For vets returning to US, green energy jobs await

ANDY BROWNFIELD - Associated Press - Associated Press

Ben Noland served in the U.S. Marine Corps for eight years, then spent 18 months looking for a job.

"I've probably put my resume in to 300 places in the past year," the 33-year-old Kenton resident said.

"The farthest I've ever got was a phone interview."

Noland finally landed a job installing solar panels at Tipping Point Renewable Energy, a Columbus-based solar power company that is hiring only military veterans for its installation crews at a time when unemployment among former service members is outpacing that of civilians.

Tipping Point's efforts echo those of companies and groups nationwide to hire veterans in the green energy industry. Denver-based nonprofit Veterans Green Jobs is one of the largest, having trained or placed 370 veterans in the last four years.

And a pilot program by five of the nation's largest energy providers, called Troops to Energy Jobs, provides training and credentials to military veterans, as well as college credit for their military training and experience.

About 240,000 veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have returned to the U.S. and are unable to find work. They make up a growing chunk of the 850,000 veterans overall who are out of work. The White House expects an additional 1 million service members to return to civilian life by 2016.

The veteran unemployment rate in October was 12.1 percent, compared with 9 percent for the U.S. overall. For veterans ages 18-24, that rate was 30.4 percent.

The renewable energy industry is growing fast — solar and wind energy have grown more than tenfold in the last decade — and military veterans often make good fits for green jobs.

Such green sector jobs as manufacturing or maintenance of wind turbines or solar arrays require skills similar to those that service members learn in the military, said Bill Scott of Bradley-Morris Inc., the largest military-focused recruiting firm in the U.S. Veterans generally get technical training that is lacking in the civilian workforce, Scott said.

The number of projects providing solar energy more than doubled in the U.S. from 2008 to 2010. In that time, the amount of solar energy generated increased from enough to power 1.4 million homes in 2008 to 3.2 million homes in 2010. Wind energy has increased 1.5 times in capacity over the same time, able to power 39

million homes in 2010, up from 25 million in 2008.

Renewable energy has been growing fast in Ohio. The number of new projects approved by the state in the first 10 months of 2011 is more than triple that of all of 2010. And of the 2,797 new constructions approved this year, all but 24 were solar power arrays.

However, there is some worry about whether that pace of renewable energy growth will sustain itself. Federal stimulus tax credits run out for wind energy projects by 2012 for and solar by 2016, and a federal grant program that repays developers a portion of project cost expires this year.

The idea for Tipping Point's Solar by Soldiers program, started this summer, was inspired in part by chief technical officer Darin Hadinger's father, a Vietnam War veteran.

He said a clerical error on his father's honorable discharge made it hard for him to find work.

Tipping Point has hired as many as six veterans for work site staffs of nine and plans to hire at least 10 more veterans altogether.

Noland, one of Tipping Point's hires, left the Marines in 2009, in the midst of the worst recession since the Great Depression.

He started looking for supply and logistics management jobs, something he had experience with from running supply convoys to troops on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. When nothing turned up, he looked futilely for warehouse jobs in Columbus. Finally, he briefly took a minimum-wage job at McDonald's 30 minutes away from his house.

"I'm a military veteran. Two tours of Iraq, one of Afghanistan — I was thinking, 'Man, I've got to be able to hang my hat on that,' you'd think." Noland said. "I was completely discouraged."

Part of the reason that unemployment among veterans is so high is that there is a lack of understanding among both veterans and potential employers, said Lt. Guy Zierk of the Marine Corps' Wounded Warrior Regiment in Ohio. Part of Zierk's job is connecting returning Marines with services and programs designed to help them return to civilian life.

"Civilians can have a hard time understanding the military. They don't understand what a squad leader is — entry-level management," Zierk said. He said returning veterans also have a hard time translating the skills they learned in their service to civilian life.

There's also a language barrier for veterans returning home, said Neal Yorke, a retired veteran of the U.S. Air Force who helps returning military members transition into civilian life.

"I was Air Force, a lot of the time I can't understand the Navy, and to me the Marines are the most difficult — let alone coming back to the civilian world and trying to explain to an employer that I have the skills that they need."

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