



IMPACT AREA:
VETERANS

OPERATION REINTEGRATION

A **CITIES OF SERVICE** BLUEPRINT

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OPERATION REINTEGRATION

Operation Reintegration is a high-impact service strategy in which the mayor's office engages veterans as volunteers to help newly returning veterans reintegrate into civilian life.

Supportive and knowledgeable veterans – already reintegrated – serve as peer mentors to connect returning veterans to benefits, programs, and services that they may need such as health care, job training, counseling, child care, and legal and financial services. Equipped with a comprehensive list of a community's service providers and programs, trained on outreach and assessment techniques, and with the experience and understanding only a fellow veteran could have, these veteran volunteers guide newly returning veterans to the resources that they need most.





BACKGROUND

Reintegrating into civilian life can be a complex and difficult process. Deployments can disrupt educations, careers, finances, and family relationships, and the experiences of war can cause physical and mental trauma. The strain on veterans and their communities is tangible and almost 40 percent of recent veterans receiving care from Veterans Affairs hospitals have one or more mental health disorders.¹

Veterans returning home face a wide array of tasks to complete and decisions to make. Yet, the many programs and services for veterans run by official government agencies as well as by Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) can be confusing to navigate in a fragmented and uncoordinated landscape. Consequently, the full set of available services is not always well understood by the veteran and military communities.

Veterans who have gone through the transition themselves understand the potential difficulties of reintegration. Through the leadership of the mayor's office implementing an Operation Reintegration initiative, a community can engage veterans as volunteer mentors to increase returning veterans' awareness of and access to needed programs and services.

¹ Seal, Karen, et al (2009, July 16). Trends and Risk Factors for Mental Health Diagnoses Among Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Using Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care, 2002-2008. Retrieved July 21, 2009 from American Journal of Public Health web site: <http://bit.ly/19lff7>. "From Anxiety, Panic & Health.com, Cited on Anxiety, Panic & Health.com April 25, 2011: <http://bit.ly/jGwmj3>.





REQUIRED ELEMENTS

- 1 Mayor's office convenes a consortium of local partners, including active VSOs, the local military installation commander (if applicable), public agencies with robust veterans programs, and volunteer organizations that are knowledgeable about veterans issues for initial discussion, input, and planning, with the goal of establishing close partnerships.
- 2 In cities where such a guide does not exist, the groups identified in Step 1 that are knowledgeable about veterans issues will create an up-to-date, comprehensive, and easy-to-access Resource Guide (online or in hard copy) that documents the full range of local services and resources available for veterans and their families.
- 3 Mayor's office determines the most effective venues for identifying and reaching out to returning veterans by working with commanders at local military bases (if applicable), National Guard and Reserve leaders, the local Veterans Affairs (VA) office, and other relevant organizations providing services for veterans.
- 4 Mayor's office works with other community partners to recruit and train volunteers from the veteran community to be effective mentors for newly returning veterans.
- 5 Volunteer mentors reach out to new veterans upon their return, explain the program, and offer their help. Using the Resource Guide, the volunteer will suggest resources that the veteran should know about, and will help the veteran understand how to get in touch with programs and what to expect from the process. The volunteer keeps a record of each contact and follows-up with each veteran on a monthly basis.
- 6 Mayor's office tracks and reports impact metrics across all peer-mentor relationships.





Required impact metrics include:

- Number of returning veterans who receive assistance, as evidenced by measuring at least one of the following:
 - Number of returning veterans continuing their education
 - Number of returning veterans gaining access to housing (temporary vs. stable)
 - Number of returning veterans securing a job
 - Reduction in number of returning veterans served at crisis centers, such as homeless shelters, family protective services, etc.
 - Number of returning veterans accessing financial assistance, such as the VA's housing loan guaranty program
 - Number of returning veterans receiving legal assistance
- Number of returning veterans contacted by a veteran volunteer at least once
- Number of returning veterans mentored by veteran volunteers

Optional metrics may include:

- Number of veteran volunteers recruited and trained to serve as peer mentors





EXECUTING THE PLAN

CONVENING PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Identify and convene veteran-focused organizations for initial discussion, input, and planning, with the goal of establishing partnerships. Consider including active VSOs, public agencies with robust veterans programs, and volunteer organizations that are knowledgeable about the issues. Depending on their type of organization, partners might play one of the following roles: providing input into the initiative's design, contributing content for training topics, providing information on veteran-focused services they offer for the Resource Guide, contributing lists of services already collected, or providing ongoing support to volunteers and the returning veterans as needed.

