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# Participation in Veteran Organizations

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# **Participation in Veteran Organizations**

**By**

**Kevin M. Beaudry BSW**

**MSW Clinical Research Paper**

**Presented to the Faculty of the**

**School of Social Work**

**St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas**

**St. Paul, Minnesota**

**In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of**

**Master of Social Work**

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**The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.**

### **Abstract**

Half of the 2.6 million veterans identify difficulty in transitioning back to civilian life after deployment (Chandrasekaren, 2014). With at least twenty percent of OEF/OIF veterans returning being diagnosed with PTSD and or Depression the need for connection to reduce isolation is high (Tanielian, Jaycox, 2008). Additionally, participation in Veteran Service Organizations like the VFW and American Legion are down over thirty percent (Montgomery, 2014). This project works to identify what is working in some of the Minneapolis and St. Paul posts to increase participation and what might be interfering with participation members. The study was conducted by talking with leaders in posts about the outreaches they are doing for veterans. Recruitment of active military, discounted membership, and integration of OEF/OIF veterans in transitioning the building were discovered as ways to increase participation. Whereas, the bar, misconception of benefits, and privacy laws were seen as interfering with participation increase.

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## **Introduction**

Currently, our veteran population consists of 21.8 million men and women. Of that 2.6 million of them served in either Iraq or Afghanistan (Chandrasekaren, 2014). The Wilder Foundation and Washington Post conducted a survey of the 2.6 million veterans fifty percent stated that their transition back to civilian life was difficult, fifty-five percent of veterans stated that they have felt disconnected from civilian life, sixty-nine percent of veterans stated that the average American didn't understand their experience (Chandrasekaren, 2014). The struggle back to civilian life can be difficult. A survey showed 13.8 percent OEF/OIF veterans return with a PTSD diagnosis (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). Membership is down in the VFW from 2.1 million in 1992 to 1.3 million, additionally, the average age is almost seventy years old (Montgomery, 2014). Participation in groups such the VFW, IAVA, DAV, American Legion, or Veteran Student Organizations are made to help with transition, and to provide advocacy for its members.

## **Statement of the Problem**

After serving in combat at least twenty percent of OEF/OIF Veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD and or depression (Tanielian, Jaycox, 2008). VFW and American Legion posts have been closing in the twin cities due to lack of membership. VFW posts are down one third from their greatest strength (Shaw, 2008). These Veteran Service Organizations are in place to help the community they serve, and to help the veterans transition back into the community themselves. With numbers down the question remains: How can we get OEF/OIF veterans into these organizations to prevent them from isolating, which is one of defining symptoms of PTSD and depression. The purpose of this project is to collect best practices of

different organizations and their outreach methods, exploring possible ways to increase participation with the belief that participation will decrease isolation of veterans.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The definition of Veteran Service Organization for this paper includes any organization that serves veterans as a group that they can belong to. Operation Enduring Freedom/ Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) veterans are veterans that served in either Iraq or Afghanistan after 2001. Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) is a Veteran Service Organization nationwide that veterans can join and serve their community. The American Legion is another Veteran Service Organization that veterans have the ability to join and serve their community. Post 9/11 veterans are veterans that served in the military after Sep. 9, 2001. A mutual help group is a group where all members are seeking support, much like an Alcoholics Anonyms group.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Participation Helps Mental Health**

Participation in Veteran Service Organizations may be a way for this younger generation of veterans to connect, which assists with reducing incidence of PTSD, and isolation. A qualitative study on older active members of the VFW conducted in 2010 showed the importance that their organization offered in developing emotional support and meaningful activity (Leedahl, Koenig, & Ekerdt, 2011). This study looked at Veterans aged fifty-five and older, and did not assess benefits for veterans of the OEF/OIF era. No qualitative studies have been completed within the VFW for OEF/OIF veterans. The primary objective of this study was to show that the VFW was an effective resource for older Veterans to find connection.

## **Veterans Experience Isolation**

Several studies have been conducted looking at student veterans and their increased feelings of isolation. An instructional note created by an English teacher explored various outreach methods attempting to connect to student veterans. This study highlighted the importance of creating opportunity of sharing experiences, student veteran centers, and teamwork for veterans in transition (Crawley, 2013). Crawley looked into ways to develop closer connection for veterans specifically within his English class, and used methods he developed to connect. Methods used to connect included, writing about personal experiences and providing ability to share their story with others. A mixed methods study of ten student veterans showed social frustration, need for social support, lack of preparation to transition into civilian life, and need to better understand resources as struggles that student veterans were facing (Badger, McCuddy, & Olsen, December 2014). This study was limited to ten students, all within a small community and would need to be done on a larger scale for adaptability. It does not specify the need for Veteran Service Organizations and is presumed that adding Veteran Service Organizations would provide a vehicle to support students with these frustrations. A third phenomenological study looking at the lives of three student veterans and their transition from military service to becoming an undergraduate college student looked at themes needed in transition. The study unfolded three themes of student veterans essential to surviving the transition; adapting a civilian identity, educating the population, and comprehensive services for students (Jones, 2013). Jones comprehensive interview expressed the need of connectivity to the population as being integral, but did not specify a need to connect with other veterans through Veteran Service Organizations as being specifically important. A panel was conducted as a study for post 9-11 veterans showing that several veterans feel out of place while on campus or

experience a loss of camaraderie upon leaving the military feeling isolated (Osborn, 2014). This panel conducted was consisting of only a hand full of veterans at a single university campus, capturing only a small percentage of veterans' perspective. Additionally, when conducting a panel many of the perceived issues may not become apparent due to the public being present, and the pressure from school advisors being present. All articles articulated the importance of connecting and the feeling of isolation on campus. Student Veteran Service Organizations were suggested as a means to limit isolation in several of the articles, along with conducting cultural education for educators. No studies were discovered on strategies for increasing participation in veteran organizations on campus. Additionally, each study was conducted within one campus, rather than across several different schools, limiting the variance of learning environments.

### **Female Veterans Need Outreach**

Additionally, to the current problem of connecting to veterans on campuses to resources it is important to note that female veterans are becoming more prevalent increasing from only two percent of the force in 1973 to fourteen percent (Parker & Patten, 2011). Which amounts to more than 1.6 million female veterans (United States Census Bureau, 2012). With the smaller population of female veterans and gender stereotypes it can be difficult to spot female veterans on campuses and more difficult to connect them to services that may be available (Sander, 2012). Additionally, it may be difficult for female veterans to partake in services like the VFW that have historically have been referred to as boy's clubs. Outreach to this group is integral for a population that continues to increase as the military begins to take down divides in gender that have been established for so long.



