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New battle at home for returning GIs

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The Record

STAFF WRITER

Staff Sgt. Jorge Marin didn't have much time to worry about the recession back home while he was helping manage the defenses at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq.

As Wall Street melted down in the fall of 2008, Marin was preoccupied with organizing security for 350 soldiers and mediating disputes among Iraqi police and military forces. The 31-year-old Clifton resident had been consumed with planning for the Iraqi deployment since November 2007, when he quit his job as a security guard in Morristown to train other non-commissioned officers before they went overseas.

But Marin has found himself with a lot more time on his hands since his unit returned from Iraq and he made the transition back to full-time civilian last November. He's unemployed despite having applied for dozens of jobs.

And he's hardly alone.

In fact, those who answered the call in the nation's most recent wars have been hit harder by the staggering economy than the rest of America: Their unemployment rate is two points higher than the rate for the general population. Among vets younger than 24 the gap is even wider: They're 40 percent more likely to be unemployed than everybody else in their age group.

New Jersey's Army National Guard members have been especially affected as the statewide unit that was called up to active duty in Iraq, and away from their jobs, just as the recession took hold in September 2008.

Among one element of the state's nearly 3,000 troops who deployed to Iraq last year, 18 percent are out of work, according to a poll of the 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry, conducted by the unit's Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Clark. Now, the New Jersey Guard is conducting a more formal survey to determine how hard its members have been hit by the recession.

Even guardsmen and reservists who had jobs when they left are finding they can't always get them back when they return, despite a federal law that requires employers to hold their positions for them. In the federal fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, the Department of Labor opened a record number of cases —

1,437 — based on veterans' complaints about violations of the law.

During the same period, the Justice Department filed a record number of lawsuits against employers for failing to give returning guardsmen and reservists their jobs back.

Complaints filed by New Jersey Guard members with the ombudsmen who help resolve disputes with employers reflect the same trend.

"If the nation is going to send people to war, the least we can do is offer them suitable employment when they come back so they can live in the country they just defended," said Justin Brown, a legislative associate with the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Washington.

The VFW is pushing for an expansion of the existing \$2,400 federal tax credit businesses receive for hiring recently discharged vets.

"Everyone needs to do more, especially the business community and the federal government," said Tim Embree, the Washington lobbyist for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "The business world needs to learn what veterans bring to the table."

U.S. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus has been talking with veterans groups about a bill to do that, but hasn't yet proposed any concrete legislation.

"For our veterans to have unemployment that high is simply shameful," the Montana Democrat said after meeting with the veterans.

The chairman of the New Jersey Senate's Military and Veterans Affairs Committee also wants to see changes in state law to encourage hiring of veterans.

"These young people are putting their butts on the line for us and we need to do more for them and their families to say thank you," said state Sen. James Beach. The Cherry Hill Democrat also thinks the statistics understate the extent of the problem. "The veterans' unemployment rates are much higher than what you're seeing, because you've got a lot of these young people who are coming back and seeing that they're without any opportunity and so they're reenlisting."

Beach said enacting a new business tax credit may be difficult in the state's current fiscal condition: "Any time you offer an incentive, it's going to cost money in lost revenue. But it is something we've discussed in the committee."

Several advocates for veterans said returning soldiers would be having more success finding employment if the military and federal agencies charged with helping them were doing their jobs better.

Brown of the VFW said a Department of Labor program that places veterans employment representatives in local Career One Stop centers could stand improvement.

"The quality is very hit and miss," Brown said. "It works well when good people are doing it. But the pay (for the representatives) varies widely and the attrition and turnover rates are very high. A lot of them have not been trained for many years."

He added that legislation passed by Congress last year requires the veterans representatives be retrained every two years.

James Locke, the Veterans Employment representative in the Hackensack One Stop Center, said he and his staff aggressively seek out employers to hire vets and provide a wide range of job training and employment counseling. The center, he added, provides ongoing workshops on topics ranging from job interview skills to

navigating the Internet.

"We're constantly working with corporations, promoting job fairs, working with individual employers to get them to sign up with our employment service," Locke said. "We have 650 veterans who are active job seekers. That grew from about 350 at the beginning of 2009."

But Locke also acknowledged that the number of employers looking to hire veterans has dropped noticeably during the recession.

Another part of the problem for the Iraq and Afghanistan vets may be that they aren't taking advantage of the center's services. John Bautz, the disabled veterans outreach specialist at the Hackensack center, said Vietnam veterans account for most of those who come in for help.