IDENTIFYING RETURNING VETERANS

Work with a local military installation commander, National Guard office, or state VA office to ensure that newly returning service members are made aware of the opportunity to participate in Operation Reintegration. Due to privacy concerns, official government and military entities cannot share names directly, but local military and government partners can advise on the best way for veteran volunteers to make their connections. For example, it may be helpful to ask an installation commander to conduct a simple poll that asks members of returning units if they anticipate housing, jobs, legal or financial difficulties upon return, and if they would like to be paired with a peer mentor. These commanders may also be willing to link newly separating servicemen and women to mentors as part of the transition process.

Events such as airport homecomings, “hail and farewell” events to recognize servicemen and women who are leaving the military, and “yellow ribbon” welcome home ceremonies are places where volunteers can make contact with new veterans. An additional approach may be to establish and publicize the initiative by partnering with institutions that provide a physical space to host volunteers such as: universities, colleges, community centers, VA hospitals, homeless shelters, or other locations easily accessible or already well-known to returning veterans. Sign-up and registration procedures should be easily accessible; some veterans, perhaps wary of social stigmas of asking for help, may not self-identify their own specific needs.





COMPILING THE RESOURCE GUIDE

1 If it does not already exist in the city, the mayor's office should develop a comprehensive guide to local resources for veterans. These service providers can be based in your community or be affiliates of the tens of thousands of veterans organizations across the country. Compile a list of programs and services available through public agencies, veterans organizations, and other relevant community organizations that are specifically designed for veterans and their families or likely to be particularly useful to them and note information on preferences and discounts for veterans. For each organization, include a brief description of the program or service provided, eligibility requirements, and application process; as needed, provide contact information for the specific department/individual that processes referrals for veterans. Organize the information clearly by program topic and consider posting it online in an easily accessible location.

Draw on lists already compiled by local partners, if available, making sure to add programs specific to your city and include a contact person for referrals so as to make the referral process as smooth as possible for the newly returned veterans. Keep the Resource Guide current by reviewing and updating its content several times a year.

Begin by looking for programs and resources in the following critical and basic need areas:

- Finding and applying for benefits
- Physical health and rehabilitation
- Mental health and post-traumatic recovery
- Job training and employment
- Family and social services, ranging from marriage counseling to child care
- Legal and financial services and counseling
- Education and college
- Housing and home loan support
- Homelessness
- Substance abuse and addiction





- 2 Meet with general service providers to document how veterans can access their services and to explain Operation Reintegration. Many agencies or organizations provide services critical to veterans' reintegration but do not focus on veterans or have requirements that make participation difficult for veterans (e.g., housing placement, job training, family counseling, financial counseling). Develop an understanding of their services, eligibility requirements, intake processes, and any preferences for veterans. Discuss the best way to make referrals. As a relationship is established, the mayor's office may also help educate these agencies on how to improve their services for veterans.

ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS AS PEER MENTORS

- 1 Develop and provide volunteer training: Volunteer mentors should be trained on the content of the Resource Guide, what it means to be a peer mentor, how to conduct outreach, and what resources are available both for their own support and to solve more complicated situations that may arise in the lives of the veterans they are mentoring. Include step-by-step instructions on program logistics regarding referrals, follow-up, and maintaining contact records (the latter is important for measuring the impact of this initiative). Training might be provided by staff at a community partner or could be offered by professionals at a local training organization or community college. Local partners can help determine the frequency of training and organize the training program to establish a pipeline of volunteer mentors for the initiative.
- 2 Veteran volunteers engage returning veterans: At the heart of the program, veterans from the community volunteer their time and experience to serve as peer mentors, reaching out to returning veterans to help them successfully reintegrate into civilian life. Volunteers contact new veterans, explain the program, and offer their help.

Through discussions with the returning veteran, the peer mentor gains an understanding of his/her needs and ascertains what resources in the community are best suited to provide help. Using the Resource Guide, the volunteer may be able to suggest new resources for the returning veteran and can help their mentee understand how to access programs and what he/she should expect from the processes.





Volunteer peer mentors should keep a record of every contact and follow-up with each veteran after 30, 60, and 90 days and every two months thereafter until the returning veteran feels that he or she is well on the path to civilian reintegration. As much as possible, the volunteer should work with the initiative's network of specialist partners to meet the needs of those being served before any crises emerge.

- 3 Support the veteran volunteers: The mayor's office or key partners maintain regular contact with volunteers to support them during their period of service, including providing opportunities to share experiences with other volunteer mentors, receive additional or refresher training, and provide feedback. Partner organizations are available to provide ongoing support to the volunteer as necessary to resolve any urgent issues or situations that arise for the mentored veterans. Volunteers may also need personal support to cope with emotional difficulties that may surface as they fulfill their role as a peer mentor.**

FUNDRAISING FOR OPERATION REINTEGRATION

Operation Reintegration is a compelling fundraising opportunity for foundations and corporations with a commitment to the successful reintegration of veterans and their families. Cities implementing Operation Reintegration should cultivate local sponsorship opportunities to help cover costs of the program (e.g., printed materials or meals during training events).

