

Opening Doors to Civilian Careers

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For service members transitioning out of the military, taking off the uniform can leave them feeling unmoored and asking: “Who am I now, and what will I do with my life?”

In Warner Robins, Ga., the newly opened Georgia Veterans Education Career Transition Resource (VECTR) Center provides separating service members the streamlined services, training, and support necessary to assist in preparing for a smooth transition and a productive post-military career.

“We offer accelerated training programs that allow not only our active duty military, but also veterans, to get in-demand workforce skills as quickly as possible so we can get them employed in household-sustaining wage jobs, and they can more easily make that transition once they take off the uniform,” said retired Air Force Col. Patricia Ross, the center’s chief operating officer.

As an administrative unit of Central Georgia Technical College, the VECTR Center provides intensive training and certification programs that include HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning), Cisco networking, commercial truck driving, and welding and joining technology.

Partners include the state departments of Veterans Service and Labor, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and United Way/Mission United. They help VECTR provide workforce training, job skills, behavioral health services, homeless services and other important social services. The Center has strong corporate partners, including GEICO. Earlier this year, it received a \$100,000 grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies.

VECTR also provides a place to call home. “We knew that if we were going to reach people from some of our larger installations in Georgia, we needed to house them,” Ross said.

They worked with the leadership at Robins Air Force Base to create an agreement allowing active duty soldiers transitioning out of the military to reside in a dorm during training.

Since 2016, VECTR has assisted more than 20,000 individuals with accessing VA benefits, employment, education, entrepreneurship training, certification testing and other benefits. Ground will be broken on a Center expansion in the spring. It hopes to offer more housing opportunities through partnerships and introduce new training programs.

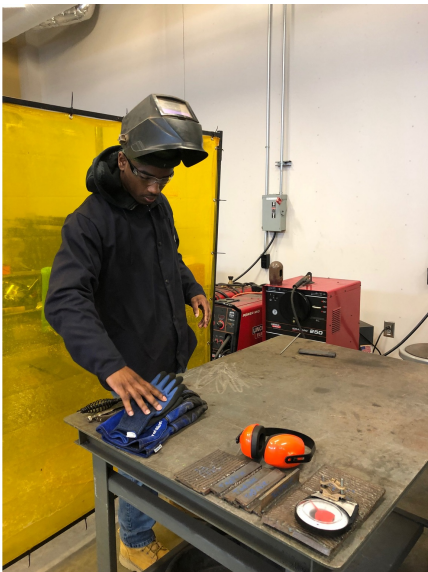
Darionte McCord

Darionte McCord, a culinary specialist in the Army, is currently participating in the welding program and living in VECTR's onsite housing. The program offers the opportunity to learn new skills and develop a new path.

"I discovered the VECTR Center and saw that they had a lot to offer," said McCord, who started with the program in January. "They provide you with everything you need and more, and they give you a nice place to stay."

For McCord, whose grandfather was a welder, learning a new trade that can provide a viable career excites him. "Welding is something that I always wanted to learn how to do," he said. "It is such a broad trade. You can never learn everything in welding, because there is always something new to learn."

McCord has already recommended the program to fellow service members because of the quality of the training and the support he receives from the staff at VECTR. "It's hard to fail. Even if you wanted to," he said.



McCord takes part in a welding class exercise at the VECTR Center, which offers a variety of class schedules in an effort to provide flexibility to veterans and their families. Photo submitted by VECTR Center.

James Harris

After transitioning from the Army in 1996, James Harris bounced around for several years and eventually found himself to be homeless. "A lot more time had passed than I had thought trying to get back in step," Harris said recently.

While he was living in a Salvation Army-run homeless shelter in Macon last year, he learned about the VECTR Center. He participated in the intensive HVAC program, which packed about 18- months' worth of material into a three month class.

"That was the first time in my life that I enjoyed school," said Harris, who liked being in class with other veterans. He also appreciated the respect and support he received from the VECTR Center staff. Within a year, his whole life had changed.

On Veterans Day in 2018, the GEICO regional office presented him with a car. "The reason [VECTR Center] wanted to get me a car was because you need a car to get a job," Harris said. "They wanted me to find housing, so they got me into a Section 8 program so that I could get housing. They also helped me to find a job."

For veterans, VECTR seeks to provide a "total solution," Harris said. For him, the Center delivered on that promise.
