

Service Fairs Focused on Recruiting Veterans, Service Members and Their Families

Overview

Service fairs are an excellent strategy for recruiting volunteers interested in serving the military community, and for recruiting members of the military community to engage in civilian service. This strategy is a win for the organizations and for volunteers. Organizations that serve the military community benefit from leveraging volunteer resources as they can provide additional human capital and skills that can help implement services to the military community to include all of the promising practices listed in the Community Blueprint.

These organizations can also benefit from access to men and women who embody military values and possess training, skills and an outlook unique to the veteran community. The military community benefits by using their skills and gaining new ones, all while meeting a mission greater than them. They are also able to develop new relationships in the community that could potentially lead to employment opportunities, access to support networks and overall relationships. It should be noted that it may take time for volunteers to build the relationships needed by individuals and organizations to be successful serving the military community – a lot of early bridge building needs to be done. Setting up a service fair for veterans within the community before addressing the larger community may allow you to capitalize on initial successes. This is because although the veterans may want to be asked, the remainder of the community may not wish to be singled out straight away.

There are three basic steps to creating a service fair: 1) Find a Partner to Leverage the Local Volunteer Community; 2) Plan Logistics; 3) Identify Volunteer Opportunities; 4) Recruit Potential Volunteers to Attend the Fair; and 5) Implement the Fair.

Is it being done already? Many communities already have volunteer hubs or structures in place that promote volunteerism and service and may conduct service fairs throughout the year. These organizations could include, but are not limited to, HandsOn Action Centers or Cities of Service. See *Other Resources* section for links to Cities of Service initiative and HandsOn Network.

Step-by-Step Implementation

Step 1: Find a Partner to Leverage the Local Volunteer Community

What individuals, associations, institutions, corporations, etc. exist in your community that can be an asset to your efforts? A service fair is an excellent first joint venture between your group and a potential partner. Finding a partner organization could help you to achieve what your organization alone may not be able to achieve and it will increase the sustainability of your efforts. The right partnership can expand your capacity to find volunteers to provide more services to the military community as well as help you better target the military community for service. Community partners can help you identify community resources that can benefit the event (e.g., space for the fair). Working with a partner organization can also minimize the potential of service duplication.

Partnerships can exist to provide volunteer generation, funding, project resources and to leverage those who are passionate about your mission to expand and deepen your work. Before you reach out to an organization it is important to know what you need and have to offer. Discuss this with your staff and board members. This will ensure that developed relationships are intentional and the focus is placed on maximizing potential effect within the community. Consider:

- What are your program and project goals?
- What are the organizational strengths and capacity to support other organizations efforts?
- What kind of impact do you want the project to have?
- How will your volunteers experience the project?
- What do you need? Volunteers, tangible resources?
- What financial resources do you need?
 - Little things like providing water and snacks at meetings or events can place a toll on smaller organizations.

Organizations like the American Red Cross, Military Family Alliance and Family Readiness Groups (FRG) are all over the country and can be leveraged to service the needs of the military community. A service fair can help them fill out their ranks.

It may be possible to go through your city's Chief Service Officer to get in touch with many of these organizations. If your city does not have a Chief Service Officer, contact the volunteer coordinator at the local HandsOn Action Center or local chapter of the American Red Cross. Links to these organizations' websites can be found in the Other Resources section at the end of this practice.

Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), including The American Legion, American Legion Auxiliary and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), are also potential partners. Before partnering with any organization, consider what you have to offer: do you have material resources, skills or access to certain individuals (funders, elected officials, etc)? Right now there is a lot of interest in helping veterans and it may be easy to find an organization whose goals align with yours.

Remember to research potential partners. Are there any risks to your organization in partnering with them? Consider:

- What is their mission?
- Who are their clients?
- Who is on their staff?
- What is their reputation within the community?

These questions can be answered by looking up news articles and community forums.

When you contact the organization, ask about the services they are currently offering the military community and how their volunteers are being used. Find out what kind of space they have available for events and brainstorm possible joint ventures with them including, but not limited to, the service fair.

Once you have found a good partner, construct a memorandum of understanding with them to be clear as to what is expected of each party. This will help foster clear communication and a common vision.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: NGO liaison

Task: Recruit local non-profits to participate in the service fair

Attributes: Articulate, persuasive, passionate about the issue

Who: The ideal candidate will have access and respect within both the NGO and military community; consider a local chapter president, Family Readiness Group leader or long-time volunteer

Hours: 60 over a two month period

Step 2: Plan Logistics

Planning a service fair involves selecting a location, a date, inviting community service providers and marketing it to the public. These steps need to be done early as they will likely be somewhat challenging to coordinate.

When selecting a location, reach out to the city government, a place of worship, a high school, college or a Veterans Service Organizations as they may have large space to donate. Anywhere large and accessible will likely do – make sure there is plenty of parking and that the site is safe.

