



## Nevada's Green Zone Initiative: *A Comprehensive Systems Approach to the Challenges Facing America's Veterans*

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### Introduction

The level of support for veterans in America is at unprecedented levels, so pronounced in fact that the Department of Defense has referred to it as a “Sea of Goodwill.”<sup>1</sup> This support has spurred tremendous government engagement on issues related to helping veterans. The U.S. Congress has approved annual budgets for the VA that have increased to historic highs in recent years.<sup>2</sup> President Obama has insisted on national collaboration efforts that have brought new focus, developed interagency collaboration, and expanded the places and ways that veterans can receive services.<sup>3</sup>

Yet even with this focus and change and the call for effective service delivery, veterans have continued to fail. Over 135,815 disabled veterans were designated as having “employment handicaps” or “serious employment handicaps” by the VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program for veterans within fiscal year 2013, an increase from 116,000 in 2011;<sup>4</sup> approximately 941,000 veterans ages 18 to 64 had been in poverty in the past year in 2013, a figure that was about the same in 2010;<sup>5</sup> and according to the Department of Labor, 722,000 veterans remained unemployed in 2013.<sup>6</sup>

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If the VA budget has only increased in recent years and veterans are still failing, we have to look at the strength of local systems that touch veterans every day, including health systems, higher education systems, and workforce systems, and wonder if our focus should not also be on those systems to drive outcomes. Fortunately, many local communities have recognized this and have begun to knit together a fabric of strategically-designed, locally-driven initiatives that are reaching today’s generation of veterans and connecting them with the services and support they need. They are viewing these veterans not as victims or heroes but as assets to communities who should be re-integrated to build the communities they left to serve in uniform. They have realized that federal funding, laws, and actions will change, but the need to ensure the successful reintegration of valued service members, veterans, and their families will not, and they have prioritized community and state level ownership over this mission.

Nevada’s Green Zone Initiative (GZI) is one example of this kind of local effort, seeking to align and mobilize all available resources in the areas of employment, education, and wellness to best serve and support Nevada’s veterans and their families. It is a statewide strategic planning initiative and architecture designed to improve services, increase collaboration, and reduce duplication among service providers; to provide onramps for policy solutions at the most local level; and to provide mechanisms to feed those solutions up to local and state bodies, including the Nevada State Legislature. In this article, we discuss the structure and goals of the GZI, highlight specific features of the program, and note the best practices and lessons learned in developing and implementing such an initiative in the service of veterans.

### **Philosophy and Background for the Program**

Putting together a statewide effort of this nature with many partners and components requires solid leadership and clear goals. Given the pressing challenge of effec-

tively serving a growing veteran population in Nevada despite a complicated and uncoordinated array of existing veterans’ service programs and a battered state budget, the state of Nevada recognized the need for a coordinated response. With this in mind, the Nevada Department of Veterans Services spearheaded and began work on the GZI in 2012 with an aim to change the way veteran services are viewed, funded, delivered, evaluated, and adapted across Nevada.

As an important first step, our GZI team identified a threefold set of assumptions and goals to guide our work. First, we recognized that there are available resources in the form of innumerable services, resources, and opportunities currently available to Nevada’s veterans. Second, we set the objective that our work should ensure Nevada’s veterans are seen as assets to our communities, colleges, universities, and our workforce. Third, we solidified our commitment to a “boots on the ground” approach coordinated at the state level and leveraging local partners, noting that no single law or combination of laws at any level of government can be effective if there are not people on the ground willing to engage, and clear avenues available to them to join the effort.

Having set our objectives, the GZI team then embarked on a knowledge-gathering “development phase” along with a core group of veterans, leaders, stakeholders, and elected officials to understand the existing situation of Nevada’s veterans. Assessing baseline data, stakeholder input, and feedback, as well as conducting an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the systems we were focused on, were critical components of this effort. We communicated the results of our convening work and the data we gathered to leaders and stakeholders across Nevada through a comprehensive scan of the state’s veteran services landscape.<sup>7</sup> This document, our “Business Case for Support,” identifies the gaps and duplications of services and programs that existed across the state at the start of the program, where those gaps were in the system, and who would be eligible for the services still needed to fill the gaps. The Business Case has become a central document to the overall effort, outlining the challenges at hand, establishing common goals, and providing a common language for public dialog on this effort.

