

JOSE ACEVEDO
VETERAN: ARMY



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AIDED BY A PEER, A VETERAN ADAPTS TO A WORLD THAT CHANGED

Jose Acevedo planned carefully for his transition to civilian life, lining up training and employment driving tractor trailers. He served 7 years in the Army in the 80s stationed in Germany, specializing in secure communications. While in the military, he prided himself on the skills he developed, but found it a challenge to transfer these to a civilian job. Now, separated and with two young daughters, he looked forward to returning to a new life in the United States.

However, Mr. Acevedo found himself among the 140,000 veterans incarcerated in U.S. prisons, having been convicted of a serious felony and sentenced to serve 15 years in prison.

In 2011, Mr. Acevedo was released to a halfway house and to a changed world in which job announcements appear and applications are completed on the Internet. The new technology required skills Mr. Acevedo had not learned in the military. He also discovered that the work he did while in prison, leather goods manufacturing and making saddles and wallets, were not in demand in the new economy.

Now 49 years old, Mr. Acevedo had to compete for jobs with savvy young people who had grown up using the Internet and seemed to have no problem cranking out multiple applications with an efficiency he could not match. When he did find an interested employer, news of his felony conviction quickly dampened their enthusiasm. “They looked at me a different way,” he says, as soon as they heard he had been incarcerated for a serious crime. It seemed there were no second chances.

How was he to make payments for restitution, child support, and student loans without a job or a way of acquiring competitive job skills? Back home in Philadelphia, Mr. Acevedo had connections who might have helped, but the terms of his parole required him to stay in the Colorado Springs area. Over time, Mr. Acevedo became stressed and discouraged.

A Peer Lends a Hand

After 2 months of getting nowhere, the Pikes Peak Workforce agency referred Mr. Acevedo to Aspen Pointe, an Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program funded through the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP)—one of 150 such programs across the country. Mr. Acevedo's employment prospects brightened from that moment on. Leo Martinez, a Peer Navigator at HVRP, quickly took Mr. Acevedo under his wing. Leo initiated Mr. Acevedo into the mysteries of job searching via the Internet. The program also helped him apply for jobs and practice interviewing skills, including responding to questions about his time in prison. HVRP gave him bus passes to get around town and clothing that would help him make a good impression. Staff also helped him find a place that would give him a free physical and affordable health care.

As important as all these practical helps proved to be, Mr. Acevedo treasured just as much the encouragement and support he received at the program, which helped him develop the motivation to overcome the psychological aftereffects of repeated rejections. At HVRP, he said, his past didn't matter—he was just a veteran: "They made me part of their family."

Working Again: On the Bus to a New Life

Today, Mr. Acevedo is working at a tourist bus line in Colorado Springs that believes in giving veterans a second chance. His current job is cleaning buses and sedans, but he is working on qualifying to work as a driver.

Despite restrictions on how he can move around town, Mr. Acevedo is building relationships at the Church of the Most High, which provides transportation to and from work. He is healthy and works out, and he hopes to buy an apartment within the next few months.

Mr. Acevedo has a message for potential employers: "Some veterans make mistakes, but given a second chance, we can still serve our country."

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