

Philanthropy Profile

The National Organization on Disability's Wounded Warrior Career Demonstration Program

In 2008, the National Organization on Disability (NOD) asked several North Carolina foundations to consider funding a national demonstration project known as the Wounded Warrior Career Demonstration. The project's third demonstration site was to be located at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, with other sites in Texas and Colorado.

The funders immediately saw the value of investing in a project that had the potential to improve the lives of North Carolina soldiers and their families. Fort Bragg is in Cumberland County, near Fayetteville. Built in 1918, it is one of the largest and most active military bases in the eastern United States. Fort Bragg is headquarters to the 82nd Airborne Corps and the Special Operations Command. The base is one of the main garrisons for soldiers deploying to Afghanistan, and it is home to approximately 29,000 people, 4,300 households, and 4,200 families.

After learning more about the project, The Cannon Foundation, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and The Duke Endowment collaborated to help fund the demonstration for 3 years. The project was launched by NOD in collaboration with the Army to support severely injured soldiers in their transition from active duty and treatment to fulfilling civilian careers, through intensive employment, training, and educational support.

One goal is to develop effective ways to help injured soldiers pursue careers so they can be active, productive members of society. The service model is intensive and high tech, and it includes long-term career counseling and mentoring. In addition to the direct services goal, collection of comprehensive evaluation data and performance of outcomes analysis will provide new knowledge for the Army and its allies, with the hope of sustaining and replicating the project. Findings will also inform public policy and practice.

Progress to date indicates that 68% of participants are in school, training programs, or jobs, compared with approximately 34% of individuals without access to the program. Another significant finding is that 83% of employed participants have stayed in jobs for longer than 12 months. Veterans in the project report a very high level of satisfaction. These statistics, as well as the extreme rate at which the population of Army Wounded Warriors has grown (from 1,500 individuals in 2006 to more than 8,000 at the time of writing), have convinced the Department of Defense that this project needs to be expanded, continued, and opened to Wounded Warrior programs in every military service branch.

The project is now in the second full year of successful operations, and the Fayetteville office of the NOD Wounded Warrior Career Demonstration Project is serving more than 114 veterans and their families. In addition to the original \$450,000 grant, NOD sought and succeeded in raising funds from the Cumberland Community Foundation, and from the McCormick Foundation, through funds from Major League Baseball.

Significant progress has been made on Capitol Hill. To serve more veteran families in North Carolina and elsewhere, NOD has undertaken an effort to expand the program to 12 sites operating for 5 years, as requested by the Department of Defense, and is pursuing both private and public funding. In the past year, NOD met with more than 75 members of Congress and a number of senior officials from the executive branch of the federal government. A total of \$1.6 million in funding for NOD was written into the fiscal year 2011 appropriation bill, but Congress failed to enact this legislation.

Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado introduced legislation last year that would expand and continue the program for 5 years (as described above), as well as open it up to the other military branches. Senator Bennet is preparing to reintroduce this legislation in concert with significant bipartisan support from the

House of Representatives and the Senate. NOD counts the majority of the North Carolina congressional delegation (including Senators Hagan and Burr and Representatives Jones, Price, Coble, Kissell, McIntyre, Myrick, and McHenry) among the supporters of the program. NOD is optimistic that Senator Bennet's legislation will be enacted and provide funding for the program's continuation and significant expansion during 2012-2013.

As a result of strong support from the Department of Defense, and to bridge the 3-year demonstration to a larger program, the project requires additional private funding to extend its planned operation period of 3 years until expansion is enabled through legislation. This funding also ensures that the lessons and outcomes of the demonstration project can be fully realized and that the services to North Carolina veterans will continue, pending expansion. NOD is also exploring a cost-benefit analysis to fully demonstrate the efficacy and efficiency of the model. The significant costs that are borne by the nation when veterans do not receive necessary support are anticipated to be far larger than the costs to provide targeted career counseling and support to those who are most at risk. The North Carolina funders are proud to support the project and help North Carolina soldiers and their families transition to self-sufficiency and success. NCMJ

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