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Impacts of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program on Post-9/11 Disabled Military Veterans, Their Families, and Their Communities

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Introduction

The Mission Continues, a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 2007, challenges veterans discharged after September 11, 2001, to continue to serve their country as civic servants after their time in the military has ended. The Mission Continues' flagship Fellowship Program provides disabled veterans with stipends to serve as volunteers at nonprofit—typically social service, youth, or veterans'—organizations. This study focuses on the first cohort of post-9/11 disabled veterans to complete the program and assesses participants' perceptions of personal, social, and family impacts of the program.

Research Question and Methods

The impact of civic service in the United States has been studied mainly from the perspective of the volunteer.¹ However, research among older adults suggests that participation in civic service has benefits and challenges that extend beyond the individual to their families and communities.² In this study, we examine how participation in the Fellowship Program affects veterans' personal growth, values and beliefs, effectiveness, sense of community connectedness, family life, and relationships using a self-administered, standardized survey given after program completion.^{3, 4}

The first cohort consists of all 52 veterans who completed the Fellowship Program between June 2007 and December 2010. We offered no incentive for participation in the web-based postsurvey, and the response rate was 52% (N = 27). Survey participants do not differ demographically from nonparticipants.

Findings

Participant Characteristics

Fellowship program participants included in this study are United States military veterans discharged after September 11, 2001, who report having a service-connected disability. They tend to be younger than age 35 (67%), Caucasian (67%), and male (83%). Geographically, fellows are dispersed among twelve states and represent four regions of the country (i.e., West, Central, South, and Northeast). Fifteen percent live in rural areas.

Personal Impact

Personal growth through civic service. Eighty-two percent of study participants reported that the Fellowship Program exposed them to new ideas and ways of seeing the world, 64% reexamined their beliefs and attitudes about themselves, 59% learned more



about the “real” world, 46% did things they never thought they could do, and 64% changed some of their beliefs and attitudes.

Self-truths: Values and beliefs. Ninety-five percent of fellows believe that they have important skills to pass along to others, 81% say that many people come to them for advice, 71% report that they feel other people need them, 81% enjoy teaching things to others, and 81% feel that they have had a good influence on the lives of many people. Nearly all program participants (95%) believe that others would say they have made a contribution to society.

Social Impacts

Personal effectiveness of community service. All participants stated that The Mission Continues Fellowship Program allowed them to make a contribution to their communities. More than three quarters reported that they felt like part of a community, and all fellows said they believe they made a difference in the life of at least one person.

Local civic efficacy. In addition to developing a sense of community connectedness through service, many participants perceived that they could influence local government decisions to meet a range of community needs (Figure 1).

Grassroots efficacy. Fellows also exercised leadership within their neighborhoods. Most study participants reported feeling competent in their ability to organize programs and events to benefit their communities (Figure 2).

Community-based activism. While some fellows participated in community events or joined advocacy organizations in support of causes, only a few shared their personal opinions in public forums (Figure 3).

Engagement in the political process. On average, about half reported being politically active by learning about candidates or ballots before voting, keeping informed about local or national news, and voting in local elections (Figure 4).

Sense of community connectedness. Seventy-seven percent of participants reported feeling that they have the ability to make a difference in their communities, more than half (55%) often discuss and think about how political and social issues affect their communities, 68% are aware of what can be done to meet the important needs in their community, and 76% try to make a positive difference in their communities. Sixty-eight percent reported having a strong attachment to their communities.

Family Impacts

Enriching family life. Although the Fellowship Program does not target family involvement as a program outcome, 82% of participants reported that their families were pleased with their involvement. Even though many (64%) reported that they spent less time with their families because of the program, fellows also reported that they earned extra money (59%) and brought resources, information, and new skills to their families (59%). Other reported effects of the program include involving family members in volunteering (41%),

Figure 1. Local Civic Efficacy (N = 27)

