

Success Through JCEP

Job Connection Education Program Preps Soldiers for Work

Story and photos by Christian Anderson

SPECIALIST KEVIN WILLIAMS was looking for work after he was laid off. Specialist Jasmine Wills wanted to become a sheriff's deputy but didn't know where to begin. Sergeant Eriquia Clayborn was still searching for her dream job.

These three individuals had something in common: they went to their National Guard armory and asked for help. Thanks to the Job Connection Education Program (JCEP), they are pursuing their dream jobs.

Just several months after seeking help, Williams owns a pressure washing business. Wills is a jailer for the Dallas Sheriff's Department. Clayborn is pursuing her dream job with the Texas State Troopers.

SUCCESS FROM DAY ONE

With a staff of eight, the JCEP opened its doors in the Dallas/Fort Worth area on March 1, 2010. Its mission was to support the 56th Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the Texas Army National Guard. The 56th had returned from deployment in August 2009, and countless Soldiers found themselves jobless due to the prevailing economic crisis. The JCEP was created to help these Soldiers find work.

"This is not a job placement program," cautioned Dinetha Thompson, program manager for JCEP in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. "We give Soldiers the skills they need to find the right job and get hired."

JCEP program manager Major Scott Gibbs of the National Guard Bureau knows exactly what these unemployed Soldiers are going through. He lost his own job during a deployment to Kosovo, when the company he worked for collapsed.

"It was devastating," said Gibbs. "I had a college degree, great leadership experience, and a ton of desire and ambition. But, I didn't know where to start."



SPC Jasmine Wills (left), SGT Eriquia Clayborn (center) and SPC Kevin Williams (right) all have been given the chance to pursue their dream jobs through JCEP.

Gibbs got a job at National Guard Bureau and was assigned to the JCEP.

"I don't want other Soldiers to have to go through what I went through," Gibbs explained. "We owe our Soldiers much more than that."

The staff at JCEP feels the same way. Their hours can be long, and the work is hard, but they know that what they do is extremely important. A Soldier without a job is under tremendous stress, making it difficult to perform well at drill, Annual Training or a deployment. Stressors can lead to personal problems that in turn can weaken a Guard unit. So the JCEP keeps the 56th strong and ready for the mission.

"It's about the Soldiers and the families," Thompson emphasized. "We don't want to fail

them. This program can be an amazing benefit to the men and women of the Army National Guard nationwide."

THIS IS HOW WE DO IT

The JCEP staff focuses on three main aspects of the employment process: resumes, interviews and personal appearance.

"The main thing we do here is help these individuals build their skills," explained Annette Robinson, a personnel specialist for the JCEP. "We do not create their resume for them—we show them how to do it and how to stand out."

Many of the Soldiers had never created a resume. Of those who had, many had made various errors.

"Most of the Soldiers have a skill set or attribute that civilians might not have," Robinson went on to explain. "So we take that skill set and make it stand out on the resume. We want to show their value as a potential employee."

After the resume is completed, the JCEP helps the Soldier apply for a job. As simple as it sounds, there are a few things Soldiers must know about this process.

"For starters, it helps to have a cover letter," Robinson explained. "Also, we try to make sure that the Soldier has a professional and appropriate email address. Not something funny or cute, but an email address that a company might take seriously."

Once a Soldier is asked to interview for a company, the next challenge begins.

Efren Villanueva, business advisor for the JCEP, has three decades of experience working for labor boards across Texas, so he understands the interviewing process.

"The key to interviewing is to look and act professional," Villanueva explained. "First, we look at the Soldier's appearance. We tell them to come to the armory for a mock interview."

Often, the Soldier shows up wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Villanueva tells them that first impressions count, and that they should be wearing slacks and a tie.

SUIT UP

"If they don't have the proper clothes, we [help them shop for them]," Villanueva said.

Once the Soldier is in professional attire, the JCEP conducts a mock interview, asking the Soldier questions that might be posed in a real interview. This helps Soldiers in two important ways: it helps them develop prepared answers, and it builds their confidence.

After the mock interview, the JCEP sends the Soldier on their way.

"We have to let them follow through with it on their own," said Mary Weaver, training specialist at the JCEP. "After our training, we have to trust that they'll follow through."

Most of the time, JCEP "graduates" do land jobs. But, there are always more Soldiers looking for work.

"For every Soldier we help, there is another one to fill their place," Thompson said. "It's a great feeling that, one by one, we are making an impact in their lives."

One company that has benefited from the JCEP is Allied Barton, a security service company in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

"The Soldiers from JCEP had tons of ambition and an amazing work ethic," said Amy Lewis, a recruiting manager at Allied Barton. "They seemed like a natural fit us. We are excited about

that and want to help them achieve their goals in the civilian world."

JOB SEEKER TO DRIVER'S SEAT

After Williams, of the 143rd Airborne Battalion, lost his job of 13 years, he felt lost.

"I felt like I was doing land navigation without a map or compass," he said. "I had not been in that position since I graduated from high school, and I had no idea what to do next."

But the JCEP offered a helping hand and some sound advice.

Williams was so impressed with the program, he decided to take it a step further and be his own boss.

"I wanted to open my own business, and JCEP can help you with that," he said. "They gave me the tools to succeed, and I hit the ground running."

Two months later, Williams was using his new skills to approach potential clients and promote his new business, Texas Pride Power Washing.

"The people at the JCEP are simply amazing," he said. "If you use their resources, you can be successful."

NEXT STEP

Clayborn worked full time as a human resource sergeant for the 36th Infantry Division. Although on ADOS (Active Duty Operational Support) status for the Texas Army National Guard, she knew in the back of her mind she wanted to be a law enforcement officer one day. She spoke with the JCEP crew, and they

assured her this was possible. They offered her assistance with her resume and cover letters, job referrals and mock interviews. Clayborn feels the mock interview was by far the most beneficial tool.

Lastly, they gave her something that she lacked before she walked through the front door: self-assurance.

"I feel confident that I can sell myself in any interview," she explained. "I feel extremely lucky to have worked with the JCEP staff and am excited about the program."

FIRST-TIMER

Wills had never held a civilian job and had no idea where to start looking. The aviation operation specialist knew there were many resources out there, but wasn't sure which avenue was the best approach.

"It was overwhelming figuring out what to do first," Wills admitted. "That's why I went to the JCEP. It was shocking to meet someone that wanted to help you and train you."

Wills told the folks at JCEP she wanted to work in law enforcement. They worked with her to build a resume and cover letter, and boosted her confidence. It paid off—Wills got a job.

"I am now a jailer with the Dallas Sheriff's Department," she said. "My initial probation lasts for a year, and then I see myself becoming a deputy. I recommend the JCEP to other Soldiers, because they help with everything it takes to prepare you to get a job," she said. **GX**



Soldiers working with JCEP have access to computers to enhance their resumes and apply for jobs.