Continued research resulted in two additional guiding documents in the GZI’s development phase. The first was the GZI “Funding Analysis,” an analysis of how Nevada fares when competing for federal veteran program grants when compared to neighboring states, and how Nevada can best position itself for greater success and sustainability. The second, the GZI “Action Plan,” outlined the vision, mission, strategy, and structure of the GZI, as well as outlining several quick wins that could be achieved in each focus area to gain traction and momentum.

## Building the Statewide Architecture and Implementing Change

With our guiding principles, goals, and documents in place, the GZI team began the first year of implementation. During this phase we developed our statewide systems change architecture, the framework that facilitates coordination between multiple layers of service providers, establishes onramps for public participation at the policy and program levels for all who wish to serve veterans, and challenges policymakers to consider how they can best meet the needs of the veterans in our state. The systems change architecture encompasses the various roles and efforts of the Interagency Council on Veterans Affairs (ICVA), local Veteran Community Councils (VCC), focus area efforts, the Green Zone Network, and other local, place based and issue centered activities. We describe each of these components below.

**Interagency Council on Veterans Affairs:** The ICVA is a statewide working group created by Nevada Governor Sandoval with the given objectives of increasing collaboration, developing statewide priorities, and making recommendations for policy changes at the state level. The governor appointed thirteen people to the council, ten of whom represent his veteran-related cabinet agencies, and others from the federal VA, local communities, and non-profit service providers. The ICVA's work involves identifying statewide resources, creating efficiencies in local, state, and federal government services as well as the non-profit sector, and establishing an action plan for improving veteran outcomes through the Green Zone Initiative and beyond.

**Veteran Community Councils:** The VCCs work much like the ICVA at the local level. These local councils are established and chaired by a mayor, a county commissioner, or another local elected or appointed leader, who then appoints members from local veteran service organizations, service providers, community leaders and stakeholders. The VCCs develop policy recommendations for the ICVA based on their local work, set local objectives, and formalize the coordination between organizations and service providers at the community level. They are also responsible for developing opportunities for the members of the public to interface and engage with veterans in their communities.

**Flagship projects and quick wins:** In addition to the statewide and local coordinating bodies, the GZI also developed a flagship project under each of its focus areas: education, employment, and wellness. These projects were intended to demonstrate success, help the GZI gain immediate traction, and provide concrete examples of progress to inspire others to lead veterans' efforts at the local level. Although established to make immediate progress, these initiatives also had a lasting impact on the future

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phases of the initiative as well. Examples include starting the Suicide Prevention Task Force; working with four community colleges to promote credit for higher learning across the community college system; and starting the Green Zone Employer Program, which is intended to create a network of certified veteran-friendly employers who wish to engage with and hire veterans in communities throughout Nevada.

**Green Zone Network:** The final element of the GZI architecture was the Green Zone Network (GZN). The GZN, a unique social networking platform created specifically for Nevada's veterans and veteran service providers, is arguably the most important aspect of the overall architecture, as it provides critical onramps for public participation into the initiative. Through this platform, service providers can coordinate their services, fill gaps in services, and identify which other organizations might be doing similar work in order to potentially leverage resources and assets. Similarly, veterans from different generations can communicate, share experiences, develop affinity communities, and follow important policy initiatives in the state. Green Zone Employers can also list jobs and recruit veterans through this site. The Network also places the power of self-help in the hands of veterans themselves, which in and of itself provides a benefit to the entire community.<sup>8</sup>

## Achieving Outcomes in Practice: GZI's Three Pillars

With our philosophy and goals established and our statewide architecture in place, in 2013 the GZI began to focus on and devote time and resources to the specific activities and priorities that drive our effort. We have organized these activities around three “pillars” to anchor and support our work, each of which is briefly described below: the Policy Development Pillar, the Service Provider Coordination Pillar, and the Connecting to Veterans Pillar.

