

# Committee On Veterans

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## THE CENTER FOR MILITARY AND PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVES

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### Veterans Across America™



*In times like these it is always good to remember that there were always times like these.*

### HOBOS AND HEROES

#### NYC Council Hearing on Disabled Veteran's Employment: Testimony of Wesley Poriotis – Chairman, Veterans Across America

June 23, 2008

Mr. Chairman: I want to again thank Dr. Ray for putting together the video we have all just seen, which includes my testimony in front of Congress. On a note of humor, Ray was good enough to edit out the section that had Senator Burr from North Carolina crucify my Greek name "Poriotis". This Southern Senator who had replaced the long standing Jesse Helms persisted in calling me *Mr. Psoriasis*.

Mr. Psoriasis he said, "What if we gave you the \$200 million dollars that the Labor Department is wasting? Cause they're failing to place these veterans in good jobs and as far as I can see, based on the testimonies my fellow senators and I have heard today from the folks at The Veterans Employment Training Service they sure aren't cutting the mustard."

Few people realize that it's the Labor Department, not The Veterans Administration, which is charged with the mission of helping veterans get civilian jobs. By all standards, including the excoriating reports from The GAO, they have mostly failed. The VA, on the other hand, is responsible for helping disabled veterans find jobs. The Labor Department wasn't doing its job despite spending \$200 million a year with 3,000 persons assigned to the task. Therefore, Ray and I brought a small contingent to corral the VA Secretary and the VA Assistant Secretary responsible for all disabled veterans programs including employment. We met first with the then VA Secretary Tony Principi and afterwards with the Assistant Secretary. Much to our surprise, we were given another dose of big government agency reality when we heard the following:

"Gentlemen, our employment programs here at the VA are dismal at best. None of our disabled veteran physical rehabilitation counselors have had any employment training. So, in our infinite wisdom, we have dubbed them 'employment specialists' and tasked them as we say in VA speak with helping disabled veterans find employment. It's a disaster. Furthermore, let me share a little secret, *"There are people in this building (VA headquarters) who don't like veterans."*

Ray and I and members of our group thought we had misheard this top official. We asked him to repeat his statement. He did and while it is unnecessary to belabor the specifics, he went on to elaborate about the challenges he faced from his VA colleagues in moving the needle on behalf of disabled veterans.

Forgive the somewhat dispiriting story, but it places into context both the good and the bad that veterans have always faced from the time returning wounded Union soldiers had the words "**homeward bound**" pinned to their uniforms as they were placed in railroad cars on their journey home during the Civil War. The words **homeward bound** were soon shortened and the abbreviation **HOBO** was written on the soldiers---a derogatory term that we now associate with homelessness and despair.



The more things change the more they stay the same. This became apparent when I testified in front of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee that we needed to re-brand military service as a value proposition for America's employers. Senator Obama was among those on the committee and lamented that in his state, Illinois, that they had a more pressing problem with the 56,000 homeless veterans.

In pondering these issues and their historical context, I was struck with the appropriateness of the inscription written on the Baptist Church near our offices at 31st and Madison:

*"In times like these it is always good to remember that there were always times like these."*

But there was one dramatic exception. Post WWII when the GIs returned home the reception they received was vastly different. I hadn't thought about it much until I bought my father Tom Brokaw's book, "**The Greatest Generation**." He is 87, landed at Omaha Beach, fought in the Battle of Sicily and was wounded in the North Africa campaign....as were his two Greek immigrant brothers who fought alongside him.

He never had said much about the war but began to reminisce as the tears flowed silently while he read Brokaw's book. I then began to share with him the tough-going today's veterans were facing post Gulf War as they tried to find jobs in the civilian sector. I told him about our formal research studies for The Joint Chiefs which quantified the de-selective biases faced by veterans attempting to access corporate America.

He looked at me with disbelief. How could that be? When your Uncles and I came back, small businesses snapped us up. Your uncle Chris built a restaurant empire and your uncle Demetrius did the same in the electrical industry. The owners took a liking to the young GIs. We had no education but we learned the business and either eventually started our own or expanded the ones we were in.

He looked at me and said, "why don't you do the same thing?" BINGO.

What this non-corporate, relatively uneducated, yet savvy survivor named Phillipus Sotirius Poriotis was telling me was the simple extract of a major ground breaking study our non-profit foundation **Veterans Across America** had just taken a year to complete for Congress.

I had missed the real point. For 15 years, a group of concerned Americans including me have been around the block. We've walked the halls of Big Government, cornered top executives from America's leading companies, and have held so called branding summits to determine the best course of marketing the value of military service to America's employers. But we've learned the hard way that doing this from the top down with big institutions rather than from the ground up with local government and local businesses isn't going to work.

Therefore Mr. Monserrate, I applaud your and Mark Jaffee's vision in linking local government and The NYC Council with The Greater New York Chamber of Commerce and its 10,000 members who will become **business mentors** to able and disabled veterans. The instant network created by this **6 Months to Success Program** is the bridge and the vital supply chain between the hidden talent and the hidden job market.

I trust, Mr. Chairman, that this program will not have the half-life of the audience leaving this hearing today. We should formalize this program and make it a permanent fixture of NYC government because as one Vietnam Veteran and enlisted service person who rose to General status (Gen. Evan Gaddis) and ran our foundation said, "Veterans don't need more dress-for-success advice, interview enhancing skills, or resume writing workshops...we need a g-d damn network...and that's what this program will achieve!"