The elements of a typical proposal include:

- Description of the Operation Reintegration initiative
- How this initiative would positively impact returning veterans and their families (e.g., the value of a veteran mentor, increased access to veteran resources, smoother transitions)
- Amount of funding requested and how those funds would be used (e.g. paying for supplies or printed materials)
- Metrics that would be collected to assess progress
- Information on Cities of Service (especially helpful for national funders)
- Recognition plan for the donor (e.g., logo on printed materials or the city's service website, verbal thanks in the training session, or acknowledgement at a public event)





Be sure to provide sponsors with feedback on the results, including photos and metrics information as Operation Reintegration is carried out. In some cases, private funders may not want to provide funding directly to city governments. If those instances, the city should seek out a local nonprofit partner to receive the funds.

RECOGNIZING AND THANKING VOLUNTEERS

Recognize, thank, and honor the veteran volunteers and the veteran community they serve. The mayor's office and its partners can recognize all volunteers with a letter of thanks upon completion of a finite commitment or provide annual recognition for long-term volunteers. Consider nominating volunteers for service awards or recognizing participants in the initiative during ceremonies on Veterans Day, Memorial Day, or Independence Day. Consult and coordinate with local VSOs on what forms of recognition are likely to be the most meaningful and appropriate for the veteran volunteers.





MEASURING IMPACT

Collecting data on the impact of the Operation Reintegration initiative is critical. The Mayor's office must track and report impact metrics across all peer-mentor relationships.

Required impact metrics include:

- Number of returning veterans who receive assistance, as evidenced by measuring at least one of the following:
 - Number of returning veterans continuing their education
 - Number of returning veterans gaining access to housing (temporary vs. stable)
 - Number of returning veterans securing a job
 - Reduction in number of returning veterans served at crisis centers such as homeless shelters, family protective services, etc.
 - Number of returning veterans accessing financial assistance such as the VA's housing loan guaranty program
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Optional metrics may include:

- Number of veteran volunteers recruited and trained to serve as peer mentors

Baseline data on the size of a city's veteran population, the number of returning veterans, and the number being served may not be available at the outset of the initiative. To gauge potential demand as well as current use of such a program, consider asking sources at the local military installation or the state's Department of Veterans Affairs for estimates of the number of new veterans returning to the area each year.





OPTIONAL ELEMENTS

FOCUS ON A SELECT VETERAN POPULATION

To limit initial planning and development variables, a city may wish to pilot the program by focusing services on a specific population of returning veterans. Focusing on a more narrow population could make the pilot more manageable in terms of training development, volunteer recruitment, and collection of metrics. An initial focus may include, but is not limited to, the following sub-groups within the returning veteran population:

- Female veterans
- Young veterans seeking to use the GI Bill to enter and/or complete college
- Veterans seeking job training or placement
- Veterans in need of legal, financial, or family counseling

The focus should be determined by local needs, resources, and available expertise in veterans' issues. If a more narrow focus is chosen, volunteers can be trained in the particular aspects and needs of the target population and developing outreach methodologies specific to that population. For certain populations, a tailored focus may also affect the profile of volunteers that are recruited, who will likely be drawn from the same profile in order to more easily relate (e.g., female veterans).

PROVIDE A SPECIFIC ROLE FOR VETERANS WITH EXPERTISE

Veteran volunteers with relevant expertise may be able to contribute by serving as a "resource volunteer" rather than an "outreach volunteer." Resource volunteers may be willing to contribute professional services (e.g., finance, legal, counseling) or detailed understanding of complex processes (e.g., gaining GI Bill benefits, applying for housing benefits, entering and succeeding at job training programs, entering substance abuse programs, recovering from traumatic brain injury) to support outreach volunteers' efforts.





INCLUDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERAN SPOUSES AND FAMILIES TO SERVE

Spouses and family members of veterans can be a terrific resource to include in a veteran-focused outreach program. They are motivated by a similar mission and equipped with an understanding and specific knowledge of the issues. They may have experience assisting their family member to apply for services or progress through stages of recovery, and they are often looking for opportunities to serve. In many instances, these family members could serve as peer mentors to the family members of returning veterans.





THE PLAN IN ACTION

Many programs provide services to veterans or aim to coordinate assistance, but relatively few leverage veterans as volunteers to conduct outreach to the veteran community to assist with return and reintegration. The example below represents one way of implementing this model, highlights critical elements such as: vets-to-vets service, partnering with active duty military leaders on early identification of returning service members' needs, and compiling a blueprint of community resources for veterans.

