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The Mission Continues: Reexamining Engagement of Post-9/11 Veterans in Civic Service

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Introduction

The Mission Continues is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with the goal of ensuring veterans' successful transition back to civilian life. Through the organization's Fellowship Program, each post-9/11 veteran participant receives a stipend to complete a six-month volunteer post at a nonprofit organization. Leadership and service focuses on local issues, such as at-risk youth education, wildlife conservation, disaster preparedness, and homelessness prevention, adding much-needed capacity and expertise to the nonprofit sector.

While most veterans who served on active duty after September 11, 2001, are proud of their service (96%), and a majority (74%) report that their military experience has helped them get ahead in life, 44% say their readjustment to civilian life has been difficult. By contrast, only 25% of veterans who served before 9/11 say the same.¹ The Mission Continues endorses continued civic service as an innovative approach to facilitate improved readjustment outcomes for post-9/11 veterans.

Since 2007, more than 750 veterans have served more than 500 nonprofit organizations in 46 states and the District of Columbia. In 2011, we reported on

the first cohort (N = 52) of veterans to complete the program between 2007 and 2010.²⁻⁴ This study focuses on the second cohort of post-9/11 veterans who began the program in 2011 or 2012 and assesses their characteristics, perceived impacts on professional and career development, history of civic engagement, and motivation for pursuing the fellowship.

Research Question and Methods

Our initial studies of disabled post-9/11 veterans who participated in the Fellowship Program find high rates of personal growth, educational and vocational achievement, continued service and leadership, program satisfaction, and community and social impacts from civic service.²⁻⁴ However, subsequent outcomes differ because The Mission Continues no longer requires that participants have a documented disability. Therefore, ongoing program and outcome evaluations are needed.

The second cohort consists of 414 fellows who began the program between January 2011 and October 2012. As with the first cohort, we used a self-administered, standardized postsurvey to measure outcomes but added a presurvey to the study design for this new cohort. We examine the degree to which participation in the program impacts veterans' physical health,



mental health, psychosocial well-being, educational outcomes, employment, and continued civic service. The response rate for completing the presurvey within one month of starting the program was 99% (N = 414) of the 420 total fellows.

To control for sample bias, we offered no incentive to participate in the web-based surveys. For this study, we excluded those who did not complete their fellowships (n = 11), participants whose fellowships continued past the survey cutoff date of December 31, 2012 (n = 171), and nonresponses to the postsurvey (n = 46). Therefore, 46% (N = 192) of the second cohort are included.

Findings

Participant Characteristics

All fellows are United States military veterans honorably discharged after September 11, 2001, after a minimum of 24 months of military service, unless a serious injury prevented their continued service. Eighty-one percent served in Iraq, Afghanistan, or both, and the majority served on multiple tours. Most fellows are younger than age 35 (74%), Caucasian (51%), and male (67%). Thirty-seven percent report being married, and 54% report having children. Geographically, almost all states are represented with nearly 85% of fellows living in urban or suburban areas.

Mental Health, Physical Health, and Well-Being

Permanent and severe disabilities, such as traumatic brain injury (TBI), major depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), adversely affect fellows' social, occupational, and interpersonal functioning. Twenty-three percent of the second cohort were diagnosed or treated for TBI. Twenty-seven percent screened positive for depression at the beginning of the program, while 13% did so after completing the program. More than half screened positive for PTSD with little change in the symptom rating before (55%) and after (53%) the fellowship.

With regard to overall health status, approximately three quarters of veterans rated their health as excellent, very good, or good before (73%) and after (79%) the fellowship, much lower ratings than that of the general population (84%).⁵ However, after

completing the program, 40% rated their health status as somewhat better or much better than it was before the fellowship.

Perceived Impact on Professional Development

The Fellowship Program affects the professional lives of veterans positively. After completing the program, 69% furthered their education, 74% transferred military skills to civilian employment, 61% built networking opportunities for a future career path, and 60% obtained employment. Fellows reported that the program helped them improve their job performance (90%), chances of getting a promotion (86%), and chances of finding a job (90%) and encouraged them to make a career change (82%).

Participants also reported that the program helped them become leaders within their communities (85%), teach the value of service to others (92%), and sustain a role of service within their communities (90%). Ninety percent of fellows reported that participation in the program increased their likelihood of engaging in future volunteering and public service activities, and nearly all participants (97%) would recommend The Mission Continues Fellowship Program to a friend or family member.

Participants' History of Civic Engagement

Over half (56%) of program fellows were civically engaged before joining the military, and slightly more continued to volunteer in their communities (67%) after participating in the program. The majority (87%) of those who continue to serve after completing their fellowships do not receive monetary stipends for their work, and 30% serve an average of once a week. The most common types of activities involve serving at a veterans' organization (34%), providing social services (29%), or volunteering in an educational organization (19%).