### **Outreach Increases Participation**

Does outreach increase participation? A study conducted with the VA attempting to increase participation of Veterans Diagnosed with PTSD revealed that outreach through sending out mailing fliers and phone follow ups showed an increase participation from 7.1 percent to 23.73 percent (McFall, Malte, Fontana, & Rosenheck, 2000). This article was written prior to the beginning of the war era that the study focuses on. It does not show if veterans from the OEF/OIF era increase in participation through intervention, but looks at intervention working for veterans overall. No studies were conducted for veterans of the OEF/OIF era showing that participation can be increased by outreach.

### **Isolation Decreases through Participation**

Does isolation decrease through participation? Several studies have shown the connection between depressive symptomology and social isolation for the elderly populations. A longitudinal study done in Taiwan showed that elderly people who were involved in social activities exhibited fewer depressive symptoms prevalent in later life (Chiao, Weng, & Botticello, 2011). This study focused again on older adults rather than the younger OEF/OIF era. It also focused on the Taiwanese culture rather than that of America. A separate study done specifically for older veterans showed an increase in Hospitalization of four to five times higher for Veterans suffering from social isolation (Mistry, Rosansky, McGuire, McDermott, & Jarvik, 2001). Like the previous article it was limited to older adults. This article was also created prior to the OEF/OIF veteran era.

Mutual help groups have been proven to be effective means for establishing positive change among patients. In a literature review of mutual help groups overwhelming evidence for

the efficacy over individual therapy was shown for members of groups (Pistrang, Barker, & Humphreys, 2008). Although Veteran Service Organizations are not the same as mutual help groups it should be noted that much like mutual help groups, Veteran Service Organizations are composed of members that are frequently dealing with similar experiences and are in different stages of their development.

### **Barriers to Joining**

There are barriers to wanting to join Veteran service groups. A cross sectional survey was conducted to identify perceived barriers to therapy for veterans. The survey revealed “OEF/OIF veterans were significantly more likely than both Gulf War and Vietnam veterans to believe that coming to treatment means they are weak” (Garcia, et al., 2014). The article also stated that OEF/OIF veterans presented with higher barriers to talking in groups. No studies were conducted specifically looking at the factors for participation in Veteran Service Organizations. This article focused on identifying barriers to treatment, and could be similar to reasoning for veterans reasoning for avoiding Veteran Service Organizations.

### **Member Number Decline**

Data that has been collected on the overall numbers of veterans involved in Veteran Service Organizations is restricted to members on their individual websites. However, several news articles about the decline in Veteran Service Organizations participation show downward trends. The local Northfield MN newspaper reported that from 2010 to 2011 Minnesota membership decreased from 51,116 to 45,288; a decrease of more than twelve percent (Schier, 2011). The article also identified that only five posts statewide increased in membership during

this period, and six maintained membership. All other posts in the state of Minnesota showed a decline in membership.

Golden Valley's VFW post closed in 2015 due to financial constraints and membership decline. The article shown by KARE 11 news about Golden Valley's post cited that Nationwide the VFW has lost approximately 800,000 members in the last twenty years (Hrapsky, 2015). Neither of these two stories were done through empirical study. They represent the media's understanding as they talked to members at different closing posts, and took data from the VFW closed member website for the data that they represented.

## **Conclusion**

This study is looking to increase active participants in Veteran Service Organizations, not just member numbers. OEF/OIF veterans show an increase in susceptibility to isolation. They are in need of support, and that support has been shown to be at the VFW and American Legion for older veterans. Additionally, research has shown that OEF/OIF veterans have difficulty with transition from war. There is a correlation between involvement in organizations for OEF/OIF veterans and their ability to succeed. Participation is down in the VFW and American Legion. Posts are closing and membership numbers are down. There has also been an increase in female veterans, and there have historically been issues with providing a space for people that do not fit into the good old boys club. The question is formed in the lack of research for veterans of the OEF/OIF era. Can the VFW and American Legion support the OEF/OIF veterans in their transition providing a place to deal with symptoms of depression and isolation?

### **Research Question**

How does outreach affect participation among OEF/OIF veterans in Veteran Service Organizations?

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Systems Theory**

This research is exploratory in nature, aimed at gathering information from Veteran Service Organizations in an attempt to find a best practices to engage OEF/OIF veterans in participation at their organizations. Systems theory identifies a system as a set of elements that are orderly and interrelated to make a functional whole (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). With the lens of systems theory this project will look at different interacting systems and subsystems with a goal of discovering patterns with elements interacting with each other. The two systems that are being observed within the context of this research are OEF/OIF Veterans as a subsystem, and Veteran Service Organizations. The presumed functional role of these Veteran Service Organizations is to establish a place where veterans can receive support for PTSD and depression but will be further explored in interviews. With Veteran Service Organizations numbers in decline across most of the state the desired outcome is greater participation and homeostasis through identifying what works to return participation to previous numbers.

Furthermore, systems theory is about discovering patterns within society. This project will be using qualitative data to look at input from the Veteran Service Organizations to OEF/OIF veterans and will be receiving information on output in the form of participation done by the veterans. Questions from the interview are aimed at first understanding the variety of inputs for why a veteran may want to join the American Legion or VFW; what they perceive as

benefits from joining. Then it will begin to evaluate the inputs based on the feedback that is received from the organization based on the positive or negative feedback that is received.

By looking at the perceived positive feedback for individual posts which “involves a system receiving information about what it is doing correctly in order to maintain itself and thrive” the local posts that are interviewed can define what is working at one location and may have adaptability at another (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). Perceived negative feedback will also be assessed in ways that the organizations can “choose to correct any deviations or mistakes and return to a more homeostatic state” (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

Research was constructed around using qualitative methods. The research was aimed at understanding perceptions of barriers and working models of outreach for Veteran Service Organizations. This study is exploratory in nature and grounded theory was used to identify data as it emerged from the research. The interviews consisted of open ended questions aimed at gathering data on what has been effective and what has not been effective in gaining members and participators in their Veteran Service Organizations from the OEF/OIF veterans. No personal questions were asked preventing sensitive information from being divulged. Questions were aimed at gathering data for the organization that individuals volunteer for, outreach techniques used, efficacy of techniques used, perceived barriers, and ideas for future outreach. Questionnaire is attached in (Appendix D).

