Life after the uniform: Vets offer 'valuable skills' in cybersecurity

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Pat Shaw of Coding for Veterans says some of the 7,000 members of the military who leave the Canadian Armed Forces every year can help fill the need for cybersecurity and software professionals. PJ Wilson/The Nugget

Military veterans have a unique skillset that can be harnessed in the cybersecurity and software development fields when they take off their uniforms.

For the last three years, Coding for Veterans has been recruiting men, and women leaving the military life behind and trying to fill the shortfall of professionals in Canada.

"These are people who understand network security, signals and military intelligence," Pat Shaw said Monday morning outside the Canex at 22 Wing-CFB North Bay.

"They bring a mindset to this, and they already have their security clearances" from their days in the military.

Coding for Veterans – known as C4V – is an online university program aimed at veterans, their spouses and family members that was developed with input from employers and the University of Ottawa, with a curriculum reviewed by the Department of National Defence.

The C4V caravan will be travelling across the province until Remembrance Day. It is in North Bay until Tuesday.

So far, it has attracted about 200 people to the program, Shaw says, who can complete it at their own pace, whether that is over 10 months or up to 24 months.

"It depends on the other things that are going on in a veteran's life," Shaw says, and already some students, even before they graduate, have been offered positions.

"It's pretty amazing," he said. "One young vet in Barrie had one course left to finish and she has already started work for a company in Ottawa" while working from home.

"These are seasoned Canadian Armed Forces personnel … who bring very valuable skills. They are used to working under pressure, in adverse environments, and working as a team – the soft skills industry is looking for.

"They offer something very much needed by employers."

It is estimated there are 150,000 open jobs in Canada today, that shortfall based, he said, on the speed with which things change.

He compares it to the COVID-19 pandemic and the coronavirus that causes the disease.

"Technology changes so fast. It's like COVID. You see how it produces variants. The ability of hackers … to cause disruptions happens so fast, you have to work to keep up with them. When a variant shows up, it's like COVID."

In fact, he said, the COVID-19 pandemic "helped elevate the awareness that you could study from home," giving the program a boost as more things moved to an online world.

This year, the program has expanded to include not only veterans, but their spouses and adult children, as well.

"Family members have an understanding, they are familiar with the emphasis serving members place on those (security) attributes," Shaw says.

The change came about through discussions with Military Family Resource Centres and retirement seminars for members, who were often accompanied by their spouses.

"Some of (the retiring members) would say 'IT isn't for me, but my spouse really likes working with computers. It would be really great for the spouse to take a program like this.'"

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Many spouses, he said, follow their military partner through various postings across the country, often moving to eight or nine different postings through a career. But while the spouse may have certain qualifications, they are not always transferable from one province to another.

Coding and cybersecurity, Shaw says, are skills which can be welcomed anywhere, and don't necessarily prohibit someone from working from home.

In Ontario, he says, the provincial Ministry of Labour is supporting full tuition for some qualified spouses, adult children and reservists who take part in the program.

"If someone accesses this, they are set with a career for the rest of their lives, and it's life-long learning," he says.

The C4V caravan will be set up at the Canex Tuesday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

On the web: www.codingforveterans.com