Ideally, the location will provide tables and chairs, if not volunteer organizations can be asked to bring their own along with anything else they may need.

PARKING

Do not forget to plan for parking in advance. Parking will be a key consideration when selecting a facility and you may need to assign a volunteer just to negotiate this challenge.

Supporting the questions and needs of potential participants and community-based organizations leading up to and during the event can be a full-time job, so make sure you have an appropriate number of persons to staff this leading up to the event. It will also be vital to set expectations with service providers/vendors prior to the event. The more information you can provide them up front about the facility's electricity, internet connection, available space per vendor, etc., the easier it will be to handle expectations. You will likely need at least one volunteer to handle this task.

Depending on the facility you select, you may need volunteers for both set up and clean up. You will also need volunteers to place signs and handle any parking needs at the event. You will need one or two volunteers to greet service providers/vendors and give them an overview of the events schedule and the facility's layout. People will need to know where the bathrooms are and if or when they can break for lunch. Also vital is a volunteer devoted to troubleshooting the event. This person will be standing by if a table breaks or for safety and medical problems.

Service providers will likely bring their own table, two chairs and a placard or banner. They should also be prepared with handouts, sign-up sheets, pens, and possibly hand sanitizer, etc.

Optional Service Fair Elements

Refreshments: It is always a good idea to have light refreshments for the fair attendees so they feel welcome. You can ask a local grocery store or restaurant to provide in-kind support and donate snacks and drinks for the fair. To recognize them, you can post a sign by the refreshments letting participants know who donated the food.

Plan for a guest speaker: In order to get more people to come to the event you may want to think about recruiting a local speaker who may draw a crowd. This speaker could take time to thank the participants for coming to the fair, as well as thanking the past/current volunteers (including those who have served and continue to serve in the military) for their service and motivating them to continue their service journey.

Volunteer Opportunities	
<p>Title: Facility manager Task: Manage the facility acquisition, related preparation and day of event operations Attributes: Strong organizational skills, attention to detail and tracking timelines Who: The ideal candidate has leadership in event planning, perhaps a wedding planner or banquet planner Hours: 12</p>	
<p>Title: Service provider liaison Task: Work with outside organizations (participants and attendees) to address matters of scheduling, mapping, time tables, etc. Attributes: Strong organizational skills and outgoing, friendly personality Who: A personal assistant or office manager Hours: 30 per week</p>	

Step 3: Identify Volunteer Opportunities

The goal of the service fair is to both encourage service to the military community and to encourage those within the military community to volunteer in their communities. Before holding the service fair, you will need to canvas your community and identify volunteer opportunities and service providers appropriate for both goals.

The following is a list of service providers who might appeal to those within the military community and will likely have volunteer needs. This list is not exclusive or exhaustive.

Organizations of interest to the military community:

- HandsOn Network Action Centers
- American Red Cross
- Big Brothers Big Sisters
- Boys and Girls Clubs
- Military Family Alliance
- Food Banks
- Military Child Education Coalition
- Community Healthcare Centers
- Veteran Service Organizations

Contact service providers identified during your community search, and encourage their participation in the fair. Explain that this is an excellent time for them to engage in targeted recruitment of skilled volunteers.

As documentation of the event is essential to determining the extent of its success, service organizations that elect to attend should be asked as a condition of their participation to track their interaction with participants. Come up with a simple form to hand out to each that will track key elements of the fair's success. Questions can include, but are not limited to:

- How many volunteers did they speak to?
- How many volunteers left their contact information?

Step 4: Recruit Potential Volunteers to Attend the Fair

There are veterans in every county in America. Traditionally, veterans of all conflict eras, their families and friends are eager to volunteer. Recruiting members of the military community as potential volunteers is best done through a variety of venues:

- **Media:** Ask local TV, radio and print media to contribute free ads for your event. Ask them to do related stories on the benefits to the military community of volunteering. Speaking with someone responsible for production, news or advertising is highly recommended.
- **Contact Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) and Family Readiness Groups (FRGs):** Ask them to “get the word out” through their various communications channels (meetings, email, etc.). Check the websites for local chapters of organizations like The American Legion, Student Veterans of America (SVA) and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Disabled American Veterans (DAV) can help you reach wounded veterans in your area.
- Nearby military installations or Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities, Blue Star Families, Operation Homefront or Operation Military Kids can help find any local military family members.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Military community outreach coordinator

Task: Recruit outreach partners to publicize the service fair

Attributes: Articulate, persuasive, passionate about the issue

Who: The ideal candidate already has access and respect within the volunteer community; they should be well spoken with a lengthy history of volunteering; consider recruiting a volunteer from any of the organizations mentioned above

