency can bring to bear.

The Real Warrior website emphasizes profiles of servicemembers with PTSD who tell their story. Marine Sgt Josh Hopper, his wife, commanding officer, and other members of his intelligence unit describe how he spiraled into the mood swings, withdrawal, quick temper, drinking, and other symptoms common to PTSD after his second deployment. They also describe how he climbed out of it after finally seeking help.

“We need the whole chain of command as well as the Soldiers themselves thinking of it [as] ‘Hey, you've had an injury here, you need to get it fixed, and there are processes to get it fixed, and you'll be better and stronger afterwards,’” said Army MG David Blackledge, who himself sought PTSD treatment after being severely wounded in his first deployment and wounded again in his second. He, too, told his story by video for the Real Warrior website. “Part of the stigma is that people think, ‘If I ask for help I'm showing weakness.’ I think just the opposite; it takes real strength.” ★