

Volunteerism and the Military Community

Overview of the Issue

The Military Community Needs Our Support

Each day, approximately 3,000 service members separate from the military and return to civilian life. All of these veterans face challenges of varying degrees: reintegration, employment, attaining an education, rebuilding and maintaining a strong family unit, isolation, drug abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), homelessness, suicidal thoughts – the list sometimes seems endless. While the government is attempting to address many of the military communities' needs, there remains a significant gap. The government can and should only do so much. The private and nonprofit sectors must also get engaged, as well as local communities and individuals. In this vein, volunteers across America have stepped up their efforts to assist the military community, but there is a continued need for more focused planning and coordination at the community level. Military families can be aided with a broad spectrum of projects that address childcare, housing, healthcare, transition (relocation), The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, spousal education and employment and Yellow Ribbon programs, to name a few.

The Military Community is a Valuable Asset

Our veterans and their families are not victims. Veterans and their families are talented, natural volunteers with valuable skill sets easily adapted to the challenges facing our communities. Their families have consistently stepped up to handle unmet needs – military family members volunteer at much higher rates than the rest of the population. Best of all, they are waiting to be asked to serve. We should help those who need it, and embrace those ready and able to serve. The military community is a great place to recruit volunteers because they already understand the military lifestyle and have an esprit de corps, learned through that military lifestyle where everyone is stronger when they work together.

Members of the military community serving as volunteers help build better communities.

Millions of Americans can be leveraged to fill gaps in services to the military community. Volunteers are our best-kept secret. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, between the years 2008 and 2009, during our most dire economic downturn since the great depression, 62 million Americans still gave 8.1 billion hours of service to their communities, or about \$169 billion in value. Fundraising, collecting and distributing food, providing general labor, transportation and tutoring/teaching topped the list of activities for volunteer services.ⁱ While most volunteers do not perform service activities related to their profession, there are national efforts to increase the amount of “skills-based volunteering” throughout the country as volunteers who use their skills are much more likely to continue volunteering.ⁱⁱ

Communities should recognize the potential of the military population and engage them in service.

- There is an army of veterans, service members and military families waiting for someone to ask them to serve. In “All Volunteer Force,” the authors point out that 62 percent, or about 1.1 million – a whole army – of current conflict veterans are willing to volunteer five or more hours a month. Amazingly, 74 percent of veterans under 30 have not been asked to serve. Ninety two percent of veterans see service as important to them and 90 percent see it as the basic responsibility of every American. Finally, veterans bring a host of proven skills: management and supervision, leadership of diverse groups, team building, and operational or logistics skills.ⁱⁱⁱ Veterans are a valuable untapped resource within communities across the nation.
- There is also an army of military families just waiting on the opportunity to serve because of their connection and commitment to their service members. Sixty-eight percent of survey participants in Blue Star Families’ 2010 Military Family Report reported volunteering in the past year.^{iv} Of note, the majority of volunteerism was through informal efforts, such as assisting friends and neighbors with meals, childcare or similar activities. This type of informal support is clearly an important area for military families, and one that the civilian community can easily participate in.
- For the military community, volunteering can sometimes be the missing piece of the transition puzzle. According to the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, volunteers benefit from their service through improving their communications and interpersonal skills; better motivating, understanding and dealing with people.^v For returning veterans these are exactly the skills that will help them maintain relationships outside their immediate family and close friends. The volunteer experience will add to their feelings of relevance, value and respect.

Meaningful Opportunities for Veterans, Service Members and Their Families

While every volunteer has different interests some studies show that the challenges current conflict veterans and service members find important are those facing military families, wounded veterans, at-risk youth and disaster recovery. They are also interested in serving older Americans’ healthcare needs and cleaning up the environment.^{vi} Many family members will want to help alongside their loved one, and the shared experience will add to those families’ strength and resiliency. Often, military family members report service opportunities as being therapeutic and their way to “pay it forward.”