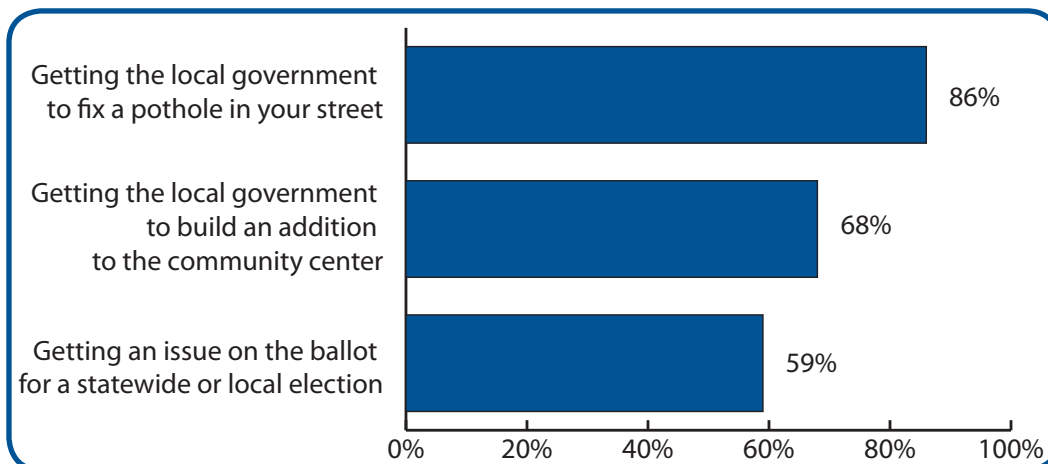


Figure 2. Grassroots Efficacy (N = 27)

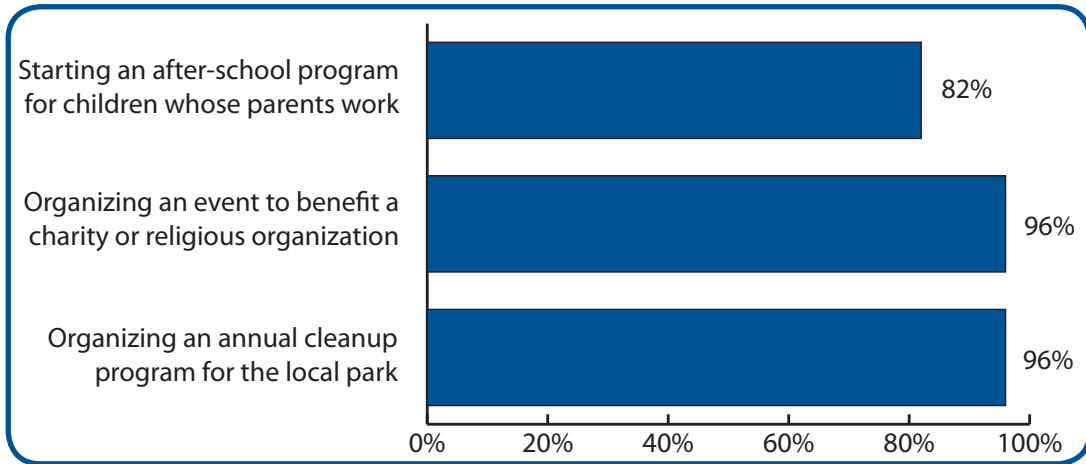


Figure 3. Community-Based Activism (N = 27)

