

Welcome to the Community: Outreach to Those Transitioning From the Military to the Civilian Community

Overview

Welcome programs are instrumental in helping those who have recently separated from the military have a smooth transition into civilian life. They can also inform those who previously separated from military life who are moving to a new community about the effective resources available in their new hometown. The community will benefit from the increased productivity and functioning of their citizens, as well as having their existing services utilized to better the lives of those in the military community. The military community will benefit from having a support system ready for them after separation that is prepared to help them succeed in their new lives.

There are four basic steps: 1) Decide what your welcome program will look like; 2) Finding partners, event marketing and logistics; and 3) Optional activities.

Is it being done already? The gap analysis of your community will give you an idea of what, if any, integration programs already exist. If something is already in place, you could still offer to help, provide additional services or collaborate other organizations to create a more comprehensive plan for integration. If you still are not sure, ask the leading organizations in your community what activities they know of in the integration realm.

Step-by-Step Implementation

Step 1: Decide what your welcome program will look like

Because all communities are unique, one welcome program will not fit all. Based on the analysis of your community and its available services and military makeup, determine whether an in-person or virtual resource fair would be most effective. Having both could be beneficial to your community.

- **In-person resource fair.** Though a more extensive event, an in-person resource fair may be best for smaller communities with limited resources. This will showcase one to two organizations from every aspect of integration (behavioral health, education, employment, finance management and legal assistance, housing stability and homeless assistance, family strength and volunteerism) in a fair of similar style to a career fair, with booths, brochures and the opportunity to network within the military community.
- **Virtual resource fair:** For larger communities, an in-person resource fair could be impractical for many reasons. There are many organizations and many more people from the military community that would likely want to participate, resulting in an overwhelming, frustrating and ineffective fair. More reasonable for larger communities would be a virtual resource fair. This would be a web page with military organizations listed by location, specialty, etc.

While a virtual resource fair can be up year-round, when and how often need to be considered for an in-person resource fair. Finding out when service members will be returning can be difficult due to privacy laws. These welcome programs could be scheduled annually or bi-annually in smaller communities. Consider planning additional fairs when multiple service members return to the community. Getting return dates can be difficult due to privacy laws. Communities near a military base should try to contact the base's public affairs office, base or family support groups; communities that are Reserve and National Guard-based should contact the Armory. Be sure to ask when they would recommend holding a welcome program.

Once you decide what your welcome program will look like, it is time to start planning it.

Step 2: Finding partners, event marketing and logistics

Finding partners. Many communities have services available for the military community in the impact areas of behavioral health, education, employment, finance management and legal assistance, housing stability and homeless assistance, family strength and volunteerism. Collaborate with those already providing these services to benefit those entering your community. Use directories such as the National Resource Directory, the Warrior Gateway and the 211 Directory to find one or two of the most effective services in each impact area in your community. Invite them to participate in the in-person resource fair, or ask if you can reference them on your website. In either case, see if they can help market the fair to their members by distributing an email blast, postcard or simply putting up a flyer in their office.

If community partners were identified during your community's gap analysis, ensure those partners are approached to assist with the resource fair.

Marketing. Finding veterans, service members and their families is not the easiest task because of privacy laws. Most likely, you will have to go through an organization that has already been afforded that information. If your community has a military base, try contacting the public affairs office or family support groups and ask how you can get out the word out to their members – whether brochures, fliers, emails, mailings or media would be easiest, and if they can help with that process. For communities with a strong Reserve or National Guard population, contact the Armory with the same questions.

Contact local chapters of Military Officers Association of America, The American Legion, Student Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), American Veterans (AMVETS) and Disabled American Veterans (DAV) for help reaching veterans in your area. Additional national organizations that may be able to help include Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Paralyzed Veterans of America and Wounded Warrior Project. Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors can help you reach any local surviving families. Also, talk to local homeless shelters about reaching veterans.

During the marketing and outreach for the resource fair, military veterans who are moving into the community but who may have previously separated from service will hopefully be made aware of the program.

Logistics. For an in-person fair, secure a facility before outreach begins. If it is not donated, reserve the date until enough service organization fees are collected (split the rent among the service organizations). Ideally the facility will provide tables, chairs and power. The service organizations can bring anything extra they need.

Secure a volunteer to answer questions during the event, manage the finances if fees are collected, collect contact information from guests and administer satisfaction surveys to all participants.

For a virtual resource fair, have a volunteer set up a website where veterans, service members and their families can easily look up the most effective services in their area by location or specialty.

Volunteer Opportunities
<p>Title: Veteran outreach coordinator Task: Recruit partner service organizations to publicize and participate in the welcome program Attributes: Articulate, persuasive, passionate about the issue Who: The ideal candidate will already have access and respect within the area(s) of outreach for which they are responsible; should be effective at gaining access and making compelling cases for support; helpful if they are a veteran or military spouse; consider recruiting volunteers from any of the organizations listed in the additional resources section Hours: 20-40 over one to two months</p>
<p>Title: Assistant event manager Task: Point of contact for questions about the event – before and during event; in charge of recording fee collection, reservations, satisfaction surveys and other event support activities Attributes: Articulate, organized, confident Who: The ideal candidate already has access and respect within the community of local business leaders; consider a local CEO who is a veteran, member of the local Chamber of Commerce, or a local politician; others could include leaders from the local American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), local veteran college students (many colleges have veteran student groups) Hours: 8-40 over one to two months</p>
<p>Title: Web designer Task: Create a user-friendly web site where chosen service organizations can be found by location and specialty; use social media and search engine optimization techniques to make the effected population aware of the website Attributes: Organized, Problem-solver, Creative Who: The ideal candidate has experience creating and troubleshooting websites; consider candidates from local higher education institutions with preference going to students with military ties who could be more passionate about the project Hours: 10-15 over one month</p>

Step 3: Optional Activities

If your community has the resources, a celebration component or continuing support events can help round out your welcome program. Utilize volunteers involved with the resource fair to help plan these optional activities.