The **Policy Development Pillar** focuses on creating policy recommendations to increase collaboration and decrease barriers to necessary veterans' services. This effort relies on subject matter experts and recommends changes in both statute and in regulation. While there are numerous policy development efforts, including veteran legislative summits, surveys, and other outreach, the most

coordinated and highest level of policy development is now underway in the areas of veteran employment, education, and wellness through specific policy councils created by the governor or through legislation. The policy councils described below, and several others not listed here, largely completed their policy development work by the summer of 2014, and their recommendations will be synthesized into a coherent legislative agenda ahead of the 2015 session.

- Due to the importance placed on veteran unemployment in Nevada, the ICVA chose to take on the employment focus area at the state level. The group meets quarterly to review best practices from other states, identify opportunities in Nevada, and develop specific legislative recommendations. Their recent report consists of a total of fifteen recommendations, all of which are designed to provide comprehensive reform for veteran employment in Nevada.<sup>9</sup>
- To address the education focus area, Governor Sandoval created the Student Veterans Advisory Council through an Executive Order. Council membership is made up of student veterans who toured every state institution and one private institution to see the depth and breadth of services provided to veterans. Following their tour and meetings, the Council submitted a report of detailed recommendations to the governor to improve student veteran success, to be considered by the legislature and the Board of Regents which oversees the college and university system in Nevada.<sup>10</sup>
- The Veterans Suicide Prevention Council was also created through an Executive Order signed by Governor Sandoval to formally replace the Veterans Suicide Prevention Task Force and to develop recommendations for the wellness focus area. Members represented various service provider agencies, veteran service organizations, and the Nevada National Guard, among others. Their final report consisted of seven recommendations aimed at decreasing Nevada's suicide rate among veterans.<sup>11</sup>

Under the **Service Provider Pillar**, the GZI is continuing to build out opportunities and platforms to engage veterans. At the community level, we replaced the Veteran Community Councils, which had limited success, with a veteran community collaborative model, which has been successful elsewhere. These collaboratives regularly convene community service providers to veterans, military members, and their families to create an enhanced local referral network committed to improving outcomes through a sustainable and measurable approach. Additionally, several federal grants, continued

emphasis on the Green Zone Network, and increased community participation and support are all allowing the GZI to increase collaboration and coordination as well. Other important successes under this pillar of work include the development of a formal volunteer training program and establishment of an annual service provider conference created and funded by the state Office of Veterans Services.

By far the most important aspect of the efforts to coordinate service providers in Nevada, however, has been expansion of the relationship between the GZI and the Nevada National Guard. In March of 2013, the director of the Nevada Department of Veterans Services and the Adjutant General of the Nevada National Guard signed a memorandum of understanding to align the efforts of the Pentagon's Joining Community Forces campaign and the Green Zone Initiative. Nevada has found the marriage of Joining Community Forces and the Green Zone Initiative to be a perfect institutional collaboration to augment the ongoing efforts described above.

Finally, the **Connecting to Veterans Pillar** of the GZI remains the most challenging aspect of the overall effort. Meeting the needs of the individual service member, veteran, or family member requires a personal connection with them, and this has been very difficult to understand and achieve. While it is the most challenging, it is also the most important, and we are prioritizing work under this Pillar in order to achieve outcomes and reach our goals.

In addition to the Green Zone Network web-based platform, the GZI developed several important approaches under this engagement pillar. Instead of holding benefits fairs or job fairs, which have proven to be highly ineffective, Nevada is engaging veterans through their sense of service, their willingness to lead, and their desire to sustain the same camaraderie they had in the military. Testing this approach, we have held multiple community service events, such as neighborhood clean-ups and a homeless feed, in 2014, with high participation from veterans, service members, and their families. Several partners also hosted special engagement activities such as writing groups, physical workouts, and other opportunities for veterans as well.

