

News Article

U.S. Seeks to Fill Empty Truck-Driving Seats With Young Veterans

- Regulator waives age minimum of 21 for trained veterans
- Advocacy group says better conditions needed, not new drivers

By Avery Ellfeldt | July 6, 2018 1:14PM ET

Trucking advocates and other industry representatives are at odds over a new program aimed at addressing a critical shortage of interstate truckers by attracting young military veterans and reservists.

The Transportation Department said it will partner with the industry to test an 18-year-old minimum age for commercial truckers with training driving heavy-duty military vehicles. Interstate commercial truckers currently must be at least 21.



Victor J. Blue/Bloomberg

A Quickway Transportation Inc. truck on an Oklahoma highway.

The three-year pilot program, unveiled July 3, will monitor the safety records of the younger drivers in comparison to drivers older than 21. The program was proposed in 2016, and will fulfill section 5404 of 2015's Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (Public Law 114-94).

"The program's going to have a lot of success," said Matt Manero, the president of Commercial Fleet Financing, a company that finances equipment and vehicles for small businesses. "We know that recruitment is a problem. We also know that job placement for veterans is a problem, too."

Shortages or Retention?

The program is proposed as a solution to historic driver shortages by allowing more young people to become truck drivers while streamlining young veterans into post-service careers. Manero said many people do not want to become drivers because of the trucker lifestyle away from family, the stigma that surrounds the industry, and the expansion of shipping retailers like Amazon.com Inc.

Independent truckers say the problem isn't attracting drivers to the industry—it's keeping them.

Todd Spencer, the president of the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, said better working conditions—not a government program to recruit more truckers—is the solution to the driver shortage. He said there are enough people to fill trucking jobs, but once employees enter the industry, poor pay, benefits, and working conditions drive them away.

"Having a 94 percent driver turnover is not evidence of a shortage. It's actually evidence of the opposite," Spencer said. "The problem isn't the people," it's the industry, he said. "By simply increasing the supply of new people, you don't solve that problem."

Younger drivers wouldn't weather the trucker lifestyle any better than the older employees, and are more likely to be involved in accidents than more experienced truckers, Spencer said.

Small Sample

The program is a step in the right direction, but it is too limited, the American Trucking Associations said in a statement.

"It's a good idea, but I would say it's an incomplete solution, unfortunately," said Jeremy Reymer, chief executive of DriverReach, a technology company that helps trucking recruiters hire drivers more efficiently. "I say that only because the sample size it would be talking about here is really small. There are not a whole lot of 18- to 20-year-old veterans who have the necessary experience to be able to participate in a program like this."

The required military training for participants would ease safety concerns about younger drivers, Reymer said.


He estimated, though, the training requirements would yield only hundreds of eligible veterans—not close to making a dent in 50,000 vacant trucking jobs that House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.) cited during a committee hearing in May.

“These big companies have been unwilling to actually do the things that they need to do to actually make real improvements in the environment that drivers live in,” said Spencer. “By simply putting a bigger supply of drivers out there, you haven’t addressed any of these things.”

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