



Outreach Strategies



WHAT WORKS?

Research at Your Fingertips—1

OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Values and principles, worker stances/characteristics, and goals of outreach are important factors in outreach programs that engage individuals who are not served or are underserved by existing agencies (Ericson & Page, 1999). Successful street outreach workers and programs possess characteristics that are critical in creating a relationship between clients and workers. Cultural competency is one of the key components of effective outreach programs, and staff members need to demonstrate an ability to work across ethnicity, gender, lifestyle, and age spectrums. Successful outreach workers tend to be flexible, committed, creative, and resourceful; hold realistic expectations; and have a sense of humor (Able-Peterson & Bucy, 1993; Huskey, Deen, & Parker, 2010; Olivet, McGraw et al, 2010).

In addition to these characteristics, staff must be knowledgeable about their target audience and how to best reach them. The Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) seeks to assist veterans who are homeless gain employment, but what are their aspirations, values, and fears? What type of support services do they access, if any? Existing literature offers information about veteran demographics and effective outreach strategies for reaching different populations of veterans.

Understanding Target Audiences

Younger veterans. Veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, a population becoming homeless sooner than previous groups of new veterans, are primarily younger than age 29 (Fairweather, 2006; Brown, 2009). Veterans in that age demographic belong to the so-called "Generation Y," which is the largest percentage of adults engaging in social networking and using smartphones (Pew Research Center, 2015; eMarketer, 2013).

Combining text messaging and social network sites with traditional media can be an effective way to communicate with veterans (Greendlinger & Spadoni, 2010), and using handheld smart phones to access electronic records can improve coordination of services (Olivet, Bassuk et al., 2010).

Female veterans. The number of women engaged in military service and entering the ranks of veterans is increasing. Women represent nearly 15 percent of today's active duty military and 18 percent of guard and reserve forces; they serve in every branch of the military; and there are 2.2 million living women veterans. Research shows that female veterans are two to four times more likely than females who are non-veterans to be homeless (Gamache et al., 2003), are more likely to find information on available services to be limited, and may fail to self-identify as veterans (The National Center of Family Homelessness, 2013; Foster & Vince, 2009). The authors of one article recommend addressing these issues by creating partnerships with community-based organizations that serve women, such as child care providers, domestic violence shelters, public health clinics, and juvenile justice social workers. They also encourage the inclusion of judgement-free questions regarding military history on intake forms used by community-based organizations (Greendlinger & Spadoni, 2010).

Veterans with behavioral health disorders. As many as one-third of veterans have screened at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and one-quarter have been diagnosed with some form of traumatic brain injury (TBI) (Clervil, Grandin, & Greendlinger, 2010). Both conditions can strongly impact the ability of veterans to obtain and keep employment; so to enrich outreach efforts, it is useful to provide information about PTSD and TBI to veterans and prospective employers (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans' Employment & Training Service, undated, *Hiring veterans*), and to facilitate the establishment of employment supports for veterans in the workplace (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015; Peace at Work, 2015). However, it is also important to remember that homeless male veterans who have psychiatric disorders tend to have more personal resources compared to non-veteran males who are homeless,

including functional childhood backgrounds and family experiences, higher education, military pensions, prior job training, and access to VA hospitals and satellite clinics. Studies have also found that homeless veterans have fewer behavioral problems than homeless nonveterans, although they have higher rates of alcohol dependence and abuse. This information can be useful when providing outreach to veterans who are homeless and when tailoring employment programs to their needs and backgrounds (Tessler et al., 2002)

Veterans who are incarcerated. Community-based employment programs, such as HVRP, may find it difficult to provide outreach and link incarcerated veterans to services. However, specialized outreach services appear to be modestly effective in linking veterans who become incarcerated with VA health care services. Although it is clinically challenging to link this group with services, the fact that the rate of current substance use is lower during incarceration may provide a window of opportunity for developing linkages between inmates and community rehabilitative services, thus increasing the likelihood of helping them find employment after release (McGuire et al., 2003).

Delivering Your Message

The goal of HVRP—assisting veterans who are homeless gain employment—must be broadcast widely, clearly, and consistently so the message is heard, understood, and reinforced. Cultivating brand recognition can help equate “HVRP” to “employment assistance” in the minds of both veterans and service providers.

Cast a wide net. The more people hear about HVRP, the more people will talk about HRVP. Share the goals, eligibility requirements, and expected outcomes of HRVP with everyone who works with veterans to not only create a ripple effect of awareness in the community, but to also open up sources of referral and opportunities (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2014, *Community Collaboration*). Establish working and referral relationships with a variety of service providers, such as Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, Disabled Veterans Outreach

Program, transitional housing programs, day service programs, local coalitions that address veterans' issues, Department of Corrections, public health clinics, etc. (Greendlinger & Spadoni, 2010).

Engage peers. HVRP has long valued employees with lived experiences. In programs across the country, it is common for staff to include veterans who were formerly homeless. Individuals formerly experiencing homelessness know where to find prospective clients and are often able to easily develop trust and rapport with them (Erickson & Page, 1999; Kraybill, 2002; Kraybill & Olivet, 2005; Olivet, Bassuk et al., 2010). Staff members who are veterans or otherwise associated with the military bring personal networks and lend credibility (Greendlinger & Spadoni, 2010; National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2007). A study of peer-driven outreach found unexpected responsiveness of injection drug users (IDUs) to outreach efforts. Preliminary results suggest that: 1) peer outreach appears to be more robust than traditional intervention in recruiting IDUs, perhaps because peers better reflect the surrounding community; and, 2) education by peers outperforms that of the traditional intervention by a factor of about 30 percent (Broadhead et al., 1995). Although there is little empirical evidence that individuals with lived experience deliver superior outreach services, it is also true that peers do not deliver inferior services (Solomon, 2004).

