



Kindra Aschenbrenner, left, and Emily Hastings, VetsWork interns, crosscut a fallen tree as they clear a wilderness trail in Northern California.

VetsWork Fills Employment Gaps

Job program headquartered in Trout Lake gives vets firsthand experience

By Drew Myron

When he was hunkered in the tight, dark space of an armored vehicle, Jimmy Pardo did not know his future would feature an entirely different sort of patrol.

Thanks to VetsWork, a program offered by the Mt. Adams Institute in Trout Lake, Jimmy went from the dangers of war to working on mountaintops in fresh forest air.

“I had the privilege of patrolling the Mount Adams Wilderness, all the way up to the very summit of Mount Adams,” Jimmy says. “I will never forget that.”

Jimmy, 33, served as an armored reconnaissance scout in the U.S. Army

Cavalry, followed by two years in the VetsWork program working in public affairs for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, and on trail crews for the Mount Adams Ranger District.

Jimmy and other young veterans are part of VetsWork, an 11-month environmental internship. Participants are placed at local, state and federal land management agencies, such as the U.S. Forest Service, where they gain hands-on skills and experience in natural resource management and public lands.

“Our country has invested a lot of time, money and effort training civilians to be soldiers, but what the military doesn’t do is prepare for the transition

from military to civilian life,” says Aaron Stanton, VetsWork program director. “We have to do a better job of supporting veterans as they re-engage in their communities. That’s what we owe our servicemen and women.”

The Bureau of Labor estimates one million veterans will exit the military between 2011 and 2016. Aaron says these veterans are struggling to find employment. For states such as Washington—home to more than 630,000 veterans—the impact on local communities is significant.

While veterans hunt for jobs, natural resource agencies are challenged with budget constraints, a backlog of

maintenance projects and an aging workforce ready to retire. With the right training and access, opportunities are created for veterans to secure good jobs within these agencies, Aaron says.

Jonathane Schmitt agrees.

“After nearly eight years of military service and two bachelor’s degrees, I searched for any environmental government position, from the municipal to federal level, for a year and a half and wasn’t even offered an interview for a single job,” he says. “Then I came across the Mt. Adams Institute’s VetsWork program and everything fell into place.”

Jonathane recently completed an internship as an invasive species specialist in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

“This program is designed to give veterans experience working in conservation, natural resources and ecological fields,” he says. “I now feel that I have the experience and connections to officially start the career that I have been slowly making progress on since I graduated high school. It seems that the hardest part is just getting your foot in the door.”

VetsWork was created by the Mt. Adams Institute, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Trout Lake, with the mission to strengthen the connection between people and the natural world through education, service learning, career development and research.

“These are not just jobs, but pathways,” says Aaron.

Working in partnership with AmeriCorps, a national service program, VetsWork was initiated in 2014 with a handful of veterans placed in sites in Oregon and Washington. The program quickly expanded across the U.S., with veterans placed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Natural Resources and various state parks.

To date, the program has served 46 veterans in Oregon, Washington, Missouri, Virginia and North Carolina. This year, VetsWork offers 36 internships in 11 states.

Mt. Adams Institute also offers



Above, approximately one million veterans will leave the military between 2011 and 2016. VetsWork helps them find training and employment. Right, interns Mattheau Corris, Kaye Jones, Tyler Walsh and Chelsea Fields take part in a training session on a community farm near Trout Lake.

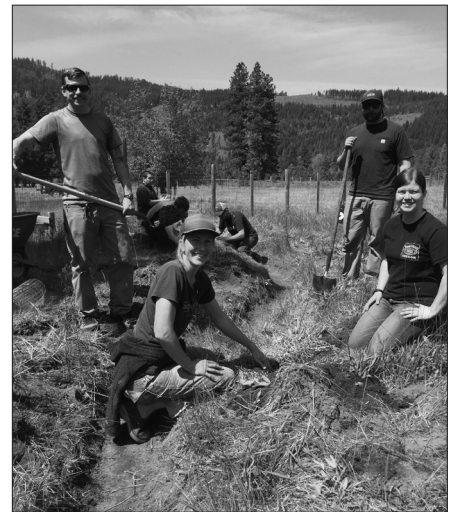
VetsWork GreenCorps, a firefighter training program developed with the Umatilla National Forest.

VetsWork is open to U.S. military veterans between the ages of 21 and 35, with a discharge classified as honorable or general under honorable conditions. Interns earn a stipend of about \$1,200 a month, and housing is sometimes available.

Chelsea Fields, 27, served four and a half years in the Coast Guard before joining VetsWork. She was stationed at the Umatilla National Forest in Pendleton, Oregon, where she worked as a conservation education and wilderness assistant, organizing educational programs for students. Chelsea’s internship included a vigorous outdoor component.

“I worked with a crew of three other people, and we spent our days cross-cutting logs that had fallen in the trail, cutting back shrubs that have grown into the trail, and redoing trail areas that were washed out,” she says. “We worked 10 hours a day for eight days in a row. It was hot, dirty work, and I had never experienced anything like wilderness trail maintenance, but I am glad I did!”

The outdoor experience prompted



Chelsea to learn more. She is pursuing a degree in environmental science with a concentration on fish and wildlife management.

For some participants, the VetsWork experience leads to job offers and opportunities. For others, it shines light on a new career path. For many, the program brings a sense of peace and purpose.

“Through VetsWork, I have found a way to serve the underserved—the veterans of the U.S. armed forces,” says Jimmy. “I’ve seen how this program benefits individuals, including myself, drawing them into nature, helping them to find renewed purpose and harmony within themselves as well as with the world around them.” ■