

Elevating Veterans: How IUEC-VAP is Redefining Union Support for America's Heroes

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A Personal Mission: From Policy to Practice

In 2010, as the country struggled with economic collapse and service members returned home from Iraq and Afghanistan, I helped launch the first public Helmets to Hardhats event in Chicago. At that time, the U.S. Department of Defense spent nearly a billion dollars annually on unemployment compensation for returning veterans, many of whom faced an uncertain future in the civilian workforce.

I worked directly with the Department of Defense to help write policy and develop long-term veteran employment programs rooted in contract negotiations between labor unions and industry leaders. The goal was urgent yet straightforward: to ensure veterans had a permanent seat at the table in infrastructure and skilled labor projects across the country.

Fast forward to 2023, and that vision has evolved into something far more comprehensive. The International Union of Elevator Constructors Veterans Assistance Program (IUEC-VAP) is not just another workforce initiative but a veteran-centered, union-driven innovation model. IUEC-VAP, along with Elevator Info Work Preservation Fund (EIWPF), National Elevator Industry Educational Program (NEIEP), is providing a level of support for elevator constructor veterans and their families that no other union has attempted — and it's only just getting started.

Building the Framework: A Full-Circle Model of Support

Launched in 2023, IUEC-VAP was created to address the unique barriers veterans face when transitioning from military service to civilian careers. This includes everything from accessing their earned GI Bill benefits to filing complex VA disability claims and finding the right support system in their local communities.

Unlike most union initiatives, IUEC-VAP was intentionally designed around three core pillars and includes all IUEC Locals across the country.

- Claims and Disability Support
- Apprenticeship and Workforce Access
- Family and Community Wraparound Services

This three-part strategy ensures that IUEC veterans are supported through every step of their transition, not only in employment but also in education, housing, mental health, and family wellness.

Why This Matters: Veterans Are Mission-Ready for the Trades

Veterans bring more than a résumé to the skilled trades; they provide proven leadership, advanced technical training, and an unwavering commitment to safety and mission execution. These qualities directly align with the demands of elevator construction and repair, where precision, teamwork, and discipline are essential.

Registered apprenticeship programs offer veterans a critical bridge: one that allows them to immediately earn a living wage, build a career, and support their families without going back into debt or starting from scratch.

The Data: Veterans in the Skilled Trades

- **Helmets to Hardhats:** Over 40,000 veterans have transitioned into union careers since 2003, boasting an 80%+ job retention rate. To date, H2H has 22,442 Career Seeker Accounts.
- **Apprenticeship Completion:** Veterans are 2 to 3 times more likely than non-veterans to complete apprenticeship programs.
- **GI Bill Usage in Apprenticeship:** In 2019, over 17,000 veterans utilized GI Bill benefits for apprenticeship-related training.
- **IUEC-VAP:** Since its launch in 2023, the program has supported many IUEC veteran members and apprentices by providing assistance for their claims and disabilities, GI Bill navigation, and workforce transition tools.

A Union-Led Blueprint for Veteran Support

What sets IUEC-VAP apart is its deliberate, integrated approach. By bringing together federal resources, veteran service organizations, union apprenticeships, and local support networks, the program provides something most veterans rarely encounter in one place: coordinated care.

Where many support systems are fragmented or bureaucratic, IUEC-VAP is seamless — a single point of contact for everything from filing a VA claim to enrolling in an apprenticeship. This is union leadership at its best: meeting veterans where they are and walking with them every step of the way.

Final Word

“Helmets to Hardhats was a launch pad for veterans to engage in meaningful career path opportunities within the skilled trades, and it continues to strengthen veterans and their

families by opening doors to stable, purpose-driven employment. With IUEC-VAP, that momentum has evolved into a full-circle model of care—one that ensures no IUEC veteran or family must navigate their next mission alone”

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