Motivations to Join and Lasting Impacts

The most frequently reported (47%) motivator for joining The Mission Continues Fellowship Program is the opportunity to continue to serve. Fellows cited serving other veterans, providing a platform for civic service, or increasing the capacity of the host organization as reasons for participating.

“So that I could continue serving, only this time in my community”

“Perfect combination of 3 factors for me: allowed me to volunteer at a location that was perfect on-the-job training for what I am going to school for; allowed me to continue to work with soldiers, especially wounded soldiers; provided a small stipend for my time that helps pay the bills while going to school, working, and volunteering.”

“To allow me to help build strengthen the organization I am interning for in the hopes of one day being on staff, or at least being a part of its current and future successes.”

Almost one third (31%) reported pursuing the fellowship to address reintegration issues; for personal growth, meaning, and inspiration; and for a challenge.

“I felt that I was lacking something in my personal life. I thought it was important for me to be the kind of person that my son could look up to, not only because I have served in the military but that my service goes beyond that. I feel that I still have so much to offer those around me and I am glad I was able to find an organization that inspires me daily.

“To get my life going again. Get in the community and make a difference.”

“To be a part of something larger than myself, a new mission.”

After completing the program, fellows reported feeling rejuvenated (22%) and inspired to lead and serve others (13%).

“By participating in the Fellowship Program with the Mission Continues, I have gained a sense of determination to do things I never thought I could. I am inspired to make changes in my community, because I know that I can, with the help of my peers and fellow community members.”

“This program has also reinvigorated me into helping the veteran community. If I can instill the passion for public service in others like The Mission Continues did, then I feel that I have made a positive impact in this world. As veterans we protected our country by fighting in another. As a Mission Continues Fellow, I can still protect my country domestically by eradicating homelessness or mentoring a disadvantaged youth.”

Summary and Implications

The Mission Continues Fellowship Program provides a structured transition to employment, education, and continued service for post-9/11 veterans. While challenging returning veterans to continue to lead and serve in their home communities, the program impacts personal, professional, and social relationships positively.

The current study reveals noteworthy differences from previous findings.² First, the timing of each study coincides with discrete periods in the history of the Mission Continues: (1) launch from 2007 to 2010 and (2) a period of growth and program refinements between 2011 and 2012. The sampling frames in our 2010 study (N = 52) and the current study (N = 420) mirror this temporal and structural phenomena. Second, because Fellowship Program eligibility no longer requires veterans to have a documented disability, 14% of the second cohort to begin the program did not report a VA disability rating. The second cohort also is slightly younger and has more gender and ethnic diversity than the previous sample, largely because of program expansion and eligibility modifications.

Given this, we expected to observe variation in health outcomes. For example, fellows who reported being diagnosed or treated for a TBI decreased from 52% in the first cohort to 23% in the second sample. The percentages of fellows that screened positive at postsurvey for PTSD (64% of the first cohort vs. 53% of the second cohort) and depression (28% of the first cohort vs. 13% of the second cohort) also decreased.

Moreover, in the second cohort, a majority of veterans rated their current health status as improved after participating in the program (65% of the first cohort vs. 79% of the second cohort). However, these ratings are still well below the national average, in which 84% report health status as excellent, very good, or good.

Finally, the perception of positive and lasting impacts of the Fellowship Program is enduring. After completing the fellowship, many veterans reported starting a job, enrolling in school, or continuing to serve in their home communities at levels consistent with previous study findings. Most fellows believe that the program provided a direct link to lifestyle changes.

In summary, national dissemination of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program to all post-9/11 veterans appears to have increased the diversity of participants and the range of civic service opportunities. Because each veteran's transition from military to citizen leadership is unique, more strengths- and asset-based programs that maximize future potential are needed.

Limitations

The nonexperimental study design restricts conclusions that can be made regarding program impacts and these health outcomes. Therefore, study results cannot be attributed solely and definitely to the program because a number of other confounders exist. In particular, selection bias, attrition, and a change in timing of postsurvey delivery (i.e., the survey was given to the second cohort immediately after completion of the program, whereas the first cohort took it up to three years later) inhibit our ability to generalize findings beyond this group of post-9/11 veterans who participated in a veteran-specific civic service program. Future studies with more rigorous designs would establish the program's efficacy and determine its long-term impact on veterans, their families, and their communities.

Nevertheless, this study suggests that nonprofit-sponsored civic service programs can maximize returning veterans' success as community leaders by increasing access to and providing funding for high-quality service opportunities. The capacity of governmental and nonprofit agencies continues to be insufficient and lacks an integrated model for service delivery for veterans.

Conclusions

Civic service has great potential for reengaging post-9/11 veterans in a new mission at home. Organizations such as The Mission Continues offer a conduit for returning veterans to engage with other veterans and their communities, cultivate career and life aspirations, and impact the communities in which they serve.

Endnotes

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