Opportunity	Percentage of OEF/OIF veterans who cited this as important
Serving wounded veterans	95%
After-school programs/serving at-risk youth	94%
Disaster relief	91%
Serving military families	90%
Community health care	68%
Environmental efforts	52%

Source: Yonkman, M.M., & Bridgeland, J.M. (2009). All volunteer force, from military to civilian service

The families of our service members volunteer both formally and informally, assisting others within their own community. According to the 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey conducted by Blue Star Families, 68 percent of military families reported volunteering compared to 27 percent of the general population – usually they volunteered for longer as well, around 10 hours per month – but 9 percent reported more than 30 hours of service per month. Some of the organized volunteerism happened in Family Readiness Groups or within their churches and local schools.^{vii}

Call to Service

Research shows that the majority of people who volunteer do so because they were asked. The more specific the request the better – if someone is asked to show up at a specific place and time, with a clear idea of what will be asked of them, they are likely to agree to it. Especially if it involves doing something that they are already good at. Military communities across America can be mobilized to address the issues facing the military community – they just need to be asked.

How You Can Help

There is a role for you and your community in this. The country needs people willing to organize volunteer efforts to serve alongside the military community. You can take steps to improve the lives of veterans, service members, their families and loved ones. These promising practices will guide you as you recruit volunteers to serve alongside veterans, service members and their families. You can connect with or organize a community volunteer hub; organize a Service Fair to link volunteers passionate about the challenges facing the military community to smart and effective ways to serve; and finally help the community build effective volunteer management infrastructure to increase and improve the volunteer experience when serving the military community.

The **Promising Practices** associated with volunteerism will provide you with the framework necessary to affect the seven other **impact areas** addressed by the **Community Blueprint**.

Quotes

"Focusing your life solely on making a buck shows a certain poverty of ambition. It asks too little of yourself...Because it's only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you realize your true potential."

-President Barack Obama at Campus Progress Annual Conference, July 12, 2006

"Our young troops and their families have done everything their country has asked of them. Their lives have been changed forever by war, but their dreams haven't changed at all. They want to raise their children, own a home, go to school, find work and even find new ways to contribute. Most of all, they want to be good citizens. They want to reconnect and renew their relationship to their local communities. Let us ensure each of them has ample opportunities to do so. We will have a stronger generation of veterans and a stronger nation for it."

-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen
in the forward to All Volunteer Force published Nov. 11, 2009

"We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee."

-Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund

"Citizen service is the very American idea that we meet our challenges not as isolated individuals but as members of a true community, with all of us working together. Our mission is nothing less than to spark a renewed sense of obligation, a new sense of duty, a new season of service."

- Former President Bill Clinton

References:

ⁱ Corporation for National and Community Service, *Volunteering in America 2011*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/assets/resources/FactSheetFinal.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Corporation for National and Community Service, *Issue brief; capitalizing on volunteers' skills: volunteering by occupation in America*. (2008, September). Retrieved from http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/08_0908_rpd_volunteer_occupation.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Yonkman, M.M., & Bridgeland, J.M. (2009). All volunteer force, from military to civilian service. *Civic Enterprises*, Retrieved from <http://www.civicerprises.net/pdfs/allvolunteerforce.pdf>

^{iv} 2010 Military Family Report, Blue Star Families, <http://www.bluestarfam.org/resources/Surveys>

^v Canadian Centre for Philanthropy Research Program, *National survey of giving, volunteering and participating, the benefits of volunteering*. (2004). Retrieved from http://www.givingandvolunteering.ca/files/giving/en/factsheets/benefits_of_volunteering.pdf

^{vi} Yonkman, M.M., & Bridgeland, J.M. (2009). All volunteer force, from military to civilian service. *Civic Enterprises*, Retrieved from <http://www.civicerprises.net/pdfs/allvolunteerforce.pdf>

^{vii} Blue Star Families. *Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey 2010*. (2010, October). Retrieved from <http://bluestarfam.s3.amazonaws.com/42/58/2/301/2010bsfsurveyexecsummary.pdf>