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VETERANS IN THE WORKFORCE

How Hickory metro is recruiting veterans to local workforce

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To Nathan Huret, veterans were an untapped workforce that could be brought to the Hickory area to fill jobs, in particular those that require leadership and teamwork skills.

So Huret, director of existing industry at the Catawba County Economic Development Corp., and others started Welcome Home Hickory Metro to give soon-to-be-discharged members of the military a weekend glimpse of what's available in Hickory.

"It's a population that we've never tried to work with," Huret says. A year ago, Huret, the Hickory Chamber and dozens of other sponsors including employers launched a program to bring members of the military from bases in the Carolinas to town for a weekend of job fairs, area tours and even a ropes course at Lake Hickory.

Families were invited, of course. They were given gas cards, hotel rooms and meals. And from interviews with the soldiers, airmen and Marines beforehand, they were matched with local industry, such as CommScope Inc., for talks about available jobs.

After three weekend events, beginning in September 2017, six families have relocated to the Catawba County area to take local jobs. The latest Welcome Home Hickory Metro weekend events brought 10 job offers, says Lindsay Keisler, president and CEO of Catawba County Chamber of Commerce.

The October Welcome Home event attracted 18 companies and 18 families. Many of the companies sent employees who are veterans to welcome the families at a Friday gathering that included bounce



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 Two veterans check in for the Welcome Home Hickory Metro event last month

“The celebration is just heartwarming,” Keisler says.

When planning for the events started, Keisler says she was expecting more veterans to participate and more jobs to be offered and accepted. “I have had to realign my expectations,” she says. “It’s not like buying a winter jacket (for the veterans). You are asking a family to relocate and start a new life here.”

Huret isn’t disappointed with the results. “We knew we wouldn’t get huge numbers,” he says. “But their skills are off the chart: teamwork, leadership.”

Employers seem pleased, too. Huret says local employers can train the veterans in skills needed for their specific industry. “It’s finding a person who can lead right away” that’s beneficial to the Hickory-area employers, he says.

Take Ariel Allensworth, a veteran stationed at Fort Bragg who participated in the first Welcome Home event. CommScope hired him pretty quickly and he and his wife, whom he met in South Korea while stationed there, relocated to Hickory.

“I’ve started a good career, and this is a great area,” Allensworth says. “We really liked the small-town feel that Hickory has but we also liked the number of stores — it’s like a bigger town.”

To Allensworth, the Hickory weekend was a good combination of fun and job search.

“It was a very relaxing weekend where I could make a lot of contacts,” he says. Now he and his wife live in an apartment near Lenoir Rhyne University, a short commute from his job.

Keisler says the Welcome Home events have gotten good reviews from the veterans and their families. On the morning of an interview with the *Charlotte Business Journal*, she had received an email of thanks from a veteran who had visited in October with his wife and three young daughters.

“We love the community,” Keisler says, quoting the email. “People are so warm and hospitable.

“You folks in Catawba County are doing something special,” the email says.

Now Huret and Keisler are thinking about the next step. Huret calls it a “broader initiative” with the military bases in the Carolinas. They’re cooking up an idea for Hickory-region offices on the bases.

“It would give us direct access to talent,” Keisler says. Within about 120 days of leaving the military, soldiers, sailors or Marines could simply visit the Hickory Metro office on their base for a sampling of jobs in the civilian community to the northwest of Charlotte.

Huret notes the Welcome Home events are expensive, each costing up to \$20,000. Having a presence on the bases would be less expensive and would likely yield more employees.

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