Hours: 20-40 over one to two months

Title: Media liaison

Task: Coordinate with local media outlets and VSOs

Attributes: Articulate, persuasive, passionate about the issue

Who: The ideal candidate will already have access to the media; consider recruiting volunteers from any of the organizations listed above or an employee at one of the local media outlets

Hours: 20 over two months

Step 5: Implement the Fair

In the weeks before the service fair:

- Meet with volunteers and others who will be helping to implement the fair to review roles, and details like attire, when to arrive, etc.
- Review the schedule
- Confirm and inventory supplies
- Arrange for food and beverage (if appropriate)
- Confirm access to event site
- Review registration set up and details
- Confirm safety plan
- Review evaluation and feedback process; ensure you have volunteers to support implementation and evaluation instruments developed

Day of the service fair:

- Arrive early (at least one to two hours)
- Have all materials waiting at appropriate locations
- Meet with speakers or VIPs (if necessary)
- Provide signs at the site so volunteers and attendees will know exactly where to go; welcome them and have them sign in; if possible, provide snacks and definitely provide water
- Bring together all the volunteers and project leaders; go over housekeeping things like the location of the restrooms; outline what tasks the group will be doing and divide into work teams (if appropriate); do not forget to highlight how the volunteers' work will make a difference in the lives of the military community; say THANK YOU when they sign in, during orientation and throughout the day
- Ensure a safe location

- Start clean-up at least 30 minutes before the scheduled end of the fair
 - Collect and dispose of trash and recyclables
 - Break down tables/chairs and store in proper place
 - Put away paper, pens and other supplies
 - Take down any signs you posted
 - Collect signed forms for your records
 - Do not leave any personal belongings
 - Do a final walk-through
 - Lead a reflection discussion/activity with volunteers
 - Ask organizations, participants and volunteers to complete an evaluation
 - Celebrate and recognize your volunteers
 - Be sure you are around to answer any questions or address any needs of the volunteers and organizations during the event

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Data analyst

Task: Prepare employer and candidate surveys; get them completed at the end of the service fair; track hiring results 30 days after the event and summarize results

Attributes: Data minded with most computer skills

Who: Consider student veterans on local campuses, military spouses or high school clubs

Hours: 30 over a month

Measures of Success

Key Success Factors for Volunteer Service Fairs

The goal of a Service Fair is to get more people volunteering and to staff hard to fill positions within service provider organizations. Documentation of the event is essential to determining the extent of its success. Service organizations who attend should be asked as a condition of their participation to track their interaction with participants. You can ask them to keep track of the number of volunteers who expressed interest in serving and the number of volunteers who signed up at the fair to serve.

Other key factors to be measured when determining the success of a volunteer fair include the number of service provider organizations participating:

- The number of organizations participating that providing services to the military community
- The number of potential volunteers expressing interest in serving
- The number of volunteers serving the military community
- The number of volunteers who report a positive experience at the service fair
- The percentage of those who sign up who come from the military community

This data can be tracked by the organizations at the fair and you can have a volunteer collect this information from each of the organizations before they leave the event. You may also want to think about collecting quotes or personal stories from organizations as well as those who attended the event so that you can use it in reports to the community or maybe even marketing materials for future fairs.

You may want to think about asking the organizations and participants about their satisfaction with the event. You can do this through a survey. For more information on surveying, please see *Surveying Guideline Tool* (Tool 5.2).

Surveys are not the only method of measuring success:

- Interviews of volunteers and participants at events allow you to ask more in-depth questions, and can build relationships with participants and volunteers
- Focus groups can provide qualitative data about your efforts and participants could have their memories jogged by listening to others; focus groups also create common terms for shared experiences and build organizational relationships with participants (*esprit de corps*)
- A review of the participation or documentation can tell you how many volunteers or organizations participated each year the demographic of the participants, etc.; this information has the advantage of being quantifiable, but is restricted to the types of information actively gathered and provides little depth

OTHER RESOURCES

- To find your local HandsOn Action Center, go to www.handsonnetwork.org
- To find out more about City of Service, go to www.citiesofservice.org
- To locate your local American Red Cross chapter, go to http://www.redcross.org/portal/site/en/menuitem.b5a0414b8a13bb88110dab5fc23f78a0/?vgn_extoid=6d65e821cbdf9110VgnVCM1000002bf3870aRCRD
- Service Leader Certificate Program: <http://www.handsonnetwork.org/tools/handsonuniversityonline>
- Local universities often have an annual volunteer fairs and may keep a Volunteer Coordinator on staff; if so this could be a great asset to your community
 - Duke University has hosted volunteer fairs for the last 34 years. Their program is an excellent example to learn from: <http://csc.civic.duke.edu/main/programs-and-services/volunteer-fair>
 - Missouri State University has hosted volunteer fairs for the last 10 years and lists the service providers attending on their website: <http://www.missouristate.edu/volunteer/3628.htm>