

**Interview with Gary Shaeen  
Managing Director of Program Development  
Burton Blatt Institute, Syracuse University**

**[Announcer]** This podcast is presented by the NTAR Leadership Center, helping state leaders help adults with disabilities to employment and better economic opportunities through collaboration, innovation, and transformation.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Welcome to Research in Brief, a feature podcast of the NTAR Leadership Center. I'm your host Lori Harrington. Entrepreneurship is a viable option for veterans with disabilities; particularly those returning from present day conflicts in the Middle East. As entrepreneurs, veterans have greater opportunities to customize their employment, accommodate their challenges, maximize their strengths and skills, and achieve financial and career goals. Gary Shaheen is the Managing Director of Program Development at the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and a nationally recognized expert in the field of mental health rehabilitation, homelessness, and systems change. For over 26 years in both the public and private sector, he has been instrumental in shaping policy and programs at both the state and federal levels that help people with mental illnesses, co-occurring substance abuse disorders, and those who are homeless fully integrate into their communities. The issue brief we are discussing today, Entrepreneurship for Veterans with Disabilities, Lessons Learned from the Field, is co-authored by William N. Myhill. First Gary, I would like you to describe the employment situation facing returning veterans today, and why their challenges are in some ways more difficult, and more problematic, which forces service men and women to look, as you say, at more creative options.

**[Gary Shaheen]** So this circumstance is really unprecedented in American history, and as a result of advances in both medical and war fighting technology, U. S. military personnel are surviving major injuries that otherwise might have resulted in fatalities in prior conflicts. So they're coming back into the work force with, in some cases, fairly serious physical and emotional disabilities that require accommodations and perhaps new and creative ways to get back into the work force. That may not always be the job that they left. So today, with the advances of medical technology as well as advances in the ways that we're accommodating and supporting veterans with disabilities coming back into the work force, it's a new environment. So one of the other factors that we're finding with these vets returning is that the stresses and the anxieties, associated symptoms from serving in combat or in any kind of military type of support function, can have also an adverse effect on a person's ability to fulfill employment demands; and also an effect on family as they try to re-integrate into the work force and make the transition from military to civilian worker life. So those are a couple of the factors that we're looking at. Combined with the fact that we're always having an eye on the compounded effects of disability and the stresses that I mentioned, on the recurrence or incidences of homelessness and family break up and those types of things; all of which effect work.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Tell us why you think entrepreneurship is a viable option for veterans.

**[Gary Shaheen]** Yeah, well entrepreneurship means that individuals have an opportunity to take control of their own career future, and let me also be clear that one of the things that's often need to overcome is that traditionally entrepreneurship is offered to folks only if it's determined that they can't be successful in a wage earning job. And now what we're looking at is entrepreneurship being offered as one of the options up front, because it can allow for accommodations, it can allow for growth and career development. And frankly, our experience at Syracuse University with the boot camp that I'll talk about in a minute, and at other universities also is that many of the vets, a great many of the vets that we're encountering are coming back and saying you know, I want to start a business, I want to be able to control my own future and livelihood; but I also want to give back. I want to be an employer that proactively hires other vets with disabilities, or other people with disabilities. So there's that whole giving back framework that we're finding is also important for vets.

**[Laurie Harrington]** You talk a lot about the entrepreneurial boot camp with veterans in your issue brief. Can you describe that program and highlight some key lessons that you've learned from it?

**[Gary Shaheen]** All their flights, their meals, their accommodations, all of the teaching and the materials; everything is given to them free, and it truly is a boot camp. They start early in the morning and end late at night, and it's preceded actually by some online course work, and it's followed by contact with their teachers and their mentors to assist them in further developing their business plans. So what Syracuse did was it not only involved faculty from the Whitman School, but we here at the Burton Blatt Institute, which is a center on innovation in disability practice, worked with the Whitman School right from the beginning to design a track that includes not only the business planning piece, but what people with disabilities, vets with disabilities, need to know about ways to explore their own personal strengths, their gifts, their skills, build a business owner profile, come to a reasoned and objective decision about what types of businesses to pursue; and then also have a good understanding of all of the available resources that they could take advantage of - government resources, local resources, preferred source set asides, those types of things. Training opportunities might exist through the One Stop Career Center for instance, other opportunities through the Small Business Administration, and those types of things that if they choose to use them, they then could use those resources to help build their business. So it was always envisioned as a 2 track kind of a program. And the program was so successful in the first year, it was written up in Forbes and got coverage on CNN, and the Federal Government really sort of stood up and took notice that in the next year, 2008, it was expanded and it was offered at UCLA and Florida State University and Texas A and M. And this year, in 2009, all of those universities are participating, as well as Purdue University. And already we're talking with other colleges throughout the country to replicate this model, and make it available to even more vets with disabilities. So our initial statistics after the first couple of years, and I believe the statistic is somewhere around close to 200 vets served, approximately 65 percent of those vets are going on to develop their own businesses after participation in the boot camp. So we're seeing already some great outcomes associated with this intensive, mentored, supportive process working with the vets coming back.

**[Laurie Harrington]** For those who may be listening who are helping people with disabilities, or who are veterans themselves that are interested in starting a business who do you recommend that they should look to for help in getting the business off the ground, and what resources are available for them?

**[Gary Shaheen]** There are many resources available, and we actually do list some of those in the issues brief; but I'll just pick off a few. You can categorize these resources in perhaps maybe 3 ways. The first is, what is available for set aside purchasing? And the Federal Government has special set asides for purchasing for service disabled vets, and that means that veterans who own businesses can actually get a preference in bidding against other types of businesses as an accommodation, and find that way of getting contracts and businesses. There are also loan guarantees, like the Small Business Association has what they call the Patriot Express Initiative; and that was established by the SBA to assist members of the military to start a business, or expand an existing business, and offers low interest loans and those types of things. And then there are a variety of resources that are available through agencies that serve people with disabilities, including vets, like the VA Department of Vocational Rehabilitation offers business assistance, help developing a business plan, loans and grants for business development. And states also have departments of vocational rehabilitation, and vets can apply for, in many states, and the policies aren't consistent across the country; but in many states they do offer grants, and also help for developing their business through state departments of vocational rehabilitation. And I think the important point in all of this is, and it's what we advise our vets here at Syracuse and they also do the same at the other universities, is these aren't hand outs. They're really resources available to the vet, the entrepreneur, if they're interested in taking these on. And let me also go back to what I had said earlier, is that we found that many vets really want to hire other vets with disabilities. So even if the entrepreneur doesn't want to take advantage of some of these resources, well there are tax incentives, on the job training types of incentives that are often provided that the entrepreneur could use in hiring another person with a disability; and thereby reduce some of their cost and allow an individual to come in and work in their business through wage employment, and build their work force, and accommodate them within the job. So it's... these are new resources, in some cases existing ones, but I think the lesson here is that entrepreneurship is seen as an increasingly viable way for vets for disabilities to re-enter the work force. And so the Federal Government and states are taking notice of this, and of course in the Career One Stops they have veterans represented as well that can assist veterans who take advantage of these resources. So it's a growing array of resources that's available. But it really does begin with a individual's hope and determination and desire, and really that in fact despite any impact of disability, that the vet can succeed as a small business owner with the right kind of supports and assistance.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Thank you Gary Shaheen for speaking with us today. I've been talking today with the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University's Gary Shaheen about the benefits of entrepreneurship opportunities for people with disabilities. This is Lori Harrington for Research in Brief with the NTAR Leadership Center. For more information about the NTAR Leadership Center and its research activities, visit [www.ntarcenter.org](http://www.ntarcenter.org).

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