After conducting the interviews data was reviewed using open coding. Interviews were read and information was grouped under different concepts. Once information was coded it was processed to show frequency of concepts and grouped them under different categories of

practices that were seen to help in increase of participation and areas ideas that were not helping with participation. Patterns established in similarities through multiple interviews corresponds to understanding that there is a relationship in the connection. Conflicting data was compiled and explored.

### **Sample and Sample Recruitment**

Interviewees for this study were selected based on their knowledge of their Veteran Service Organization's outreaches and effects. Sample size consisted of eight Veteran Service Organization leaders or former leaders within the Saint Paul and Minneapolis areas.

Organizations targeted for interviews consisted of VFW, and American Legion. Organizations were notified prior to conducting interviews to provide releases prior to conducting interviews, and to gain permission for gathering information from individual organizations. Interviewees were required to have information on outreaches used in the past and participation levels. Individuals that had not been with the organization for at least one year were passed up for interviews due to lack of contributable information for the study.

Recruitment for the study was done by calling organizations within the Ramsey County, Hennepin County, and Dakota County areas and asking to interview someone that met the qualifications for the data to be relevant. After identifying that they were appropriate participants for the study individuals were contacted by phone and then given an information sheet to explain confidentiality and the purpose of the study (Appendix A). As part of the study, organizations advocates will be given information collected for best practices for outreach of OEF/OIF veterans to impact member numbers positively after research was completed. The VFW and American Legion state advocates were also emailed for permission to interview at the local level prior to conducting interviews and consent was established in (Appendix B). When

calling each local organization, telephone transcript in (Appendix C) was used to identify the nature of the research and that the research was for the Graduate social work program at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine's University. They were informed that their identity will remain confidential.

Interviews were conducted in organizations that resided in Ramsey County, Dakota County, or Hennepin County. Not all local organizations were able to or willing to participate in the study due to identified time constraints. Positions held in authority positions do not delineate being a member of the organization or the payroll. Due to limited diversity of participant's gender or ethnicity and its impact on identifying possible participants, a description of the demographics of the participants was not included in the research information and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Prior to conducting research the Institutional Review Board for Saint Catherine University reviewed and approved the project proposal. Questions were aimed at organizational tactics to improve participation rather than personal questions. Upon meeting participants will sign release forms prior to conducting interviews, and example of the release form is attached in (Appendix A). The release form is aimed at informing participants of the purpose of the study, how information would be stored, how information would be used for publication, and the use of recording a recording device. Participants were informed that their identities would remain confidential in the presentation of the data. Additionally, state advocates were emailed (Appendix B) for approval prior to conducting interviews, and responses were taken from both the American Legion and VFW. Names and agency names were omitted from the data collected on Apr. 15, 2016, allowing those who were interviewed the ability to withdraw comments prior

to publishing. During interviews an Olympus recording device was used to collect data. Individuals were informed that they were being recorded and that they could refrain from answering any question. Additionally if individuals identified after completing the interview that they want any information not to be transcribed for data analysis they could do so by contacting researcher until Apr. 15, 2016 when identifying data was removed from transcripts and compiled for research purposes.

After conducting interviews with digital recording device recordings were kept in researcher's office, in a file cabinet with a lock until they could be transcribed and then erased. After transcribing information that data was kept under password protection until data could be scrubbed of identifying factors, and was kept under password protection only held by researcher until the data was scrubbed. Information was then coded and extrapolated from the interviews for data analysis. Signed releases were kept on site at researcher's office in a locked file cabinet and will be held for two years after research is completed.

### **Data Collection Instrument and Process**

Data collection was done through qualitative interviews using questions located in Appendix D. Eight questions were used in the interview process and were aimed at identifying the relationship between outreaches and member participation. Questions were open-ended to understand the participant's perceptions about the relationship between the Veteran Service Organization and outreach efficacy.

Interviews took place in private offices when available, or in locations that a recording device could be used and privacy could be afforded. Interviews were between twenty-eight and forty-nine minutes long.



The questions used in the interview process were aimed at different topics. Question one asked about the benefits of joining the organization. This question was used to identify perceived positive effects of being a member and views of what it could be providing for veterans. As it was presumed through previous research that being a member of a Veteran Service Organization helped with reducing isolation; this question needed to be explored for validation of this assumption. The second question was aimed at looking at the participation levels of OEF/OIF veterans in their local organization. Clarification questions were used in collection of data to identify specific numbers of active participants and member numbers of OEF/OIF veterans. This data was collected to identify if the organization interviewed was having perceived success with outreaches. All other questions (questions three through eight) were used to identify different forms of outreach that were being done for specific groups; like female veterans and OEF/OIF veterans, and the perceived success of each outreach on member numbers and participation.

### **Data Analysis**

After data was collected from each interview it was transcribed to word document and identifying information was removed from the transcripts for the purpose of confidentiality on Apr. 15, 2016. Content analysis was done through open coding initially. Open coding “involves unrestricted coding to produce concepts and dimensions that seem to fit the data fairly well” (Monette, Sullivan, DeJong, Hilton, 2014, p. 433). Transcripts were first scanned for individual concepts and were selected in each transcript. Open coding was used versus focused coding due to overlapping of questions even though questions were divided into three areas of understanding. The three areas of questioning described in the data collection process were perceived benefits of Veteran Service Organizations, participation levels and membership

numbers, and perception of outreaches. After coding information on the three categories was collected and separated for data analysis.

After coding concepts were lumped together into themes under the three headings of information and then divided into different themes. Grounded theory was used to let the theory emerge from or be “grounded in the data” (Monette, Sullivan, DeJong, Hilton, 2014, p. 221-222). A theme was created when two or more of the participant’s identified answering similar concepts to questions. Concepts with fewer reoccurring patterns were compiled for future exploration of data. The strength of the theme was established when more participants identified with the theme, or when there was not conflicting data with a theme. For instance; many participants identified communication with National Guard units as being a practice that they were using, but there were mixed results with this approach with little efficacy, or great efficacy, identifying a weaker theme due to conflicting data.

