

Mentoring Programs for Veterans Moving Into the Community

Overview

Mentoring can provide a support structure for those entering or re-entering a community and will ensure that integration is swift and complete. Mentoring provides a way for a community to show that it is invested in the veteran, service member and/or their family member's future, and make it more likely they will soon become contributing members of the community. Simply knowing that the community cares about their integration can make a difference to the military community. Properly mentored veterans, service members and their families will be more likely to move through the educational process, join the workforce and otherwise integrate into their communities at a much faster pace.

Mentors can come from many groups: members of veterans and military service organizations, university faculty and staff members, and family members of service members. Mentors can also come from private sector groups, like the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary or other private groups, corporations and institutions.

There are six steps in creating a mentoring program: 1) Determine need and capacity; 2) Define the population to be served; 3) Determine the type of mentoring program that fits your community; 4) Plan the mentoring program; 5) Conduct orientations; and 6) Monitor the program.

Is it being done already? Assess any efforts within your community prior to initiating your own mentoring program. Veteran service organizations, especially those dealing with integration, are the most likely to host mentoring programs. These programs may be able to be found online. Use your community's blueprint coalition to find any other existing mentoring programs. If they do exist, see if the host organization(s) are willing to expand their program or need any other assistance. Even if your goals do not align, it never hurts to be aware of the existing mentoring programs within your community.

Step-by-Step Implementation

Step 1: Determine need and capacity

Before starting a mentoring program, it's a good idea to get a sense of your community's mentoring needs. Conversing with future mentors and mentees, such as community leaders, students, veterans, service members and their families, will give you an idea of the how interested people are in forming mentoring connections and what kinds of mentoring (employment, educational, etc.) are in demand. You'll also get a sense of how prepared your community is for an emerging mentoring program. Are potential mentors supportive of the idea? Do you have a volunteer hub that can help coordinate the program?

Step 2: Define the population to be served

Who will be served by the mentoring program? Integration into civilian society happens on all levels. Employment, education, behavioral health, family strength, and finance and legal are all areas of life where one can benefit from the advice and leadership of a mentor. Perhaps your community has the capacity to address all of these areas. If not, choose the most important ones to your community.

Possible mentor sources from each mentoring area:

- Behavioral health: Counselors; people who have overcome an addiction; people who have dealt with PTSD, TBI and other invisible injuries of war
- Employment: Chamber of Commerce; executives from the large industries in the area; career counselors; the Department of Labor; as mentees join the program, career-specific mentors may need to be sought out
- Higher education: University, community college and trade school educators and administrators; Student Veterans of America
- Family strength: Family leaders (parents or grandparents, for example) from the military community
- Finance management: Financial literacy educators; Military Spouse Fellows
- Legal assistance: Military attorneys

Step 3: Determine the type of mentoring program that fits your community

Though a typical mentoring program consists of one-on-one meetings, the new age of technology and social networks makes other mentoring styles, such as group or e-mentoring, even more possible. These alternatives can be helpful for communities with a smaller mentor base, because many mentees can benefit from one mentor.

Please see *Alternative Mentoring Methods* at the end for more information.

Step 4: Plan the mentoring program

Create a timeline that shows a mentee and mentors progression through the program. How are they chosen, matched, supported, and how often and how long will they typically meet? Many mentoring programs last a year or longer, what resources will your community need to support a program of such length?

Build community support

Draft a marketing plan to promote the program. Your marketing plan should include benefits to the community, expected outcomes, mentor and mentee requirements, budget, action steps and timeline, and a method for evaluation.

This marketing is essential in finding high-quality mentors. Participants will want to know what kind of commitment they are signing up for, and an informative marketing campaign may prove most effective. Whether your marketing materials consists of PSAs, brochures, social media or flyers (or all of the above), informative and concise pitches will help future program participants see the pros of being in a mentoring program.

Depending on the capacity of your community, marketing may be far reaching or simply word of mouth. Finding quality participants on both ends of the program will be vital to success more than any other factor.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Community support manager

Task: Recruit participants for the mentoring program from the military community; be able to discuss military community integration with interested parties; create and disseminate marketing literature; build awareness of the program

Attributes: Enthusiastic, affable, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should possess excellent social skills; marketing experience is a bonus; volunteers should also be willing and able to learn about and discuss the unique difficulties faced by the military community; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Decide how mentors and mentees will be chosen

Have both mentor and mentee candidates fill out a resume-style form that provides an overview of their professional and personal details to determine if they are a good fit for the program, and also later help match them up with their partner. Ask about their expectations for the program, give a space to ask questions and state their professional and personal goals.

When choosing mentors, keep in mind that a commitment to help is the most important factor. Though professional and personal experience matters, even the most senior-ranking person can be a bad choice for a mentor if they do not have a commitment to help.

The ideal mentee will be open-minded, open to criticism and advice, and respectful of their mentor's other responsibilities.

