

Serving Those Who Served: How Can Extension Reach U.S. Military Veterans?

Abstract

U.S. military veterans are often overlooked as an audience for Extension education despite a number of programs targeting military youth and families. This may be due to the difficulty in reaching a diverse and widespread veteran population. The Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Care System is a network of facilities across the country that can provide access to veterans, as a group. The VA's resources can be leveraged for Extension programming through unique partnerships that meet the institutional goals of both Extension and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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Introduction

United States military veterans are a relatively diverse group made up of people from all walks of life. There are 21.2 million military veterans in the United States, and they make up almost 9% of the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). It can be challenging to reach veterans as a whole due to the group's tendency to disperse after being discharged from the military. How can Extension serve adult military veterans?

The Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Care System is a network of facilities across the country that can provide access to veterans, as a group. The system has 1,465 locations, with multiple offices in each state and territory. Veteran use of VA services is increasing each year with nearly 9 million unique enrollees making more than 80 million visits annually to VA centers for medical care, educational opportunities, job placement, and financial assistance. (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). The VA's network of facilities provides a unique opportunity for Extension to provide outreach programming to adult veterans.

Opportunities

The mission of Extension is to deliver information from the university to all Americans, particularly

those who lack access to formal education. The mission of the VA is to serve and honor the men and women who are America's veterans. A VA-Extension partnership can meet the institutional needs of both agencies through existing programs.

Horticultural Therapy

The VA medical centers in several states across the nation provide horticultural therapy for their patients (Massachusetts, New Jersey, Florida, California) and Extension-based Master Gardener programs in at least 21 states offer horticultural therapy programs (Flagler, 1992). The two groups can easily collaborate in order to provide volunteer-based activities for VA patients. Rutgers Cooperative Extension has provided both informal lunchtime horticultural therapy activities for VA patients and employees, as well as monthly greenhouse sessions at the East Orange VA hospital in New Jersey. The East Orange facility has also taken the therapy sessions a step further by having the patients plant flowers and bulbs around the property in a beautification effort under Rutgers' supervision.

Agriculture

VA medical centers are often sprawling facilities that sit on large properties. Much of the land is often unused and would be perfect for a beginner's farming program or to provide hands-on experience after classroom instruction on the basics of agriculture. Agriculture is the core of many Extension programs, and agents are often looking for new audiences. Extension professionals could team up with the local VA facility to provide agricultural training. The University of Nebraska's Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots program and the Veterans' Sustainable Agriculture Training at California State are two examples of ways to introduce agriculture to veterans. Rutgers Cooperative Extension has provided training in urban agriculture at the East Orange, NJ, facility, and has also given guidance for greenhouse and acreage planning for crop production at the VA center in Lyons, NJ. These Extension-based activities have provided field training for veterans interested in agriculture, as well as vegetables that are used in the facility cafeteria. Since 2010, the Rutgers Cooperative Extension urban agriculture gardens at the East Orange VA facility have yielded 8,800 pounds of produce that have been donated to homeless or underprivileged veterans.

Job Skills Training

Veterans have historically suffered high unemployment rates both in the short-term after returning from service and in the long-term with chronic joblessness (Joint Economic Committee, 2013). The Council of Economic Advisors and the National Economic Council have recently recommended improved access to training and certification programs, as well as providing access to both formal and informal educational opportunities as ways to improve employment outcomes for veterans (2013). VA facilities often have job placement centers and provide seminars for job seekers, but they are not equipped to provide job skills training. Extension can provide that training in areas such as landscaping, forestry, aquaculture, stormwater management, etc. Some VA centers have funding available for training materials and resources that could be passed on to the Extension agent providing the training program. Rutgers Cooperative Extension has provided a job skills training

program in sustainable landscaping and stormwater management at the East Orange, NJ, VA facility for several years (Rowe, 2011). Three iterations of the program have yielded 29 graduates: two have started their own companies, two have started community gardens in nearby Newark, NJ, and three have gone back to school to further their education. The program was marketed throughout the East Orange VA facility, and 96% (28 of 29) of the training participants had not previously attended an Extension programming event prior to enrolling in this veterans-only training course.

Conclusions

It appears that there is a lack of Extension programming for adult veterans despite Extension's long history of serving military families (Jones & Roueche, 2007, Ames, et al., 2011). The Veterans Affairs Health Care System can provide access to veterans across the country, as there are multiple VA facilities in each state. Extension can provide training and educational opportunities for veterans in horticultural therapy, agriculture, and job skills training for workforce re-entry. VA-Extension partnerships can meet the needs of both institutions by tailoring existing Extension programming to the nation's veterans. VA facilities can benefit from the partnerships by being the recipient of Extension-based volunteer hours, by offering educational programs, and by offering new services to patients. Extension professionals can benefit by expanding existing programs and by reaching an underserved audience through the VA system.

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