

Career Matchmakers

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Tony Whelan, LouieConnect project manager, and Cathe Dykstra, Family Scholar House CEO, discuss nonprofit organizations and careers with transitioning veterans at the Fort Knox Senior Leader Symposium March 28, 2018. Photo by Whitney Allen.

When Tony Whelan retired from the military, he had no idea what kind of civilian career he might transition into. All he knew is he wanted to stay near Fort Knox.

“This is one of my favorite installations,” said Whelan, who retired after 25 years in the Army. “I knew I wanted to stay close to it. There’s such a community here.”

As a master sergeant, he had been a successful leader throughout his military career, but he was worried about how to find a job that would maximize his talents and provide the same standard of living. As Whelan was going through the Solider for Life—Transition Assistance Program, he heard about Where Opportunity Knox (WOK), a regional initiative to connect transitioning veterans and military spouses to jobs in the greater Louisville area. He knew immediately he wanted to take part.

While many employers across the country hire veterans, no region has the same approach to recruiting and retaining veteran talent as WOK, which is now in its fourth year and funded through grants. The greater Louisville area is well-positioned for this

initiative; approximately 100,000 soldiers transition from active-duty service annually through the U.S. Army Human Resources Command located at Fort Knox.

Three regional veteran connectors (RVCs), all retired service members themselves, lead the program, coaching participants on everything from cover letters to salary negotiation. When a client needs something outside their areas of expertise, the RVCs connect them to 170 community partners who are willing and able to help. They also travel outside of Kentucky to recruit even more veteran talent to the area.

The RVCs work with businesses in the area, setting up events such as employer showcases, which offer a firsthand look at what it's like to work for a particular company.

Among WOK's many offerings is the Senior Leaders Corporate Fellowship Program, designed for those who are within 180 days of their transition. For two months, participants intern with a company for four days a week and spend one day a week in the classroom learning skills relevant to job hunting.

"We currently have a 90 percent success rate with that program," said Linda Larson, one of the RVCs. "When employers see someone with great talent that would be a very valuable asset to the company, they will often offer them a job halfway through the program."

Whelan is one of those success stories. He interned with the nonprofit Family Scholar House, then was hired as a project manager. In that role, he recently launched a web app called LouieConnect.com for those who are in crisis or need assistance connecting with local resources.

"If it was not for Where Opportunity Knox, I do not think I'd be where I'm at today," Whelan said. "If you do not participate, you are selling yourself short."