Another stumbling block for younger veterans is that they don't have the business connections they need to find jobs in a tight economy, said Ray Healey Jr., executive director of Veterans Across America in New York, a non-profit organization that links veterans with mentors in the corporate world.

"We did research into what happened to young veterans of the first Gulf War and we found some dismaying things," Healey said. "A huge percentage came back and hit a brick wall on employment, sending out hundreds of resumes and getting no responses."

Matters have worsened for returning veterans now, Healey said, because the recession has killed the job market for nearly everyone.

Employers have a hard time understanding how the experience veterans gain in the military relates to civilian jobs, Healey said. Even though many of them have acquired skills ranging from basic leadership to highly technical computer expertise, he noted, the returning soldiers' resumes don't match up with what job recruiters are accustomed to seeing. And veterans can have a tough time translating their military occupation specialty (MOS) codes into civilian language.

"When we surveyed businesses, we found they saw veterans as having acquired little or no perceived business value from military service," he said. "And the longer they served, the less perceived value they had."

That's a problem to which Marin can relate.

"For my MOS, there's no match," he said. "I'm in the infantry, trained to eliminate the enemy. That doesn't translate into any civilian job."

That doesn't mean Marin didn't acquire skills employers are looking for, but he has a difficult time explaining that to them.

For example, he recently applied for a position working in employee relations. The application asked whether he had experience mediating disputes.

"I said yeah, I've done that many times," Marin said. "Part of my job was to work with the Iraqi police, army and navy, who often disagreed with each other and were at each other's throats. We intervened and got them to work together with us."

But Marin received back a letter thanking him for applying but saying that his responses didn't show he was qualified for the job.

Younger vets returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are having the toughest time, employment experts and veterans advocacy groups say, because many of them have never held a civilian job. They often signed up with the Guard thinking it would provide them with the skills and discipline they needed to get a good job.

In January, the unemployment rate among vets between the ages of 20 and 24 was 24.1 percent, compared with 17.7 percent for the same age group in the general population. The rate would be even higher, Beach argued, if not for the large number of vets who've gone to school under the GI Bill. They're not counted as unemployed, even though they often need jobs to help support themselves and their families while they work on their degrees.

Kevin Wolfe of Teaneck, for example, enrolled at Montclair State University after returning from Iraq last fall. "The GI Bill helps me out a lot," Wolfe said. "But I'm still on unemployment and I need a good job to keep me stable. I've applied for about 100 jobs, but no one's gotten back to me."

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#### LESLIE BARBARO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Buy this photo Jorge Marin 'camping out' with his daughter Camilia in their Clifton home. He is among a growing number of unemployed ex-soldiers.

Help is available

A number of non-profit organizations provide help to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans looking for work: \* Veterans Across America: Through its Champion Mentors program, this New York-based organization links veterans with corporate executives who help them put together resumes, refine interview skills and make connections with companies. Veterans can sign up by visiting the group's Web site,

[www.veteransacrossamerica.org](http://www.veteransacrossamerica.org)

and clicking on the Champion Mentor Program link. Businesspeople who would like to volunteer as mentors can do the same. Or call Veterans Across America at 212-684-1122. \* GI Go Fund: Based in Newark, the fund organizes job fairs for veterans around the state. It also provides career guidance, resume-writing workshops and other assistance. For information, visit

[gigofund.org](http://gigofund.org)

or call 973-802-1479. \* Women's Rights Information Center: This Englewood group received a \$70,000 grant last fall from Women United in Philanthropy to launch Project STARS: Successful Transition and Achievement for Returning Servicewomen. Working with Fairleigh Dickinson University, the **Bergen County** One-Stop Career Center and Women Lawyers in Bergen, STARS is designed to provide academic prep programs, career services and legal assistance to female veterans. For more information, call the center at 201-568-1166 or visit the group at 108 W. Palisade Ave.

If you are an employer with a job to offer an out-of-work veteran: \* The Department of Defense's Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve supports companies that want to hire Guard members and works with the Department of Labor One Stop Career Centers to recruit employers. Companies with job openings can call the Hackensack One Stop Center at 201-329-9600. ESGR also acts as an ombudsman for soldiers who think employers have violated the law that protects their jobs. Guard members who need ESGR's

help should call 800-336-4590.

— Harvy Lipman

LESLIE BARBARO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Buy this photo National Guardsman Jorge Marin of Clifton with his daughter Camila and wife Liliana.

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***Highlights: Women United in Philanthropy, Bergen County***