 The City of **Austin, Texas** is piloting an initiative called Operation Outreach. The program is implemented through a partnership with the Central Texas chapter of the American Red Cross, which volunteered its capacity to manage volunteers. So far, over 500 veterans have been served through the program, including over 230 veterans connected to employment services, over 200 veterans connected to health and mental health services, and over 160 veterans connected to housing services. The initiative also matches veterans with other critical resources like transportation assistance to work, utility payment supports, and vet-to-vet mentoring services.

Additionally, the city's Workforce Solutions Center provided a private space for volunteers and veterans to meet and receive individual support. The space functioned as a centralized location where local nonprofits could refer veterans to help them connect to needed services. Ultimately, the goal of the initiative is to support returning veterans in maintaining successful and self-sufficient lives.

(Austin's high-impact service plan can be found at www.citiesofservice.org.)





RESOURCES

Service Organizations focused on managing volunteer programs or serving the veteran community may make good implementing partners, or be able to contribute expertise in managing the program or seeking funding. Examples include:

- Points of Light Institute's Veteran Leader Corps, a national service program that focuses on developing volunteer leadership, meaningful service opportunities, and cultivating job readiness with robust training and resources for veterans and military families (<http://bit.ly/XTwMUB>).
- AmeriCorps' Veterans Corps Programs in states that match volunteering veterans with opportunities to serve the local veteran community (<http://1.usa.gov/12pOHDh>).
- Local Chapters of the American Red Cross implementing the Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) program (<http://bit.ly/kXVOub>).
- Give an Hour, a nonprofit organization providing free mental health services to U.S. military personnel and their families affected by the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Services are provided by mental health professionals who commit to volunteering one hour per week for a year (<http://www.giveanhour.org/>).
- The Mission Continues, which awards community service fellowships to post-9/11 veterans, empowering them to transform their own lives by serving others and directly impacting their communities. Mission Continues Fellows serve for six months at a local nonprofit organization addressing key educational, environmental or social issues. Each Fellow works to achieve a post-fellowship goal of full-time employment and/or pursuit of higher education, while maintaining a permanent role of public service (<http://missioncontinues.org>).
- The Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs manages the Veterans Conservation Corps, which includes a Vet Corps component. The program leverages AmeriCorps veteran volunteers to help Washington's veterans navigate the state's higher education and training programs to help veterans adjust from the military to college life (<http://1.usa.gov/m9ks3q>).





- Points of Light Institute's Community Blueprint is aimed at helping the public take stock of the resources available in their community for veterans. The Community Blueprint covers eight areas: Behavioral Health; Education: K-12 and Post-High School; Employment; Family Strength; Financial/Legal Services; Homelessness; Reintegration; and Volunteerism (<http://bit.ly/QioRHR>).
- Team Rubicon (TR) unites the skills and experiences of military veterans with first responders to rapidly deploy emergency response teams. Since its creation in January 2010, TR has impacted thousands of lives – in Haiti, Chile, Burma, Pakistan, Sudan, and the United States of America (Vermont, Maryland, Missouri, and Alabama). TR reaches victims outside the scope of where traditional aid organizations venture and helps victims on the fringe (<http://teamrubiconusa.org/>).

Useful reports and resource directories include:

- The United States Department of Veterans Affairs launched the National Resources Directory (NRD) to provide access to services and resources at the national, state, and local levels that support recovery, rehabilitation and community reintegration (<http://www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov/>).
- Civic Enterprises has released a detailed report, “All Volunteer Force: From Military to Civilian Service,” describing the untapped volunteer potential of returning veterans (<http://bit.ly/UdP7ZZ>).

Federal agencies and national organizations operating critical programs include:

- Department of Veterans Affairs (<http://www.va.gov/>)
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (<http://www.hud.gov/>)
 - Information on HUD's information for veterans (<http://1.usa.gov/kNrAnI>)
 - HUD has established a hotline for veterans facing homelessness (<http://1.usa.gov/ITFwsg>)
- Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Veterans Employment and Training Service (<http://www.dol.gov/vets/>)



Cities of Service is a national nonprofit that designs and supports the implementation of high-impact service strategies that can be widely replicated in cities worldwide. We provide technical assistance, programmatic support, planning resources, and funding opportunities. Cities of Service supports a coalition of nearly 200 cities whose mayors are committed to using citizen volunteers to solve local pressing challenges, from engaging mentors to help decrease high school dropout rates to increasing energy efficiency in buildings. We help coalition cities share solutions, best practices, and lessons learned, as well as spread awareness about their great work.

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