### **Validity and Reliability of Data**

This study is exploratory in nature, and the primary purpose for data collection was to identify concepts on participation. The content validity of the data is based on the frequency of themes established in the interviews. If a concept showed up in multiple interviews it was considered more valid information than a concept that showed up fewer times. Reliability of the data was established by looking at previous concepts that had been established, and comparing concepts with higher frequency.

### **Strengths and Limitations of Study**

This study was exploratory in nature as there were no previous studies conducted in this area previously. However, several individual interviews have been conducted within the state by local news agencies due to the increasing number of closing facilities, so themes could be compared to data that was collected from interviews from local and national news views on the issues with participation. A strength of this study is that interviews were conducted within a close radius of each other limiting external social factors from influencing the data. Additionally, unlike interviews conducted in the news articles highlighted in the literature review, facilities with increasing OIF/OEF participation were explored and themes were identified.

A limitation to this study was the limited number of interviews and the limited number of organizations that were interviewed. Initially, the research was going to be conducted looking at more Veteran Service Organizations including school organizations, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), and Iraqi and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). However, this was not conducted due to memberships that are defined differently than the American Legion and VFW. School Veteran Service Organizations vary in their short term use in the veteran life during education, and the other organizations vary in their lack of meeting, larger coverage area, and free membership versus the paid membership required from the VFW and American Legion. Another limitation existed due to the lack of participants in the study. Only one person was interviewed at each post, and only eight posts were interviewed out of the approximately twenty-five posts that make up the twin cities area.

The VFW and American Legion differ in their membership “if you have served at least one day of active duty during the eligibility dates and are still serving in the military after any of

the said periods or have been honorably discharged, you may become a member”(American Legion 2016). Eligibility dates are basically limited to times when the United States was at war for American Legion membership. Membership of the VFW is more restrictive, “veterans must have received a campaign medal for overseas service; have served 30 consecutive or 60 non-consecutive days in Korea; or have ever received hostile fire or imminent danger pay” (Veterans of Foreign Wars, 2016). The key difference is that American Legion members could have served at any time during a war, but did not have to serve in the war. The result in having a more restrictive membership requirement by the VFW is that they have a smaller pool of perspective members and therefore it may be more difficult to identify who could join. However, due to the research being conducted focusing on OEF/OIF veterans, the numbers of VFW members increase are more accurate than American Legion participation numbers when looking to improve mental health for OEF/OIF veterans. This is because the American Legion has veterans that never served in war but are still included when talking about the younger veterans during interviews with the American Legion.

### **Findings**

This research project was conducted to identify outreaches Veteran Service Organizations had been conducting to effect OEF/OIF veterans. Ten VFW posts were called and contacted to establish interviews and three interviews were scheduled with local posts. One post declined research interviews. Six posts either did not answer when called or their bar manager took a message for the post commander and did not return the call. Seven posts were contacted from the American Legion and five posts provided a research participant for interview. Two posts were called with phone numbers that rang without response. To maintain confidentiality participants in the study were referred by “Participant one”, “Participant two”, etc.

After completion of the interviews, subjects were taken from the data through open coding and then themes were established for different subjects. The first subject of the interviews was perceived benefits of Veteran Service Organizations, and was reflective of the outreaches the organization was involved in. The themes identified under this heading were comradery, strength in congress, family support, and veteran support. The second subject obtained through questioning was participation by OEF/OIF veterans. Participants in the study described the participation levels done by OEF/OEF veterans in their organizations. The third subject this study looked at was perceived barriers to participation. Themes of the perceived barriers were; misconception of benefits, busyness, aging population of the organization, the bar, laws against outreach, and other perceived barriers. The fourth subject looked at what helps with participation. Themes of what helped increase participation were; recruiting military, recruiting the mayor, remodeling, free membership, other programs, and female veterans.

### **Perceived Benefits of Veteran Service Organization**

Benefits to Veteran Service Organizations was a broad subject in interviews. Most of the information within this topic was similar through the interviews, and was more reflective of the way that the participants viewed the organization. Themes established in this category were comradery, strength in congress, family support, and veteran support. The first questions in the interviews were: what does participation in Veteran Service Organization do for its members, and what are the perceived benefits. However, the data collected for perceived benefits was taken from the full interview as participants identified more benefits as further questions were asked.

## **Comradery**

The way that comradery was described in the interviews conducted is the reverse of isolation. Respondents overwhelmingly identified that they believed comradery was the biggest benefit to being a member of a Veteran Service Organization. All eight interviews identified comradery or some form of being able to talk about their experiences as being a big draw for being in Veteran Service Organizations. However, the phrasing used in talking about comradery showed that it was more of a process that occurred while involved rather than something someone may perceive from the outside.

Participant two stated “Primarily, one, having a place where they can meet and talk about their experiences... A lot of times veterans don’t talk to their families and so we try to be a sounding board.” The use of words identifying Comradery as the biggest reason for being a member was used in five of the eight interviews. Participant two identified that there is frequently isolation occurring within the family structure.

Participant three identified “...it’s being able to be around, veterans and people that have gone through the same trials and tribulations I did... Being able to sit down and understand where a veteran has been in combat knows they’re ok, you know where I’ve been... I can trust him.” This is also shown as a process where sitting down and hearing about others experiences develops trust in the environment.

In Participant five’s interview they identified “Too many of these kids are taken out of a normal environment and thrown into a war zone and then expected to come back to a normal environment and they aren’t normal anymore. They need to be able to sit and express their feelings and talk about what happened over there, here with people that understand what is going

on.” Participants five statements echo normality being established when talking with other veterans as a process.

Participant eight identified a similar aspect of comradery by stating “that’s what I think would draw guys in, I get it, you have something in common, you all wore the uniform.” This participant identified this after talking about several different people that shared their war stories, emotions, and difficulties they had in reintegration after deployment.

### **Strength in Congress**

Three of the participants identified strength in congress as a benefit that could pull in veterans. Strength in Congress was defined by participants as using the collective number of members in their organizations perceived voting power to influence political action. This view looks at the organization in a macro view of its ability to stand with others to represent the group nationally.

Participant four best described strength in congress by saying “number one important thing that any Veteran Service Organization does for you and I as veterans is ensure that our country continues to deliver our earned entitlements, that’s what we deserve for our sacrifice to this country... If our organizations collapsed then who is going to do that for you and I”

Participant three described that Minnesota carries fifty-thousand votes and that they were able to voice their opinion when congress was going to reduce funding for veteran homes. Participant eight and four identified talked about the Veteran Affairs Hospital scandals that took place and their influence to promote change because of large numbers.

