Helmets to Hardhats (H2H)—a partnership started by unions, employers and government in the United States and Canada—connects armed forces reservists and transitioning veterans to apprenticeships and skilled jobs in the construction industry and related fields. In the United States, where H2H began in 2003, National Guard, Reserve and transitioning active-duty military service members in most cases become apprentices with jointly managed training and education funds. In 2012, the program spread to Canada, where reservists and veterans are matched up with employers and often enter an apprenticeship program through joint labour-management apprenticeship programs.

Joseph Maloney founded the U.S. program while serving as the international secretary-treasurer of the Building and Construction Trades Department of AFL-CIO, based in Washington, D.C. Maloney returned to Canada in 2006 and is an international vice president of the Western Canada Section of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers. Maloney spearheaded the implementation of the program in Canada and serves as the chairman of H2H in Canada. He will be the keynote speaker at the Trustees Institute for Jointly Managed Training and Education Funds February 3-5, 2014 in Rancho Mirage, California. He spoke recently about H2H with editor Chris Vogel, CEBS.

How was the Helmets to Hardhats program started?

In 2003, we were experiencing severe skills shortages in the industry; there was a major building boom on at the time. In the past, some trades have had relationships with individual branches of the service—like bricklayers with the Navy and ironworkers with the Army. We (15 unions of the AFL-CIO’s Building and Construction Trades Department) decided to try to get all trades to have a relationship with all five branches of the U.S. military and the Reserves. Anybody who comes out of the military—regardless of what branch—has some kind of construction-related experience. They build temporary housing; if they drop tanks from helicopters, they’d certainly make good riggers and ironworkers; and guys who work in nuclear submarines are pretty good in the electronics field. We talked to (the late) Congressman John Murtha of Pennsylvania (the first Vietnam War veteran elected to the U.S. House of Representatives) about
the concept. He liked it a lot. He was chairman of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, and he arranged to get financing from the U.S. government in 2003.

**What is the main objective of the program?**

When you’re in the military, your lodging, food and everything else is taken care of from the time you get up in the morning until you go to bed. And then, when you leave the military, you’re on your own. If you don’t have some kind of assistance—to write a resumé, to apply for a job—it can be difficult. There’s a lot of homelessness among military veterans because they don’t have the proper links to get back into society. This program does that for them. If you want to start an apprenticeship program, or if you have some related skill or a particular trade, and depending on where you want to live in that particular country, we will do our best to make that link and make it work. Not everybody coming out of the military wants to be a construction worker. Some are officers, and we can help get them into management positions.

**How does H2H link veterans with skills training and jobs?**

It’s a web-based program. If you’re transitioning out in October, you register and say, “My name is Joe Maloney. I’m leaving the military in October. I want to relocate to Toronto, Ontario, and I’d like to be an electrician.” The system will match you up. The H2H director will be in contact with the electricians in Toronto. Your name will be put forward, and you’ll be placed in a priority queue. Some unions take apprentices only at certain times of the year; with some there’s an open door—so whatever the next opportunity is, you’ll be notified. You’ll be assessed and then placed, and away you’ll go.

An employer can register online and say, “I’m this employer, located here, and I’m looking for this occupation.” A veteran can view the posting and decide to apply for that job.

Canada is like the U.S. system—there are several ways of doing it. If you’re going into an apprenticeship program in a particular trade, you’d operate under their rules and regulations.

In Canada we have a staff of four or five in Ottawa, and each union in Canada has assigned a national person who breaks it down through their union’s apprenticeship system throughout the country. It’s the same in the U.S.—they have a staff and a system, and a real person will get back to each person.

**If veterans have no prior training or experience in construction, what qualities or skills make them good apprentices?**

With a veteran or reservist, you’re getting a person who has gone through at least grade 12. They’re drug-free. They can get up in the morning and put their boots on and work in a team environment. You’re getting a well-rounded person you’d be happy to have in your employ. Every veteran we take, both in the U.S. and Canada, has got to be honorably discharged.

Our contractors like it because they’re getting very reliable people. And this is not limited only to the trades, but all the other industries related to construction. It can be estimating, accounting, supervision and different kinds of leadership that we look for.

**Can any employer participate in H2H?**

It’s mainly for building trades employers. But if an employer has a proven record of training, a proven record of a benefits program such as a pension and health and welfare—they’re not a fly-by-nighter—they’re allowed to participate. The last thing we want is contractors that potentially could be exploiting people. We’re very proud of the fact that we have the highest paying jobs, the safest jobs and the best benefits in construction. And we have the fairest employers in construction.

**How supportive have unions been in the U.S. and Canada?**

Unions are 100% behind the program. They’re very, very committed to the military on both sides of the border, and they’re proud to be part of the H2H program. The construction trades are very patriotic. You’ll note that in the U.S. and Canada, a lot of the tradespeople do have some form of a military background, either in their family or directly.
What is the government’s role in H2H?
In the U.S., the government provided $5 million to start it. Funding went slowly down and down, and under the Bush administration funding collapsed. Now it’s funded through private industry, with an hourly checkoff through collective agreements.

In Canada, the federal government and the Alberta and Ontario governments gave $150,000 each in start-up money. From there, the industry generates the money to run it ourselves. Transcanada Pipelines has committed $1 million, and some other big organizations have committed several hundred thousand dollars. With some of the larger unions—the Boilermakers, in particular—a penny an hour from every hour we work in the country goes to H2H.

How does the program address disabled veterans and women?
Disabled veterans are welcome to register. There’s always room somewhere for a disabled veteran to come on board. Not everyone’s got to climb steel and ladders all day. The industry changes dramatically with new technology, so disabled veterans are not turned away.

If a woman reservist or transitioning veteran applies, she’s going to be treated the same way. In the United States, the first candidate we had was a woman who joined the pipefitters apprenticeship program in New York City. We welcome them all the time. If they have the qualifications and they register, we match them up.

How do the H2H programs differ between the U.S. and Canada, and how many veterans and reservists have been connected with jobs in each country?
The U.S. program is just bigger; there are more people in the military leaving. From 2007 through 2012, we know of at least 6,220 U.S. veterans placed, along with at least 250 disabled veterans. Each year, from $18 million to $35 million has been invested in their training. In Canada, about 5,200 military transition out every year in the three branches (Canada does not have Marines). We’re not going to get all 5,200, but from September 2012 through April 2013, 1,011 veterans had registered on the H2H website, and we think that at least 75 were employed or were in apprenticeships. (A system to track veterans’ progress is now in place.) During the program’s first seven months, 54 registered contractors or employers registered at the website. In our particular trade in Canada, up to 25% of all our apprenticeship intakes are H2H candidates. We really devote a lot of time to this.

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