

How Communities Can Give Veterans The Opportunity to Become Civic Assets

By Jim Lorraine,
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Our goal at America's Warrior Partnership is to empower communities with the resources, knowledge and connections they need to holistically serve and support local veterans. This includes showcasing veterans as assets who can strengthen their homes, workplaces and their communities as a whole. The challenge in accomplishing this is that most people across the nation have a split perception of veterans within their community.

Got Your Six, a nonprofit dedicated to normalizing the depictions of veterans on film and television, regularly assesses how average civilians view veterans in their communities. The organization's research found that most veterans are perceived as both "broken" and "heroes" within their communities. However, there is the potential to shift these views to focus on the positive perceptions that can empower veterans.

One of the most encouraging findings from Got Your Six's research is that people are five times more likely to say post-9/11 veterans are strong leaders and valuable assets to their communities as opposed to comparable civilians. Civilians recognize veterans as outstanding individuals, and with the right support from local service providers, veterans can become tremendous assets who strengthen the communities around them.

To guide community organizations and local service providers towards offering better services and opportunities to warriors, our team conducts an annual survey measuring the strengths, needs, growth and satisfaction of veterans, their families and caregivers nationwide. Here are some of the key takeaways from this year's survey.

Veterans Seek Opportunities To Connect With and Give Back To Their Community

Many community leaders understandably believe that the most sought-after services by veterans are related to urgent matters, such as housing or healthcare.

While these kind of urgent resources are critically important, they are not the areas where the majority of veterans are seeking assistance.

For two years in a row, our survey has found that the resources veterans seek out are primarily focused around opportunities to connect with their community. More specifically, this year the survey revealed that:

- **55.9 percent of veterans seek greater opportunities for recreational or other physical activities;**
- **48 percent of veterans seek greater opportunities to connect with other military service members, veterans, and families/caregivers; and**
- **39.8 percent of veterans seek volunteer opportunities.**

Overall, one in five warriors are looking for either a connection to other military members, families, recreational activities or simply ways to continue serving in a civilian capacity through volunteerism. Service providers that can guide veterans towards ways to connect with and give back to the community will help strengthen the outlook and satisfaction of local veterans, while also tapping into dedicated individuals ready to strengthen their community.

Proactive Outreach and Frequent Contact Are Essential

In addition to assessing the type of resources veterans are seeking, our survey investigated the most effective means of engaging veterans. The results found that, on average, twice as many veterans seeking resources within the communities we surveyed were engaged through outreach efforts as opposed to walk-ins. In short, veteran-serving organizations that employ proactive outreach strategies are reaching far more warriors in need than those that wait for veterans to come to them.

Another key finding from our survey was that nearly 25 percent of veterans reported they felt a sense of wellbeing within the first three months of engaging with a community organization. The number of veterans who experienced this wellbeing skyrocketed to 75 percent after three months of engagement with a community organization. In other words, service providers not only have to be proactive in reaching out to veterans, but also diligent in establishing long-term relationships that help veterans feel like they belong in the community.

Communities Are Showing Positive Momentum

America's Warrior Partnership works with several affiliate communities located throughout the nation, and we share the findings of our annual survey with them every year.

Local service providers, nonprofits and other organizations within our affiliate communities have taken these findings to heart.

After a year of emphasizing proactive outreach frequent contact and opportunities for recreation, volunteerism and networks, we've seen many positive increases in veterans' perception of their place within their community. This year's survey found that:

- **36 percent of veterans actively participate in community events, as opposed to 30 percent last year;**

- **Veterans' perception that they can thrive in their community increased by 8 percent year over year; and**

- **81 percent of veterans feel they have the resources they need within their community, as opposed to 75 percent last year.**

These communities are already moving in the right direction to offer veterans the best support possible. With this insight into the resources veterans seek and the methods of engagement that are most successful, more service providers and organizations can follow this lead to empower local warriors so they feel like they belong in the community and have the opportunity to continue serving as civic assets to their families, friends and neighbors.

About the Author

Jim Lorraine is President and CEO of America's Warrior Partnership, a national non-profit that helps veteran service organizations connect with veterans, military members and families in need. Learn more about the organization at www.AmericasWarriorPartnership.org