## **Family Support**

Six of the participants identified perceived benefits of joining Veteran Service Organizations were different forms of family support. Four of them identified scholarships that were available for children. Others identified Christmas parties, picnics, and other activities for the veteran's families to gather around.

Participant two identified "A lot of times dealing with family life can be rough, and before it gets into the contentious stage we are in touch with different help groups... We have one group that actually comes in and visits and meets here and they will get in touch with them and usually help and lead to protection type of thing." This participant was describing how their organization has a support group that helps out the family, and as it was understood talked about contagious that they were referring to a high level of financial debt.

Other participants talked about helping monetarily through disaster relief funds or through emergency funds. Participant one talked about helping the "fallen vet's kids". Participants also talked about individuals who had their cars break down, bills they couldn't pay, or broken household appliances and how their organization provided support to the veterans to get them back on their feet, regardless of their membership status.

## **Veteran Support**

All eight of the participants talked about different veteran supports as being perceived benefits for joining. Participants named various contacts that they had with different agencies and their connections with ascertaining Veteran Affairs disability rating. Participants also identified that there were more many benefits for the individual. Participant four stated "The benefits are really limitless, and the previous eras worked hard for them. There is help for



medical needs, financial needs, direction, and other areas, but I don't think that should be the big pull to bring people in. Yah, we have those supports, but joining should be more about what you can do through joining. It's a way to keep on serving." Many of the other participants in this study also identified similarly that joining offered the ability to serve the community and other vets.

Participant two described the benefit of serving, as a way of supporting the community and other veterans by saying "hey, look what they did. Let's go over there, let's become members, let's help them out."

Participant five described it as "a way to keep serving after your service". The point made by these participants seemed clear in binding two points together that participation in a Veteran Service Organization provided the ability to feel good about yourself in the actions you take in your community, and that this was one of the things that the American Legion and VFW were founded on. Organizations that gave back to the community.

### **Participation by OEF/OIF Veterans**

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies that were working to increase participation with OEF/OIF veterans. When asked: How much participation is done by OEF/OIF era veterans, participants responded variably between one of two ways: We cannot get them in, or we are just starting to get them in.

Participant one identified "They are the smallest percentage of members... (making up) twenty-four percent of that are gulf war era and beyond." Participant one also identified that "They are all involved". Talking about the OEF/OIF era veterans at his post. This interview showed the highest perceived involvement of OEF/OIF veteran era.

Participant two stated “we are getting more and more all the time. But I am not happy with where we are right now.” This participant also identified that they had around fifteen to twenty OEF/OIF member out of a charter of around three-hundred signed members. When asked about participation participant two identified that OEF/OIF members were participating and identified specific leadership positions that were transitioning to this era of veteran.

Participant three identified “it’s starting to come in for us”, referring to OEF/OIF veteran participation. This participant stated that their membership was around ten percent for OEF/OIF veterans.

Other participants identified little to no involvement by OEF/OIF era veterans. Participant four stated “there is a huge gap with joining”. They described how members have not been joining from the new era.

Participant five stated “we can’t get them in... if we do (have them) we don’t know about them. If we do have them it’s no more than twenty-five or thirty and they don’t participate”. This participant talked about how there was minimal participation from OEF/OIF veterans, but that they had a few members from this era they had not met.

Participant 6 stated “we are not getting any help from these guys here. I don’t even see them at the bar. We have some members that signed up and pay, but do not participate. They don’t come to the meetings, they don’t come to the picnic... The (organization) picnic thirty years ago was two-hundred people, the (organization) picnic now is twenty-five to thirty.” This participant identified that they believed that participation numbers were down as much as eight-hundred percent.

Participant seven and eight both identified getting “not enough” participation from OEF/OIF veterans. Number seven identified there was a person in leadership in the organization that was from that era, and number eight identified around ten percent of their membership was OEF/OIF veterans with around forty members, but not participating.

### **Perceived Barriers to Participation Increase**

Outreaches are subdivided into different categories. Due to having three participants identifying that participation was working or beginning to work, and others who were having difficulty increasing participant numbers. Participants were only able to identify a few outreaches they observed not working, but had thoughts of why OEF/OIF veterans were not participating, or why their organizations were having difficulty reaching veterans. There were five main categories for perceived barriers to participation: misconception of benefits, busyness, aging population organization, the bar, laws against outreach. Other categories will also be discussed as possible factors for participation barriers.

### **Misconception of Benefits**

Three of the eight participants viewed misconception of benefits offered by the organizations. They tuned into the belief that there were factors of perception and the marketing that reached the veterans resulting in not seeing the actual benefits over the perception of benefits. Participant four identified that a lot of veterans think that Veteran Service Organizations are meant to purely serve veterans, and stated this is a “Misconception... what can this do for me vs what can you do for that organization”.

Participant eight identified the misconception that they believed the “impression that I didn’t get hurt and I don’t need to be here.”, and stated later in the interview that they don’t work to “sell memberships”, but work to help the community.

Participant five identified this in stating “they don’t understand, helping others helps you”, and that “nowadays it’s what do you have to offer me” when talking about how veterans look at their organizations.

### **Busyness**

Five of the eight interviews identified in different ways that OEF/OIF veterans were busy with their lives returning from deployments resulting in lower numbers in their organization. Participant four stated talking about OEF/OIF veterans that they have a “fast paced life where we will come home from deployments... (and that they are) finishing our academics, finding a job, raising a family” and that this is why member numbers for OEF/OIF veterans are down. Participants five, three, and two also identified that family was a big reason for them not looking to join, and two of the participants identified that their organization always placed the needs of family first.

Participant two placed the blame of the impact of busyness on the government by stating that it is “poor logistics and strategic thought on the government sending booku (a lot of) national guard over multiple deployments... (and that it) effects families and I think it effects them” resulting in the need for more family time and not wanting to participate currently.

Participant seven identified that this was largely due to a change in culture identifying “it’s a different deal... back in the old days. Ya know dad worked and ma stayed home with the kids and looked forward to coming here and coming to volunteer and stuff...it’s a different time.