- **Celebration.** If you have a large military, Reserve or National Guard population and you have been able to access the returning dates for a group or groups of these veterans, service members and families, consider how your community can best celebrate and honor them. From airport greetings or neighborhood barbeques to welcome home parades, think about the capacity of your community and what is possible. Whatever is chosen, make sure information about the other components of the welcome program are advertised during the celebration. Include a brochure of contact information for your partners that have agreed to help you in the program just in case they do not attend.
- **Continuing support.** Using the contact information gathered at the resource fair, contact those who requested continuing support with information of further events or resources. These can be events that you put together or existing events and opportunities from your partner service organizations. Examples of events that could be put on are monthly gatherings of military families for cookouts or sports activities that bring together people in similar situations and help them create support systems and swap advice about integration issues. Examples of programs that your partner service organizations may be holding are finance literacy classes, mentoring programs and volunteer or job fairs.

Measuring Success

Tracking impact is important for several reasons. Most of all, if everyone understands the ultimate measures of success, volunteers and participants will become more focused in their activities. Additionally, this data will help you consider any potential improvements for future welcome programs. Lastly it will help identify national promising practices, which can be shared across communities.

- **Increased demand at partner service organizations.** The ultimate goal of a welcome program is to increase awareness of veteran services so that those reintegrating know how to help themselves. The best method to track this is to gain your partner service organization's commitments to complete a survey 30 and 90 days after the fair. If they can either keep track of how many of their clients found them through the welcome program or measure any increases in demand after the fair, these numbers can give an idea of how successful the program was.
- **Satisfaction.** Before the welcome program resource fair ends, you should attempt to get all participants (providers and users) to complete a satisfaction form.

- **Participation.** These numbers are also important in giving your volunteers goals, a sense of achievement and targets to beat next time. They are also easy to record with a sign-in sheet at the resource fair, or a site visit counter for a virtual fair. Good measures include:
 - Number of veterans, service members, family members, etc. who participated
 - Number of partner service organizations that participated

Other Resources

Employment:

- Chamber of Commerce
- Hire Heroes USA ([.hireheroesusa.](#))
- Return2Work ([.return2work.](#))
- Feds Hire Vets ([.fedshirevets.](#))
- Veterans Employment Coordination Center (www.va.gov/vecs/)

Behavioral Health:

- The Pathway Home ([.thepathwayhome.](#))
- Coming Home Project ([.cominghomeproject.](#))
- Homecoming for Veterans ([.homecoming4veterans.](#))
- Real Warriors Campaign ([.realwarriors.](#))
- Additional VA resources: ([.mentalhealth.va.gov/Resources.](http://mentalhealth.va.gov/Resources.))

Education:

- Higher Education:
 - Student Veterans of America ([.studentveterans.org/](#))
 - The strongest local Veteran Service Organization (VSO) (Search “Recognized VSOs” for your state at [.va.gov/ogc/apps/accreditation/index.](#))
 - Education coordinator if there is a nearby military or VA facility
 - Local community colleges and four-year universities
- K-12:
 - Military Child Education Coalition ([.militarychild.](#))
 - Military Family Alliance ([.militaryfamily.](#))
 - Local school district representative

Financial Management and Legal Assistance:

- Local banks and credit unions
- Financial education nonprofits (Google search: Financial Literacy Program and your city, state for local resources)
- State coalition of Jump\$tart ([.jumpstart.org/state-coalitions.](#))
- Local veteran advocacy groups/legal clinics
- Law offices that offer legal services on a sliding scale for lower-income families

Homelessness and Housing Stability:

- Local homeless shelter
- Local food bank
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
(http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov/Search_HCC.aspx)
- National Coalition for Homeless Veterans ([.nchv.org/network.](http://nchv.org/network))

Family Strength:

- Local Blue Star Family chapter ([.bluestarfam.org/local-](http://bluestarfam.org/local))
- Military Family Liaisons if there is a local military facility
- Military Family Liaisons/Yellow Ribbon representatives from your State Guard/Reserve Bureau

Volunteerism:

- HandsOn Network ([.handsonnetwork.](http://handsonnetwork.org))
- American Red Cross ([.redcross.org](http://redcross.org))

Consider inviting a representative from your regional Veterans Affairs office (www.vba.va.gov/VBA/benefits/offices.asp) to the resource fair to answer questions about benefits and resources available.

Give an Hour is a national nonprofit organization providing free counseling and other mental health services to active duty service members, National Guard and Reserve Component forces, and veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan who have separated or retired from any branch of military service. Consider inviting one of your local providers to the fair to talk about their services. To find a local provider, visit www.giveanhour.org, select “For Visitors” on the left hand side, and do a basic provider search for all practice areas.

The Defense Centers of Excellence National Resource Directory (www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov) is a website for connecting wounded warriors, service members, veterans and their families with resources that support them. It provides access to services and resources as the national, state and local levels to support recovery, rehabilitation and community integration. Two other effective directories are the 211 Directory (www.211.org) and Warrior Gateway (www.warriorgateway.org).

The Department of Defense Community Relations website (www.ourmilitary.mil) provides a comprehensive listing of social media sites and community programs nationwide to support military families.