Tailor the message to the audience. The average human attention span has dwindled over the years to its current 8 seconds, which leaves little room for extraneous information (Microsoft Canada, 2015). To engage the targeted audience, the message must not only be concise and up-to-date, but also relevant to that audience. For example, to demonstrate cultural competence, hire staff members with direct experience with the military in addition to training all staff on the attitudes, values, norms, and practices that characterize military life (Greendlinger & Spadoni, 2010). Helping veterans relate the relevance of military skills to civilian tasks is a specific example of how this insight can be beneficial. It is also important to be familiar with the language of employers; for example, veterans seeking to update their resumes should know the keywords that employers use to electronically search for desired skills (Goldfarb, 2015).

Share real success stories. During a focus group exploring best practices at the 2014 National Coalition for Homeless Veterans Annual Conference, an experienced HVRP grantee noted that sharing personal narratives of veterans who have been helped is very effective in bringing veterans and community providers on board (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2014, *Community Collaboration*). This same strategy is useful for engaging funders, politicians, and policy-makers (Erickson & Page, 1999).

Choose the proper tool for delivering the message. Websites, e-mail marketing, social media, and in-person events are regarded among nonprofit organizations as the most important communication tools for meeting community engagement goals, with media relations and print marketing regarded as somewhat important (Miller, 2014). Regardless of the preferred tool, audiences must be met “where they are” (Fisk et al., 1999). The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (2014, 2007) recommends connecting with veterans who are homeless by facilitating the regular availability of Disabled Veteran Outreach Program Specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives at emergency shelters; regularly visiting places where veterans or persons who are homeless congregate, such as Veterans Administration medical facilities and church programs; and participating in Stand Downs. (For a list of scheduled Stand Downs, go to <http://www.va.gov/homeless/events.asp>). The Coalition also recommends connecting with service providers by securing a standing invitation to attend their weekly team meetings, participating in job and resource fairs, building on previous professional relationships, tapping into existing networks of service providers, and coordinating local mini-Stand Downs.

Connecting with Your Community

Getting the word out to veterans who are homeless about the availability of HVRP services is one aspect of outreach; equally important, however, is establishing ties within the community. Building relationships with numerous and diverse agencies and programs will multiply outreach efforts and can ultimately better meet the needs of veterans who are homeless (Erickson & Page, 1999; National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2007).

Extend outreach to all. Be thorough when building relationships in the community. According to Erickson and Page (1999), “Survival depends upon community networking: providing referrals, sharing resources, pooling knowledge, and participating in community-wide groups.” Partners deemed essential to this process include:

- **United States Department of Labor, veteran’s Employment and Training Service:** HVRP, Disabled Veteran’s Outreach Program Specialists, Local Veterans Employment Representatives, online employment resources
- **United States Department of Veterans Affairs:** Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Compensated Work Therapy, Homeless Veteran Community Employment Services.
- **Social Security Administration:** Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, employment assistance services for disabled workers
- **State** vocational rehabilitation and local workforce development services offices
- **Veterans service organizations:** The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, etc.
- **Coalitions and affinity groups** that address veterans’ issues and/or homelessness
- **Local Continuum of Care member agencies**
- **Faith-based organizations and ecumenical councils**
- **Local chapters of national organizations:** Volunteers of America, Salvation Army, Goodwill, United Way, etc. (Greendlinger & Spadoni, 2010; National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2010 & 2007)

Fostering communication and collaboration among these essential partners is an ongoing and pressing activity and can be accomplished by maintaining constant contact with existing and potential partners through an established schedule of phone contacts

and visitations. Memoranda of understanding and other formal commitments from partners will ensure that expectations are clear to all. (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2007)

Think outside the box. Several HRVP grantees profiled as best practices in employee assistance programs use innovative approaches to outreach. For example, People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) in Los Angeles created a “one-stop shopping center” of 20 community-based organizations and social service agencies for people experiencing homelessness, called PATHMall. Clients may initially visit PATHMall for its free medical clinic or beauty salon, but while there, they are introduced to a full-service employment agency. Another program operates a Mobile Education Center to help connect with veterans in rural areas. (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2007)

Thinking outside of the box does not have to be large in scope. Innovation can be as modest as establishing an online network of partners, legislators, and other community members that helps publicize services. Or it could be working with the local office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development to more easily identify eligible clients by color-coding its Homeless Management Information System. (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2014, *Eligibility Education*)

Another article by the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (2007) suggests uniting with agencies that work with individuals who are not homeless, but may run a high risk of becoming homeless. In several areas, local jails allow outreach workers to help inmates prepare for discharge by explaining employment services that are available to them. The Coalition recommends considering strategies not typically considered to be outreach, but that nonetheless promote good will toward the program. For instance, providing an emergency cell phone number to local agencies is a win-win: agencies can link veterans to assistance immediately and the HVRP benefits from a 24-hour opportunity for referrals.

Educate the masses. Successful HVRP grantees agree that how well the community is informed makes a big difference in the outreach success of a program.

A publication from the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (2014, *Eligibility Education*) recommends sharing the goal or expected outcomes of the HRVP with organizations, employers, and community members as frequently as possible. The degree to which they need to understand operational details depends heavily on their role, but all must understand the basic eligibility requirement of veteran homelessness. The importance of educating company managers on the value of hiring

veterans is emphasized in a publication on lessons learned from the *100,000 Jobs Mission*, an initiative founded to promote veteran employment (Hall et al., 2014). This was reinforced by findings of a study from the Center for New American Security: more than half of the executives from leading corporations interviewed held negative images of veterans because of media coverage on PTSD (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Zoroya, 2013).

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