Hard to get people to volunteer”. This participant identified that with both parents working they did not have the time to put into the organization and that the family aspect was overlooked unlike it was through previous years.

### **Aging Population Organization**

Three of the eight participants identified how looking at the organization as belonging to the aging population may influence participation. Participant five stated that “we have a lot of older gentlemen that are very set in their ways” and later identified that it made it difficult for female veterans because of the perceived sexism in their role within their organization.

Participant eight and four made statements that were similar, identifying that prospective members may be looking at the organization as being for older adults. Participant four stated that veterans may look at it as “our ma and pa or grandpas organization”. Participants that identified belief that the organization is for the aging population all made statements about the need to change perception to get new members in.

### **The Bar**

It was identified during several interviews that there was a belief that veterans were not coming in because of the bar. It was also identified during several of the interviews that this perception came from the district originally, and that there was recent publicity in the news that stated this was the cause of their difficulty with numbers. Five of the eight participants identified that there were difficulties due to the bar. Participant five identified that OEF/OIF may think “they don’t want to come to the bar, cry in their beer, and tell war stories”. Or that when they look at their organization “what they see is a bar”

Participant three identified similarly that there is a perception that “we are the bar down the street. Where they meet and they bullshit about what happened at the war”.

Participant one identified that there is a belief that the image of their organization is “Image of old vets sitting around and drinking and shooting the shit, telling war stories.” Added to the difficulty of this perception is that the bar and the pull tabs that many of these organizations have are their largest source of income and provide funding for local programs and outreaches.

### **Laws against Outreach**

There were two factors seen within laws that may be prohibiting participation numbers. First is that due to the fraternal license of the bar they are not able to advertise for their restaurant or business side of their organization. Participants seven and three identified with this obstacle. Participant three stated that the result of the fraternal license is that they have to advertise by “word of mouth” for the business of their organization even when they may have an award winning restaurant.

The second legal aspect viewed as interfering with outreach is privacy laws, also viewed as secret information for guard and reserve units. Three of the eight participants identified an aspect of privacy laws interfered. Participant five identified that “now days we cannot go down to the armory and get the contacts and names of the veterans... We just cannot get information”. This results in this organization not having the ability to reach out to where the soldiers are. They are restricted from contacting them because military commands are not allowed give information to the VFW or American legion about their soldier’s names, address, and deployment history.

Participant seven identified frustration with secretive communication and stated that it was “tough to make contact with them because every time I went down there I was dealing with a new chain of command”. This participant also identified having a relationship with one of the National Guard posts where they attempted outreach, and that during a regular visit they found out the unit was gone and had moved to a new location without the Veteran Service Organization being aware.

Participant three told a story of how his post wanted to escort returning veterans back from the airport after a deployment, but they were unable to get information about their return time or date. The participant stated that they had to get insider information with limited timeframe in order to be able to support the National Guard unit, and that it required them and other members to devote time waiting.

### **Other Perceived Barriers**

Participant three identified “(a different) post have an entirely different look to them. They have a lot of young veterans, they are involved... That (post) is in a younger neighborhood... (Post) is only about five miles from here”. Participant three identified that their post was not booming with OEF/OIF veterans, but that there was another post close by that was doing well. They stated that this post had altered their appearance and services to be more in tune with what younger veterans needed. Research was not conducted at the post that this individual referred due to lack of availability, but the thought of centralized posts adhering to certain populations could explain lower numbers of OEF/OIF veterans at some posts.

Participant seven identified that the lack of current numbers was resulting in “less outreach type things because of lack of participation”. The thought that numbers were down

because there were not enough members to uphold programming that would encourage others to want to be a part of the organization. Participant seven also mentioned that trying to work with guard units was frivolous because “people are stationed here, they are from all over.”

Identifying that there are fewer people that live in the city who are involved in the National Guard units than there are in rural communities.

Another perception held by two participants was that due to the closing and merging of posts the knowledge of their current non participating members was not as strong and that it was contributing to weaker communication. This was identified by participant five and six.

### **What Helps Participation?**

Three of the eight participants identified some form of success when conducting outreaches resulting in less data of working outreaches. Activities that were identified at posts with increase in participation will be grouped with the data of perceived effective strategies for bringing in new members. Under the category what helps participation there are recruiting military, recruiting the mayor, remodeling, free membership, and other programs.

### **Recruiting Military**

Two of the three participants identified that they had good relationships with local guard units, and had recruited leadership from the posts. Participant one identified that it was difficult to get the initial few OEF/OIF members into the organization, but after recruiting them “they start bringing in their buddies and then we get the numbers. We call it the referral program”.

Participant one identified that they had membership from executive officers down to privates that had just finished basic training. Participant two identified that their proximity to the National Guard post made it simpler to recruit members. This participant also identified that executive



officers had joined their organization and were in positions of leadership at their local Veteran Service Organization influencing activities that took place through the organization.

Four of the total participants identified involvement in thirty, sixty, ninety day Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Programs where they were able to integrate and support the unit while they were in transition back from deployments. Beyond the Yellow Ribbon program is a requirement for National Guard and Reserve units after a deployment where they meet at thirty, sixty and ninety days after returning home. During this time they participate in activities for mental and physical health. Several organizations that support veterans are welcomed to be present for service members returning.

### **Recruiting the Mayor**

Two of the three participants identified that they had integrated with their local political organizations and that the mayors were members. Participant one and three commented that they had made this connection and it resulted in being more visible in the community, and this may alter negative perceptions due to seen contributions. Additionally, participant five also identified that their organization had recruited the local politician into their organization and was heavily involved in their community.

### **Remodeling**

Two of the three participants identified that they were in the process of remodeling and that it was being done by OEF/OIF members. Participant two stated that one of their members “got in contact with Home Depot and Home Depot has this special thing that they do for (organizations). (They) were able to get our upstairs completely remodeled for free, and they are

going to do it again down here”. Participant two was referring to a member who was a current service member in the armed services at the local National Guard post.

Participant one identified remodeling, “that’s the reason we are sticking a quarter of a million into this post in renovations. It’s trying to modernize and get rid of the image of old vets sitting around and drinking and shooting the shit telling war stories.” This participant identified that one of their OEF/OIF currently in the military members was “involved in the construction”. None of the other posts identified any renovations being conducted. Additionally, participant one showed me what their remodel would look like after completion and identified a room specific to children that would have TVs and other activities to play.

