

# Testimony of David Bostic



JOHN DEERE

## House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Topic: Supporting Veteran Transitions Through SkillBridge and Dealership Careers

### Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas and distinguished members of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify to the Department of Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. My name is David Bostic, and I'm writing on behalf of John Deere to share information about an issue that affects thousands of transitioning U.S. service members every year, which is the successful reintegration into the civilian workforce.

In 1997, fresh out of high school, I started as a technician at a John Deere dealership in Lexington, Illinois and attended the John Deere Technician training program at Lake Land College in Mattoon, Illinois. Except for the years spent furthering my college education at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois and serving as a Rifleman in U.S. Marine Corps, I've spent my career supporting John Deere customers, first with a wrench in my hand at a dealership, and then in corporate roles I've held at John Deere for the past 18 years.

John Deere manufactures equipment and technology that enables our customers to produce food, fiber, fuel, and infrastructure to support a growing global population. To accomplish this, we employ over 30,000 employees across 16 U.S. states, including 250 employees in Chairman Van Orden's district. But we don't do this alone, John Deere equipment is sold and serviced by a network of independently owned dealerships throughout the country, like United Ag & Turf and James R Rosencrantz & Sons in Congressman Pappas's district. These are small and mid-sized businesses embedded in thousands of communities across the United States that employ an additional 50,000 people. Currently, these dealerships face a critical shortage of skilled workers, especially equipment technicians. Right now there are thousands of open positions in John Deere dealership service and parts departments across the country. These are well-paid jobs with benefits and growth potential, and they don't require a four-year degree.

Our nation's veterans bring unmatched skills, discipline, leadership, and resilience to their local communities. They are problem-solvers, team-builders, and mission-driven professionals. Veterans consistently outperform the general population in employment metrics. According to the US Department of Labor, as of August 2025, the veteran unemployment rate stands at just 3.1%, compared to 4.2% for

nonveterans. Post-9/11 veterans report an even lower rate of 3.0%. In total, 17.6 million veterans participate in the civilian labor force. Moreover, 32% of employed veterans work in STEM or skilled technical roles—double the rate of nonveterans—highlighting their readiness for high-demand careers. Veterans are also heavily represented in installation, maintenance, and repair fields (10.9%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Yet despite these strengths, many face significant challenges transitioning from military service to civilian careers. On the surface these employment numbers are impressive, but what they fail to show is the stress, failed starts, and setbacks many transitioning service members face when entering the civilian workforce. As an example, I'd like to highlight Dave Underwood, Global Executive Recruitment & Governance Lead for John Deere. When Dave Underwood was medically discharged from the U.S. Marine Corps in 2012, he believed his discipline and leadership would make the transition seamless. It wasn't. He faced uncertainty, rejection, and moments of questioning his value outside the uniform. Fortunately, Dave was able to seek out mentors, learn new skills and leverage a network of mentors to help translate his military service into a successful civilian career by 2022. Other veterans are not as fortunate and this is why Dave co-founded the Quad Cities Veterans Network, a community-driven initiative that connects veterans with resources, mentors, and employers. These networks provide critical support during the transition process, offering job leads, peer guidance, and a sense of belonging. Their impact is tangible: veterans gain access to meaningful careers, companies tap into exceptional talent, and local communities benefit from the leadership and resilience veterans bring.

John Deere has always been a staunch supporter of this country's military and its veterans and over the past several years we've taken even greater strides to advocate and support veterans. In 2019, a team of fellow veterans and I launched The John Deere Military Hiring Program to help dealers close the skilled technician gap. Our goal was simple: connect transitioning service members with careers at John Deere dealerships. To accomplish this, we set out three key principles:

**FIRST:** Be simple to navigate for service members and dealerships. Deere dealerships are small to mid-size employers and often lack the assets to navigate many government programs. That is why my team and I take on as much of the work as possible. In not only recruiting but completing the logistical and documentation workload for Skillbridge internships.

**SECOND:** Add value for the service member and their potential employer. To do this we provide free training for candidates. This sets them up for success and translates the skills they've gained in the military to terms civilian employers will understand. This training is free of charge to the service member AND the dealer.

**LASTLY:** Stay focused on positive outcomes. Our goal isn't charity or good press. Our goal is successful employment for our participants. Since 2019, our dealers have hired approximately 800 veterans, including hosting over 300 SkillBridge interns which has become a cornerstone of our military hiring program.

## **Recommendations**

I urge the Subcommittee to consider stronger partnerships between the Department of Veterans Affairs and private sector employers to design and manage transition programs like SkillBridge that assists veterans and spouses.

SkillBridge is aptly named because it serves as a bridge between military duty and civilian employment. And it works. Employers gain access to highly skilled talent, and service members gain a smoother, more confident transition. Each year, approximately 200,000 service members transition out of the military. SkillBridge participation exceeded 22,500 in FY2022, with nearly 8,000 opportunities offered through 4,800 industry partners as of mid-2024. Employers consistently report SkillBridge as a critical tool for addressing veteran underemployment and filling technical skill gaps (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024) But we can accomplish more with a coordinated effort between the government and civilian employers. While Skillbridge has proven to be a successful program, it fails to address the concerns of veterans, reservists, members of the National Guard and spouses.

Employers are on the front lines of workforce development. They understand the skills needed, the gaps, and the potential that all military affiliated individuals bring to their organizations. By involving employers directly, we can ensure programs are relevant and responsive to current labor market demands.

Here are three key recommendations:

1. Formalize employer advisory councils within the VA to help shape transition programs, like Skillbridge, ensuring alignment with industry needs and emerging career fields.
2. Expand incentives for small and mid-sized employers to participate in programs like SkillBridge. At John Deere, we can leverage our size and infrastructure to help independent dealers navigate this process. Many small businesses do not have that kind of support and would benefit from wider adoption of third-party providers.
3. Create a centralized VA-employer portal to streamline veteran benefits, track outcomes, and share best practices across industries. Currently, there are numerous programs that can be overwhelming. Well-intentioned businesses struggle to navigate a plethora of systems and connect with the right information and resources.

## **Closing**

In closing, I ask for your leadership to create a future where the government, veterans and employers have a clear path to create positive economic opportunities. This is not about one hiring program or initiative, it's about committing to a laser like focus on the dignity, purpose, and economic opportunity for our veterans. When they thrive in the workforce, families are strengthened, local economies grow, and our nation benefits from the continued service of those who've already given so much for our country.

Thank you for your time and commitment to those who've worn the uniform.

## References

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025, August). Employment situation of veterans – August 2025. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers>

U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2024). Military transition: DOD needs to improve oversight of the SkillBridge employment program (GAO-24-107352). Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-107352.pdf>