

Giving Back to Those Who Served

Through programs and development opportunities, the NJMEP team is dedicated to helping New Jersey's veterans adapt to civilian life by connecting them with stable careers that utilize the skills they gained in the military.

BY MADELEINE MACCAR

For four generations, from his grandfather to his son, Lance Lopez and his family have served their country by answering the U.S. military's call to action in the Air Force, Army, and Marines.

Today, the project manager, veterans and community recruitment, for New Jersey Manufacturing Extension Program (NJMEP) uses not only his firsthand knowledge of what it's like transitioning from active duty back into civilian life but also his lifelong passion for helping our nation's veterans and their families.

"I have always been a supporter of the armed forces," Lopez affirms. "I think we all—in some way, shape or form—have a responsibility to our country. We all do it in our own ways: Some people can serve, and others can help in other ways, like supporting our military people. Whichever way we can best help our country, we take those avenues."

Lopez's desire to give back to those who risked their lives in the military extends to supporting them as they find both their place in the world and meaningful employment once their active-duty days are behind them. That's a big reason why he's such an ardent advocate for all the ways NJMEP is dedicated to working with those servicemen, servicewomen, and their families, helping them transfer the skills they developed during their military careers into a new or lateral field.

With everything from career training, professional development opportunities, community programs, NJMEP has a wealth of opportunities to help veterans find their place in the manufacturing sector's vast array of jobs. One is the New Jersey Defense Manufacturing

Community Consortium (NJDMCC), a twofold endeavor that's both a training program for veterans and their family members and a way for interested manufacturers to connect with the well-trained individuals once they graduate. To further eliminate as many barriers to employment as possible, there is no charge for veterans and even their families to participate in NJDMCC.

Lopez also highlights this grant NJMEP received from the Department of Defense, giving the program \$5 million across five years to upskill 240 individuals annually throughout the funding's duration: 120 veterans, their family

members and military service members a year, and another 120 individuals through the County College of Morris—an initiative that Lopez says "we're very, very excited about."

"These manufacturers need good-quality, upskilled individuals who are willing, able and want to work, and we just want to be the catalyst and provide the tools to make that happen," he explains. And, befitting how both the industry's and military's technology have

evolved tremendously to provide engaging, advanced and hands-on work. NJMEP underscores how sustainable, secure and satisfying manufacturing careers can be, especially since employment in New Jersey's sector averages more than a \$97,000 annual salary.

While companies that tap into the rich talent pool of the region's veteran population can help retired military members find their footing in a new role while building upon the strong foundation of skills, ability, and knowledge they gained from their service, the benefits of hiring employees with military experi-



ence are inarguably mutual.

"The initial benefit is you have a disciplined workforce," Lopez explains. "It's difficult sometimes for employers to give an employee a task to do and that employee follows through on that task, whereas veterans are trained to complete their missions and move onto the next one. And I think that's what employers see now when they hire veterans."

He notes, however, that retired military personnel tend to regard programs touting the quality of their veteran support with a learned suspicion. But NJMEP's proven track record, Lopez's own military background and thoughtful efforts to make personal connections have all helped its programs establish a stellar reputation among the veterans community.

"There's so many organizations out here who talk about what they do and how they help veterans, and veterans are typically skeptical about those programs," Lopez explains. "I think it's all about the outreach: Person-to-person emails work because people need that direct connectivity. When they speak to our veteran service members, I think they know they have connected with someone who will do what they pledged to do for them."

It's all part of NJMEP's effort to connect the veterans who call New Jersey home with the employers that want to help them find meaningful work while also reaping the benefits of bringing hardworking and reliable members onto their teams.

"It's a gift back to our veterans," Lopez says. "New Jersey MEP has shown that they care enough about our veterans and our manufacturing partners in the state, where we want to upskill these veterans and their family members to actually take on these manufacturing jobs that are so-well deserved by the veterans and the manufacturers." ▸



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