### **Free Membership**

Participant one and two also identified that they were involved in a membership program where they gave free membership to different members. Participant one stated that when a member was activated that the post would pay for their membership so that their family could benefit from the post. Participant two stated that they let the National Guard “commanders know that you will get one year VFW membership free. And that gives them the opportunity then because they feel they are a member already they come in and see if it’s something they want to do. Or if they decide that it’s not something they want to do they have lost nothing”

Additionally, participant eight stated:

“We will tell people that if you have a son, daughter, niece, on active duty, bring us their information and we will sign them up and pay their dues for them while they are on active duty. Or while they are deployed if national guard or reserve. And we actually get an eighty percent retention rate out of that.”

Offering military service members free membership appears to offer the ability to try out the organization prior to making a monetary commitment.

### **Other Programs**

Other programs that were at the three posts that reported an increase in participation and were not reported at other posts were, a motor cycle group and working with the veteran's hockey league. Participant one identified their motorcycle group as being big at their post, bringing in around one-hundred-thousand in charitable funds yearly. Participant two identified working with the veteran's hockey league.

### **Female Veterans**

Little information was given by participants about approaches used for outreach to female veterans. Participant three identified "I don't look at them as female veterans or male veterans". This participant was identifying that they believed that distinguishing gender would cause more division. Others responded by identifying that they were unable to do outreach without having female members already.

Changes were identified at posts for female veterans by participants one and five. Participant one identified that their post was honoring female veterans by recruiting one of the female veterans to the forty and eight group. The forty and eight group is an elite group of American Legion members that members must be voted into. Participant five identified that they were looking for female veteran license plates and leaving information. Participant five also identified that there was a big push within their post to change perception and that it resulted in "higher membership for women in percentage than men". Meaning that a higher percentage of woman per membership than men.

## Discussion

Previous research conducted looking at the effect of participation in Veteran Service Organizations showed membership in the VFW aided in developing emotional support and meaningful activity for older veterans (Leedahl, Koenig, & Ekerdt, 2011). In this study all eight of the participants identified that comradery was one of the perceived benefits of being a member. The participants also identified that there may be difficulty for younger veterans in perceiving this benefit. Participants talked about the establishment of comradery as a process that happens when becoming a member of the organization.

The experience of comradery that the participants identified as being a draw for joining Veteran Service Organizations is in line with different studies that took place in colleges. Crawley's study which showed that writing about personal experiences and offering the ability to share them with others is in line with what participant described in this study (Crawley, 2013). It shows growth through sharing a narrative. However, in the Garcia survey it showed that OEF/OIF veterans were more likely to believe that coming to treatment implied being weak (Garcia, et al., 2014). Could this also be true of joining an organization that encourages you to talk about your experiences; could OEF/OIF veterans see this as being weak, not strong, or not independent?

Jones's study identified three themes for transitioning from combat to the classroom with success (Jones, 2013). The three focused areas were adapting to civilian identify, educating the population, and comprehensive services. Participants through this study identified that being a member of a Veteran Service Organization provided comprehensive services through veteran and family support. Family supports such as scholarships, relief funds, and support groups were identified in these organizations, and veteran support through individual services. Additionally,

under the heading veteran services this project talked about “a way to keep serving after your service” and identified involvement in the community and supporting other veterans, this is in line with adapting a civilian identify. A way to merge military with the public through acts of service. The other point that Jones made was that education of the population was needed, and this was described through participants in this study through the involvement with congress to educate political influence for needs. Needs such as how to reach the population, and what services would be helpful for veterans mental health support after getting out of the service.

Perceived barriers identified through this study for participation increase revealed opinionated thoughts on OEF/OIF veterans and the negative output received from the participants. The concepts that majority of participants identified most frequently as being barriers to participation were the bar and the busyness of OEF/OIF veterans. A news article came out in the Washington times describing how the old bar image was influencing younger members to not want to join established Veteran Service Organizations (Klimas, 2014). The research done in this study identified the highest response parallel with articles written about Minnesota posts closing in recent years due to the old image and inability to get new members in, and lack of functionality for younger members (Hrapsky, 2015), (Schier, 2011). However, it could have been that the articles written influenced the posts perception of the problem. It was indicated during one of the interviews that their district was identifying a need to change the bar image, and the frequency of this response could largely be due to information that was put out to each post from the district.

Three of eight participants identified that misconceptions about the benefits of being involved in Veteran Service Organizations. This point talked about how volunteering for the community is not perceived as being valued by the OEF/OIF veterans. This is an idea for future

study exploring the benefits of volunteer work. The thought is that veterans should not be looking at what they can obtain from being a member, but what they can contribute, similarly to the speech given by John F. Kennedy at his inauguration, the key to success is “ask not what your country can do for you ask what you can do for your country”(Kennedy 1961).

An equal number of participants identified that there were laws that were interfering with reaching out to Veteran Service Organizations. There were no previous outside sources identifying this issue. It would be a good area to explore in future research looking at the different ways that laws interfere with the ability to effectively communicate for support. Advocacy at the state or national level could help to remove some of the barriers like communication from Veteran Service Organizations to guard and reserve units or finding more collaborative areas to implement support. Additionally, adapting the laws regarding business advertising with a restricted fraternal bar license, through subdividing the location could result in more marketing to populations unaware of the organizations benefits.

Other areas that were identified in the study that could be contributing to the lack of participation included lack of current participation, and centralized Veteran Service Organizations that are collecting OEF/OIF members. Lack of current participation, this was observed as an area where the downward slope of an organization that had combined multiple times and did not have current OEF/OIF veterans could result in further decline. Whereas, centralized locations for OEF/OIF veterans would show a difference in both palatability of posts with declining numbers and desire to stake claim to the post they call their home. This would show the importance of exploring how upgrading one post in the city influences membership at surrounding posts.

What helps participation was largely defined in three of the participant's interviews. Four of the eight participants identified that they had involvement with the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Program. The Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Program started in Minnesota and is aimed at helping service member return through meeting that occur in the three months after deployment. Although frustration was identified in establishing communication with local military units, two of the units identified recruiting military executive officers from local units to active roles in influencing their post as being key to their organizations growth and participation. The key difference was the integration of the OEF/OIF members into decision making positions.