The most inventive piece of our veteran engagement effort is a professional mentorship program called Engage, which was created by veterans, for veterans. Engage focuses on peer-to-peer mentorship to provide veterans with skills, support, and access to employment opportunities. In order to develop those opportunities within the community and to showcase the successes of their participants, Engage gathers monthly for a breakfast with community leaders and members, service providers, and those wishing to serve or employ veterans.

## Challenges and Successes of Building a System

Bringing all of these individual efforts and programs together and keeping the initiative moving forward has been valuable and important work, but as one might expect, it has not always come about smoothly. In addition to realizing numerous wins and building momentum over the past few years, the GZI team has learned many critical lessons from failures and challenges along the way.

For example, the Veteran Community Council concept started well, with ten communities signing memoranda of understanding, but the concept evolved and formalized at a much slower rate than we anticipated, largely due to the informal nature of the councils. Another challenge came through the very limited amount of staffing supported by the state to see various elements through, which in turn required the small team to focus on building momentum at the tactical level and forego system-wide changes at the strategic level, at least for a time. It also became clear during the first implementation phase that the largest challenge by far would be making the personal connections with veterans necessary to link them with beneficial services and resources. We learned early on that providing a social networking platform alone would not be enough, and that we needed to personally engage with veterans in the communities they lived in order to understand their needs and ambitions and connect them directly to those who could help them succeed.

Even with these challenges, the GZI experienced considerable successes as well. The statewide architecture was leveraged to secure millions of new dollars in grants to support the effort; additional staffing was approved by the legislature as a result of Governor Sandoval's support; and the language of the Green Zone Initiative was injected into policy development discussions at every level of state government. All of this resulted in a very successful legislative session in 2013, in which important elements of this effort such as the Interagency Council on Veterans Affairs were established in statute in perpetuity, consolidating previous successes in concrete, legal terms and providing a platform for continued successes.

These successes and challenges during the initial implementation phases had enormous impacts on subsequent phases of the effort. The challenges identified which aspects of the model needed to be adapted or discarded,

such as the Veteran Community Councils. The successes created a base of support for the effort to make the successful case for more staffing and resources, allowing the GZI's key leaders to reassess the effort at the strategic level and regain momentum going forward.

## Conclusion

Local systems impact veterans in every aspect of their lives, and aligning those systems, making them more efficient, and ensuring that the "Sea of Goodwill" is built upon to improve veteran outcomes is challenging but critical to the long term outcomes we seek to achieve for this important population. In Nevada, the Green Zone Initiative set out to do many things, including changing the way veterans and veterans services were viewed within our state. Even with some setbacks, the GZI's successes have shown that local collaboration and statewide coordination can have a tremendous, even immediate impact.

By building a model that appreciates services provided at the federal level but takes local ownership of the work, the GZI has improved outcomes for Nevada's service members, veterans, and their families. We have injected the DNA of the GZI into all levels of government. We are sustaining systems change and service delivery through public and private partnerships, philanthropy, federal funding, and public policy change. We are mobilizing communities and organizations toward a shared change agenda. Most importantly, as a result of this work, key services, resources, benefits, and opportunities have become available and more relevant to the veterans who are interested in accessing them. As the GZI continues to grow and evolve, it will assist veterans in successfully reaching their educational, employment, and wellness goals.

Just as the GZI adopted successful strategies and tools from other state and local governments, and even from non-veteran initiatives, it also serves as a model for others in changing outcomes through a systems change approach.<sup>12</sup> The principles of local, collective efforts toward a common goal are the same even if challenges, opportunities, and resources differ. The Green Zone Initiative is Nevada's approach, one we hope will serve as a model open to modification for implementation in other communities, to better and support the futures of veterans across the country. **CI**

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