



TIPS FOR SUCCESS FOR WORKING WITH YOUNGER VETERANS

This tip sheet is designed to help Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) grantees more effectively serve younger veterans, including those who have recently separated from military service. The youngest generation of veterans faces many challenges that are less common among older veterans, yet they are more likely to possess certain strengths that help them in pursuing a career. In order to serve this population, it is important to target outreach activities in a whole new way and to tailor employment supports to the unique strengths and obstacles of each individual.

What Are Some of the Challenges in Serving Younger Veterans?

It may be necessary to provide significant supports to some younger veterans in order for them to succeed in the workplace. Because of ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, a high percentage of younger veterans have served in combat areas. Many veterans returning from combat zones have traumatic brain injuries and other serious physical injuries. Post-traumatic stress and addiction to pain medications are commonplace.

Many younger veterans have given little thought to a career pathway. They may have enlisted in the military while still in high school without making a plan as to what they would do afterward. Those facing challenges such as post-traumatic stress or serious injuries are unlikely to have considered how these obstacles would affect their post-military careers. Veterans who have little or no work experience outside of the military often need support in order to prepare a resume or handle a job interview. Unlike older veterans who have learned to “sell themselves” in person, younger veterans often have little experience presenting their skills to an employer.

Those veterans who do not have a clear career pathway in mind include some who are taking advantage of their GI Bill educational benefits. While enrolled in community

college or a four-year institution, their housing situation is usually settled, but if they graduate or otherwise leave school without a job, they can end up couch-surfing or literally homeless. Other younger veterans who have recently separated from the military feel like they need a “breather” before focusing on a career.

Among younger veterans, minorities and women are disproportionately affected by homelessness. One study found shockingly high rates of homelessness (50 percent of men and 30 percent of women) among young African American veterans who were living in poverty (Fargo et al., 2011). The authors also noted that low-income, African American, female veterans were particularly susceptible to homelessness when they were raising young children. It is possible that workplace and/or housing discrimination, based on race, gender, and parenting status plays a role in these disparities.

Younger veterans are less likely to be engaged in VA services or involved with traditional Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) such as the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Some women, in particular, avoid VA services for numerous reasons. Women who have experienced military sexual trauma may be retraumatized by the large number of men at VA facilities, including armed guards. Further, most VA facilities are not set up to accommodate women who have young children in their care.

Outreach to younger veterans may require very different approaches than outreach to veterans of prior eras. Many younger veterans do not refer to themselves as veterans, do not like to use the term “serve” in reference to their military experience, and do not like to be thanked for their service. Further, service providers note that many younger veterans do not think of themselves as people who need employment supports in order to succeed.

What Are Some of the Strengths of Younger Veterans?

People who work with younger veterans point out that they are more likely than older veterans to have certain characteristics that can support finding work. Although every individual is of course unique, some of the strengths that you might find in younger veterans may include:

- Younger veterans may be more tech-savvy. Many younger veterans are comfortable filing online job applications, and they may prefer to have employment staff contact them by text or email. They are also comfortable networking for jobs through social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and they know how to respond to jobs posted through social media.
- Many are task-oriented and will follow up rapidly on job leads, pursuing employment aggressively.
- They tend to be less set in their ways and open to multiple avenues toward employment.
- They are likely to be interested in career development, rather than simply earning income.

Tips for Successful Outreach

- Be respectful of the way that younger veterans may like to think of themselves. Rather than asking whether someone is a veteran or if they have “served,” ask neutral questions, such as “Have you ever been in the military?”
- Concentrate outreach efforts in places that younger veterans who are not seeking help from the VA might be accessing assistance. These might include county assistance and food stamp offices, as well as community health centers. Women veterans who are single mothers and/or have experienced violence may seek services through mainstream service providers. It is therefore important to educate such agencies about how to identify eligible veterans and to cooperate in providing the most comprehensive services possible to women veterans.

- Consider conducting outreach at places that younger adults might congregate. For example, in small towns, the Friday night football game might be an effective place to set up a table. Concerts, outdoor expos, and other events are also likely to lead to new contacts with veterans. Many veterans like to participate in fitness events like “mud runs” or adventure races. Because many veterans have young children, family events provide other opportunities for outreach.
- Try to identify groups that younger veterans might be joining for camaraderie in lieu of traditional VSOs such as the American Legion and VFW. Members of these groups might be experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or they may know other veterans in those situations. Some younger veterans prefer to join groups with a fitness or community services orientation, such as relay racing teams or volunteer organizations. For example, Team Red, White & Blue organizes races, ski trips, and other events to connect veterans to the community at large; Team Rubicon brings together veterans and first responders to volunteer in disaster relief. Another popular activity is motorcycling, and many clubs are specifically for veterans or have many veterans in their membership.
- Use technology and social media to your advantage. Many younger veterans, even those experiencing homelessness, have access to cell phones, and text messages are often an effective means of communication. Some apps allow for sending free messages—find out what people in your community are using. Service staff, particularly those who are veterans themselves, find it helpful to join Facebook groups and other social networks in order to promote their services. It is also helpful to have an “alumni network” of veterans served by the program, as they can spread word of events, etc. Facebook and other social media sites also allow for “micro targeting” advertisements to people who indicate military experience in their profiles or online activity.

- Given that younger veterans might pursue educational credentials, reaching out to veteran organizations on college campuses and to student services may be helpful to inform veterans on campus about how working and learning can go hand-in-hand or how employment services could be helpful when a veteran nears completion of college studies. HVRP staff would do well to introduce their grant services at an on campus orientation session about the issues veterans may face in their job search activities. See <http://www.campusveterans.com/>
- Above all, be respectful of the fact that many younger veterans do not want to think of themselves as a person who needs charity or special services. Promote the services that you offer as something that they have earned by serving in the military. Make sure that veterans know that they will receive one-on-one attention and intensive assistance with resumes, interviews, etc., as they may have received inadequate assistance from mainstream employment services.

Tips for Successful Employment Supports

- Keep a close eye on the changing labor market. Younger veterans may be more aware of newer types of jobs that others their age are taking, and it is important to offer avenues to jobs that younger veterans consider relevant.
- Be aware of veterans' support needs, but remember to focus on their strengths in order to find the right job, and then make sure that supports are in place. Put people at ease about disclosing post-traumatic stress, substance use, and other issues that they might worry will hurt their job prospects. It is better to identify these issues ahead of time and put supports into place than to have them interfere with job interviews or work performance. Make sure that you clarify that

you are helping veterans in a holistic manner, and that you will get them the help they need rather than judging them.

Sue did not disclose to her job specialist that she had experienced military sexual trauma. The job specialist helped her to obtain a job at a call center, which was quite loud because of the dozens of people speaking on the phone in a single room. Sue's supervisor put his hand on her shoulder to get her attention. His act startled her and triggered an angry, violent outburst.

- Be sure to focus on meeting both immediate and long-term needs. Many younger veterans need immediate income and will have to take a less-than-ideal job as a "bridge" job. Make an effort to continue working with veterans if they find such employment and help them to develop a sustainable career path.
- Establish contacts that can help you to identify veterans who have recently become homeless or are at imminent risk of homelessness. Intensive interventions may be able to help them establish a secure home and avoid long-term homelessness.

An HVRP grantee has established a working relationship with a contact at the state Veterans Affairs offices who has a list of recently separated veterans who are receiving unemployment compensation. The grantee also has connected with local guard and reserve units to identify veterans returning from active duty and did not have a job lined up for their return.

- Identify employers that are willing to hire recently returned veterans. Many employers are more willing to hire recently separated veterans without job experience than they are to hire veterans with longer periods out of the workforce.