When matching mentors to mentees, look for relationships that will help each side grow. Though it is tempting to match similar people with similar backgrounds, this does not always lead to growth in the relationship since they may already have similar outlooks.

Schedule interviews with potential mentees and mentors selected from the applicants. While asking them about their personal and professional history and what they hope to achieve from mentoring, look for attributes of ideal mentors and mentees such as communication skills, motivation to help and participate and willingness to open up.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Mentor-mentee relationship manager

Task: Accept and analyze applications for program; schedule and perform interviews of participants; work with all volunteers to match mentor and mentees

Attributes: Analytical, personable, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should possess excellent social skills; interviewing skills are a bonus; volunteers should also be willing and able to learn about and discuss the unique difficulties faced by the military community; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Decide when and where the mentoring will take place

Though the mentoring program can suggest a minimum amount of time to meet, the mentoring group or pair are more likely to commit if they make their own schedule that is convenient for them.

If your program decides to have group mentoring, collaborate with community partners to find a space for them to meet. Coordinate mentoring sessions based on the availability of the space and the participant's schedules.

Step 5: Conduct orientations

Orientation is an effective way for your mentoring program to define expectations and voice any concerns. Mentors and mentees can then come together and plan out their program, including goals, schedules and guidelines.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Orientation leader

Task: Create orientation materials for mentors and mentees; lead the orientations and answer any questions participants may have

Attributes: Leadership qualities, knowledgeable about mentoring programs, comfortable speaking to large groups

Who: Volunteers should possess excellent social skills; training experience is a bonus; volunteers should also be willing and able to learn about and discuss the unique difficulties faced by the military community; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Step 6: Monitor the Program

Though now most of the relationship is in the hands of the mentors and mentees, it is your responsibility to monitor the program and offer guidance and support should a conflict arise. Either inform the participants that you and other volunteers are available should there be a need, or decide that you and the other volunteers will contact them on a regular basis to check up. Progress reports where the mentor and mentee evaluate each other can help inform you of which relationships are doing well and which may need more support.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Program support

Task: Monitor existing mentor relationships; keep track of who has graduated from the program by making a database in Microsoft Excel, Access or other database program

Attributes: Attention to detail, organized

Who: Volunteers should possess excellent organizational skills; database administration experience is a bonus; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Alternative Mentoring Methods¹

- **Single Leader Mentoring Groups:** A single mentor manages a group of mentees. This is a good option when there are a limited number of mentors within a community.
- **Peer Mentoring:** Members provide guidance to each other. Usually a group is formed with people with similar goals and interests.
- **E-mentoring:** A mentor provides guidance through electronic systems, such as email, phone or video-conferences.

Measure Your Success

Measuring the success of your efforts is important. The ability to track the change created will motivate your community. Even more important is knowing what about your mentoring program worked, and what was ineffective. Future efforts will rely on the lessons they can glean from your steps, and so it is important to provide an objective evaluation of the process.

Depending on your available resources, it can be difficult to accurately measure the success of your mentoring. The simplest and most effective way to do so is through surveys. As mentees graduate, ask the participants to evaluate their experience. Additional questions could include:

- Did the program meet their goals outlined?
- What worked well?
- What could have worked better?
- What recommendations would they make for future mentoring initiatives?

See *Other Resources* for an example of a six-month evaluation and final evaluation form. See *Surveying Guideline Tool* for more information on preparing and administering a survey.

¹ Key Steps for Creating a Mentoring Program. (n.d.). *Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community*. Retrieved December 1, 2011, from www.advancingwomen.org/files/5/175.pdf

Resources

- Business Know-How: <http://www.businessknowhow.com/manage/mentor2.htm>
 - Understanding the parameters of a mentoring relationship
- Chronus, Resources: <http://chronus.com/resources/10-tips-for-starting-a-successful-mentoring-program>
 - 10 tips for starting a successful mentoring program
- The Next Web, Entrepreneur: <http://thenextweb.com/entrepreneur/2012/01/25/how-to-be-a-great-mentor-and-a-mentee/>
 - Tips and advice on how to be a great mentor or mentee
- United States Office of Personnel Management: <http://www.opm.gov/hrd/lead/BestPractices-Mentoring.pdf>
 - Best practices on mentoring; education about types of mentoring programs, benefits of mentoring, and things to consider when developing and implementing a mentoring program
- University of Minnesota Extension:
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/citizenship/DH6497.html>
 - Recruitment tips for a mentoring program.
- University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension:
<http://extension.unh.edu/intranet/NewEmp/MntrMntr.pdf>
 - Mentoring Program Handbook: Includes responsibilities and pitfalls of both mentors and mentees, and sample documents such as a needs assessment survey, six-month and final evaluation, tips for being a good listener, suggested guidelines for meetings, biographical sketch and a letter that mentors can use to introduce themselves to their mentees; remember that these documents are tailored for a university's staff mentoring program and to make appropriate changes for your community's program