

Chairmen, members of the committees, and fellow participants, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Erik Orient, and I serve as UPMC's Director of Military and Veteran Affairs. I am also a Marine Corps veteran.

UPMC has been recognized as the #6 Military Friendly Employer in the nation and the #9 Military Spouse Friendly Employer. We are proud of those distinctions, but they are not the result of a single program or initiative. They reflect a deliberate organizational strategy focused on serving veterans, transitioning service members, military spouses, and military families.

At UPMC, that strategy is built around four pillars: veteran-focused insurance products, care coordination with the VA, community support, and employment assistance.

The first pillar is veteran-focused insurance products. Designed *by Veterans, for Veterans*, these Medicare Advantage products work seamlessly with TRICARE and VA benefits while helping fill gaps in coverage. They provide enhanced support and simplified access to care, helping veterans navigate a complex healthcare system with greater confidence.

The second pillar is healthcare coordination. UPMC Veteran Care Services delivers coordinated healthcare through compassionate and personalized support for veterans by serving as a single, reliable point of contact between veteran patients, UPMC Central PA, and VA Medical Centers. The program simplifies access to care and manages scheduling, referrals, records transfers, billing, and advocacy so that veterans receive timely, respectful, and high-quality services tailored to their needs.

The third pillar is community support. Between 2023 and 2025, UPMC invested more than \$1 million in veteran-focused charitable giving and sponsorships, supporting more than 25 local, regional, and statewide veteran organizations. These investments have strengthened programs focused on employment, housing, education, leadership development, outreach, and community connection throughout the Commonwealth.

The fourth pillar is employment assistance, and it is here where I believe some of the greatest opportunities exist for employers across Pennsylvania.

Our Pathways for Veterans program is staffed entirely by veterans and military spouses. Every applicant from the military community who applies to UPMC is personally contacted by a member of the Military Engagement Team and offered individualized career guidance, resources, and transition support. In just the past 18 months, the program has received approximately 1,800 referrals, made more than 1,200 connections, and helped generate 225 job offers, including 149 offers to veterans and 76 offers to military spouses.

One of the most powerful tools available through this employment strategy is the Department of Defense SkillBridge program.

SkillBridge allows eligible service members to spend the final months of military service working with a civilian employer while continuing to receive military pay and benefits. It gives service members an opportunity to gain civilian experience, build professional networks, and demonstrate their abilities in a real-world setting.

For employers, it provides the opportunity to evaluate talent through demonstrated performance rather than paper credentials alone.

At UPMC, SkillBridge has delivered tremendous value. To date, 188 participants have contributed 2,866 weeks of work experience across our organization, the equivalent of approximately 55 years of workforce contribution.

But one of the most important points I would like to make today is that SkillBridge is not just for large organizations like UPMC.

Any employer can participate.

Employers receive access to highly trained, motivated talent at no salary cost while service members continue to receive military pay and benefits from the Department of Defense.

Whether it is a healthcare system, a manufacturing company, an information technology firm, a logistics company, a small family-owned business in rural Pennsylvania, or a local government agency, SkillBridge can help employers address workforce shortages while providing meaningful opportunities for transitioning service members. In fact, municipalities and Commonwealth agencies can also participate in SkillBridge and benefit from the program.

Some of the greatest potential may exist among Pennsylvania's small and medium-sized employers. Every transitioning service member who completes a SkillBridge internship in Pennsylvania has an opportunity to establish professional connections, put down roots, and ultimately choose to remain in or return to the Commonwealth after military service. That benefits the veteran, the employer, and Pennsylvania's economy.

Pennsylvania has one of the largest veteran populations in America, yet we should be doing even more to capture military talent before it leaves active duty. Today, there are approximately 100 organizations offering SkillBridge opportunities in Pennsylvania, and only an estimated one-third to one-half are Pennsylvania-based employers. If we want veterans to continue their careers in Pennsylvania, we must provide opportunities for them

to establish roots here before they separate from service. Every new SkillBridge provider creates another pathway for a transitioning service member to connect with a Pennsylvania employer, join a Pennsylvania community, and ultimately choose the Commonwealth as the place to build their civilian future.

Becoming established as a SkillBridge provider is not overly cumbersome, but it does require a deliberate and committed effort. Although it may ultimately create more competition for military talent, the UPMC Military Engagement Team is happy to assist any Pennsylvania-based organization interested in becoming a SkillBridge provider. We view expanding opportunities for veterans across the Commonwealth as a shared mission, not a competitive advantage.

Our experience has taught us that moving beyond the cliché of being "military friendly" requires more than gratitude and a well-intentioned but empty "thank you for your service."

It requires commitment.

It requires organizations to dedicate time, personnel, and resources to military and veteran initiatives. If supporting veterans and military families is nobody's primary responsibility, it will inevitably become an afterthought. Sustainable impact requires leadership commitment, dedicated resources, and accountability for results.

UPMC is proud of the progress we have made, and we look forward to continuing to work with this group, the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, military installations, veteran-serving organizations, and employers across the Commonwealth to expand opportunities for veterans and military families.

Together, we can strengthen the pathway from combat to careers and ensure that Pennsylvania remains a destination of choice for our veterans, military spouses, and the talented men and women transitioning from military service.

Thank you.