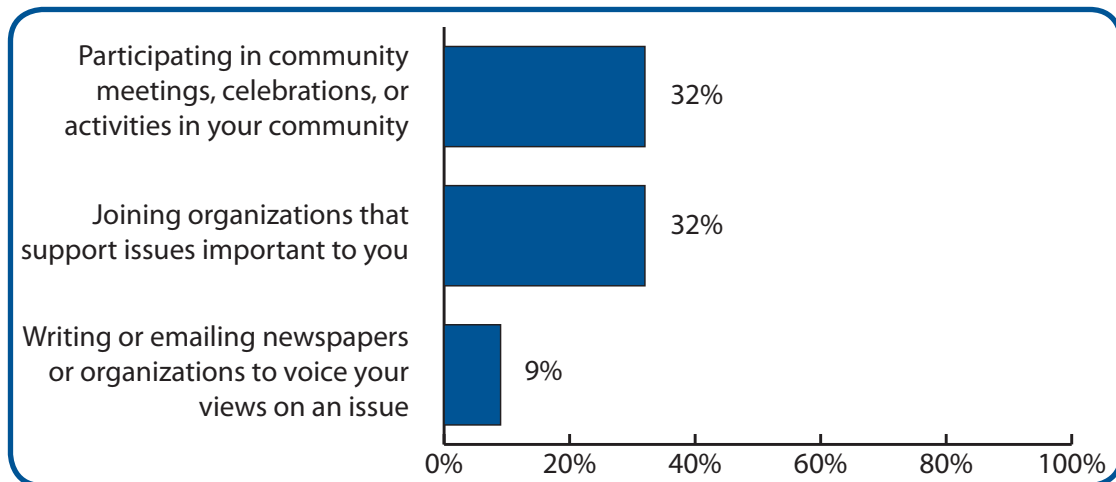
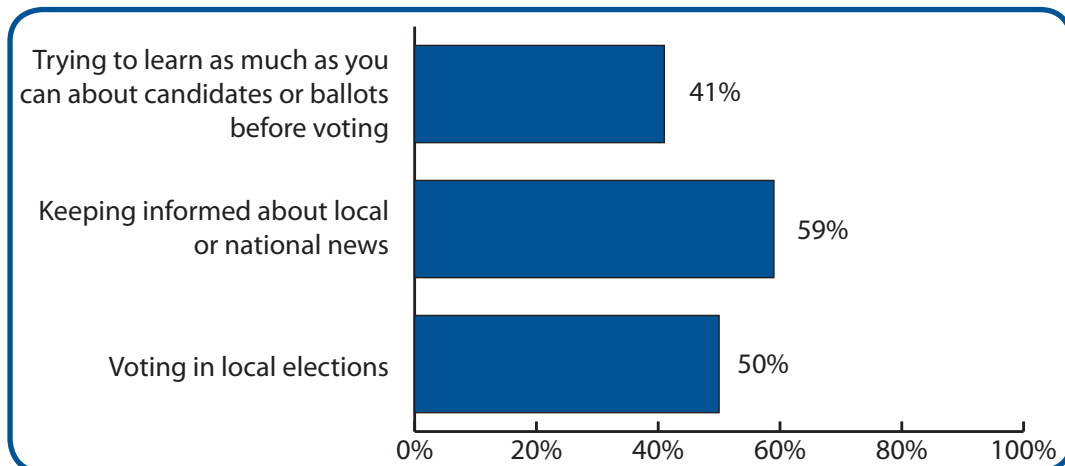


Figure 4. Engagement in the Political Process (N = 27)



becoming more aware of social and community issues (36%), and becoming more socially active (32%). Some fellows also reported that their involvement lessened their families' concerns about them (27%).

Strengthening relationships. Half (50%) of the study participants reported that the fellowship improved their relationships or communication with their families, 59% reported that they set an example for their families and children by participating in the program, and 68% reported that their families were proud of them.

Veterans' perceptions of impact. Three quarters of participants rated their contribution to the welfare and well-being of others as excellent, very good, or good. Some fellows reported pursuing the fellowship to help themselves, their families, other veterans, and their communities.

- » “I wanted to do something for my child, I needed to feel needed...a reason to get out of the house and so it happens that they reached out to me.”
- » “A perfect [way] for me to help other vets.”
- » “To contribute to society.”
- » “To figure out where I was going with my life.”

Many participants reported feeling that their lives had changed.

- » “I have opened up to a lot of people... I have become more sociable and more happy since volunteering...it has opened up a new path for me in my life!”
- » “Since my fellowship I have become a different person. I took a big risk with The Mission Continues and every day that risk is paying off.”

Summary and Implications

Participating in The Mission Continues Fellowship Program has many positive personal, social, and family effects. Fellows gain experience with purpose-driven civic service activities that promote reflection and awareness of their impact on their own lives, the lives of others, and their communities. Effects extend to their families and relationships, even though some noted that fellowship activities were stressful and took time away from their families.

The Fellowship Program fosters a strong sense of citizen leadership by engaging fellows with their communities and building their confidence to serve as citizen leaders after completing their military careers.

Overall, study participants perceived that The Mission Continues Fellowship Program brought about positive personal changes and improvements in their social and family relationships. However, the postsurvey design and small sample size limit the conclusions we can make about long-term impacts and our ability to generalize findings beyond this cohort.

Researchers must obtain input from program beneficiaries (e.g., individuals, families, host organizations, and communities) in the future to form a more comprehensive impact analysis of the civic engagement of veterans. Nevertheless, this research suggests that returning disabled veterans find meaning, purpose, and direction from participation in nonprofit-sponsored civic service programs. Fellows perceived that their service added value to their communities and that their families were strengthened because of the fellowship.

Participating in civic service programs such as The Mission Continues can have significant impacts on the lives of disabled post-9/11 veterans, future veterans, families, and communities.

Endnotes

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