



TIPS FOR SUCCESS FOR OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Outreach is more than distributing leaflets and advertising on billboards. Although raising general awareness is important, the ultimate goal of outreach is to engage the target audience in the services being offered.

In the case of the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), such services assist veterans who are experiencing homelessness gain employment, and veterans are clearly the primary target audience. Reaching veterans experiencing homelessness—especially younger, recently separated veterans—can be challenging, so you may need to engage other sources who personally know veterans experiencing homelessness and in need of HVRP services. A second target audience might be business leaders who can provide employment opportunities, but may be unfamiliar with HVRP or the benefits of hiring veterans. Lastly, a number of community stakeholders, including community-based organizations that will serve as partners and sources of referral, must also be invested in the effort. This tip sheet provides suggestions for how to engage a target audience, regardless of its composition.

Appeal to what is important to the target audience.

The common denominator for attracting the attention of any audience is summed up by the “WIIFM Principle”: What’s In It For Me? Audiences want to know how HVRP can help them meet their goals and uphold their values.

Veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation New Dawn (OND) are becoming homeless sooner than previous groups of new veterans. This population is largely younger than age 34, a time for establishing self-identity, careers, and relationships (Brown, 2009). Speak to the needs of this group and the respective needs of each target audience. If you are unsure about what is important to younger veterans, host a focus group to gather information that could help your HVRP reach this group of veterans. When talking with

employers, refer to the bottom line. When talking with community-based organizations, describe how working together can be mutually beneficial.

Address fears and concerns of the target audience.

Debunking urban myths and distinguishing fact from fiction can prevent alarm or uncertainty from becoming barriers to action.

Based on media hype over the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among veterans and violence in the workplace, prospective employers may have misconceptions or misgivings about hiring veterans. Explain to employers that veterans bring many positive traits to the workplace, including loyalty, reliability, discipline, productivity, and good team-building and communication skills. Furthermore, point out that research indicates that fewer than 15 percent of OEF/OIF veterans screen positive for PTSD (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.).

Similar education efforts can be used to engage veterans experiencing homelessness who may be wary of services. For example, one in four female veterans report having experienced military sexual trauma (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). These women may avoid services provided in Veterans Affairs facilities and other settings where large numbers of men are present. Outreach efforts for this population should include a description of how services are provided and by whom.

Meet people “where they are.” The physical location of target audiences informs where outreach efforts are conducted, but the mindset of the target audience can determine the success of those efforts.

Obvious locations to conduct outreach activities for veterans experiencing homelessness are emergency shelters, food pantries, VA medical facilities, and Stand Downs. Other locations may not attract large numbers of veterans, but still may allow opportunity to interact with specific subsets of that population. For example,

women who do not self-identify as veterans despite experience in the military may visit any number of community-based organizations that serve women, such as public health clinics, domestic violence shelters, and child care providers. Including the judgment-free question of “Have you ever been in the military?” on intake forms at those establishments will help identify individuals who may be eligible for HVRP services.

Veteran-specific events such as Stand Downs can heighten awareness of HVRP among community-based organizations. Engagement of these organizations, however, is likely to occur only when their leaders and representatives fully grasp HVRP goals and expected outcomes. This knowledge can best be conveyed through regular and consistent interaction, perhaps at weekly meetings of local service providers.

Speak the same language. In its literal sense, this tip refers to understanding and properly using the vocabulary of an intended audience. Figuratively, “speak the same language” conveys a sharing of similar beliefs and opinions.

Veterans belong to a speech community that is different from the speech communities of employers and of community-based organizations. A speech community is “a group of people who use the same variety of a language and who share specific rules for speaking and for interpreting speech (Nordquist, n.d.).” The phrases of one speech community may not be common to another speech community. For example, veterans seeking to update their resumes should be aware of and appropriately use keywords that employers use to electronically search for desired skills. Veterans should also avoid using military terms and acronyms in their resumes because such terms are unfamiliar to most people outside the military speech community and will mean little to potential employers. When speaking to each target audience, correctly use language that resonates with that speech community.

Involve peers in outreach activities to ensure the sharing of similar beliefs and opinions. Veterans will likely find common ground with staff who have military experience or who have experienced homelessness themselves.

Employers will listen closely to someone with business expertise, and a local employer who is also a veteran can be impactful in speaking to other employers about the benefits of hiring veterans. Leaders of community-based organizations will relate to an individual who is or has been directly involved with a not-for-profit/nonprofit or charitable organization.

Fine-tune the message and its delivery. Dwindling attention spans amongst the general population means you have 8 seconds to capture someone’s interest virtually and up to 5 minutes during live interaction. Thus, outreach efforts must be concise and impactful.

Many OEF and OIF veterans belong to Generation Y, which has become accustomed to “prompt, speedy outcomes and gratification in every interaction and exchange (Brown, 2009).” This group also relies heavily on smartphones and social networking. Sharing success stories through social media outlets can be an effective and efficient strategy for piquing the curiosity of someone who may benefit from HVRP. (The increasing use of mobile devices requires that any virtual outreach efforts be suitably user-friendly. Consider using images, rather than text, which are processed far more quickly by our brains.) For business people and leaders of community-based organizations, share success stories that appeal to their problem-solving nature.

Reach out regularly. If the “squeaky wheel gets the grease,” then the consistent outreach coordinator gets the target audience’s attention.

Share the goal or expected outcomes of HRVP with members of the community, organizations, and employers regularly, but don’t wear out your welcome with constant contact and interruptions. Schedule meetings with employers that fit into their busy schedules. This way, you keep HRVP on their radar without becoming an unwelcome intrusion.

When using email or social media to share HRVP news, keep in mind that over half of individuals of ages 18 to 24 check their phone at least every 30 minutes (Microsoft Canada, 2015). Recommended frequency of posting to Facebook is 5 to 10 posts per week; for

Twitter, three tweets per day is suggested (Lee, 2014). Regardless of the rate at which you choose to reach out through electronic means, be sure to maintain consistency.

Connect with your local coordinated entry process.

Across the country, Continuums of Care are designing and implementing entry systems that are gateways to housing and services for all people experiencing homelessness. HVRPs should make sure they are part of the conversation about how veterans seeking assistance will get to the HVRP. (See information from the September 9, 2014, NVTAC webinar, available at <http://www.nchv.org/images/uploads/Webinar-Coordinated%20Assessment%209-25-14-Final.pdf>).

Develop a marketing plan. HVRPs should develop a plan (whether formal or informal, prepared in-house or by a consultant) for reaching out to each target audiences, the methods to be used, and the materials that will support the effort. As an example of the latter, HVRP brochures should be designed to be aesthetically pleasing, but cost effective. Do not crowd a lot of information into a bi-fold brochure at the expense of white space. If certain information fluctuates regularly, consider using a brochure insert, which can be updated at far less cost and in less time than a whole brochure. The plan should also identify website information that will appeal to veterans who are homeless versus employers versus other target audiences.

References

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