Another area that was seen as being helpful was remodeling. When looking for data on the transformation of veteran service groups through remodeling Home Depot was discovered to be supporting posts across the nation in upgrading their buildings. Only two of the participants identified that their post had been remodeled and both of them identified an increase in participation. Additionally, both posts identified that OEF/OIF members were involved in the planning for the building changes.

Variations on free membership resulted in an increase for two of the posts. They identified varying different programs of one year free membership after deployment or free membership while active duty. This approach provided the ability for veterans to work their way into the program and begin to see the benefits. With one of the participants identifying eighty percent retention from their program.

There did not appear to be a lot of activity in connecting with female veterans at the Veteran Service Organizations. With gender stereotypes adding to the complexity and Veteran Service Organization being largely boys clubs the need for change in perception is still present (Sander, 2012). The increasing female veteran population means not only that female veterans

are needing to be pursued at a greater rate to join Veteran Service Organizations and that the organizations are needing to be altered to welcome them, but that newer era veterans are expecting to be in a place that is more reflecting of their service, with gender equality.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Strengths of this study are that it looked into posts that were varying in numbers to identify differences. The study also looked into factors that could be contributing to perception through open ended questioning. Due to the study being exploratory in nature it offered many solutions for Veteran Service Organizations and also explored some of the areas that may be interfering.

The largest limitations of the study are that it did not look to the OEF/OIF veterans to identify what they were wanting in an organization, and the limited number of interviews that were conducted. The service organizations themselves identified how difficult it was to connect with this group of veterans on a wide scale, and adding in the restriction of the government to doing studies for active military, a study looking at OEF/OIF veterans perceptions would be interesting and supportive, but does not appear to be feasible. Limited interviews were largely due to the restricted time of the research study, issues with regular direct communication with posts leaders due to either lack of an establishment, attempting to contact through a bar manager, and the limited geographic area the study was focusing on.

Another limitation of the study is that a lot of the perceived issues with participation could have come from district, state, or national influence. No empirical data was identified stating why OEF/OIF veterans would not participate, but several news stories and interviews



have been done with individuals identifying their personal frustration. The pool was corrupted prior to the interviews.

The way that veterans perceive their organizations can have large implications in their numbers. Many of the Veteran Service Organization leaders that were participants in this study were from the Vietnam era. During interviews they identified that they were not welcomed into the organization because they were not seen as veterans. They had to fight for their membership, whereas OEF/OIF veterans are being asked to participate. Social media implications have not been explored either. Veterans may be trading off real connection through Veteran Service Organizations for social media groups with their former military units.

Benefits have increased largely for veterans over the last twenty years. The increase in benefits could also causing there to be less perceived need for Veteran Service Organizations. Although data suggests that the OEF/OIF era are in more need than other eras of support currently there are several organizations currently that aid veterans. The VFW and American Legion could now be seen as white noise, only one of many organizations that help and not as the organizations that created all the benefits that veterans now benefit from.

### **Research Implications**

This study was exploratory in nature. Four areas were explored in this study. The perceived benefits of being a member of a Veteran Service Organization which yielded results in benefits for the family, veteran, congressional strength, and comradery. Comradery was seen as alleviating symptoms of isolation and a tool to normalize behaviors, thus having the ability to help with mental health diagnosis that OEF/OIF veterans could be suffering. The second area looked at participation and showed that OEF/OIF veterans are not participating in most of the

organizations. Perceived reasons for lack of participation revealed that organization leaders believed that the bar and busyness of veterans were the largest reason for lack of increase in numbers. Other reasons with significance identified were misconception of their organization, the ageing population, and laws. The implication for this information is that changing some of these factors may result in an increase in membership. Additionally, it was seen that female veterans are not being targeted by most posts for membership either through adaptation of the post or individual outreach. The last area of study looked at what was working for membership, and identified that recruiting National Guard members, the mayor of their town, remodeling, and free membership aided in numbers increase.

Future research would do well to further explore possible outreaches being done for female veterans, or where they may be deriving support outside of Veteran Service Organizations. Due to the lack of information provided about female veterans in the study and the increasing numbers in this area of research is one that Veteran Service Organizations could greatly benefit from. Another area for future research would be to look further into Veteran Service Organizations that upgrade their buildings and their effects on surrounding posts numbers. Or the implications of providing a post where younger veterans gather on the populations of other Veteran Service Organizations. Future research would also benefit from exploring the benefits for the veterans themselves rather than looking at the perceived benefits of the programs.

### **Practice Implications**

Data showed areas of change that resulted in an increase in numbers came from integration of members into the system, changing of image, and giving the ability to experience at no cost of benefits. The implication that could be derived from this study is that for expansion

of an organization to include more of a people group it is having difficulty integrating, largely requires change to the organization prior to increase in involvement. OEF/OIF veterans need to take part in the making the organization their own. Additionally, trial memberships allow members the ability to make the changes to the organization into one that is more welcoming. Data also identified that there is a perceived benefit for mental health symptoms for veterans in joining Veteran Service Organizations.

Other practice implications that can be taken from this study are that it is perceived that being a member in a Veteran Service Organization can help with isolation and normalization for veterans. According to this study Veteran Service Organizations offer a place where veterans can talk freely about post combat stress, and also offer a place where volunteerism and community can be obtained. Unfortunately, for the most part, OEF/OIF veterans have not been joining these organizations. Which identifies that there is either disconnect by OEF/OIF veterans, disconnect by the Veteran Service Organization, or both. Because the OEF/OIF veterans are a people group there is little likelihood that they will change their outlook, and so the brunt of work rests on the Veteran Service Organizations to reconnect.

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## Appendix A

### Individual Consent Form

#### OEF/OIF Veteran Participation in Service Organizations INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

**Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating outreach methods to increase participation for OEF/OIF veterans. This study is being conducted by Kevin Beaudry, a graduate student at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas under the supervision of Dr. Vang, Pa, a faculty member in the Department of Social Work as part of the MSW degree program. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because of your outreach work within your organization with OEF/OIF veterans. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of my research is to identify what has been effective in increasing participation of OEF/OIF (Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom) veterans in service organizations. This will include the VFW, and American Legion. The desired effect is to increase outreach decreasing isolation of the targeted population. Approximately 10 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to conduct an interview with questions about previous outreaches used to connect to veterans, and participation levels of your organization for OEF/OIF veterans. This interview will take about 45 minutes. A recording device will be used during the interview and will be transcribed by the researcher after the completion of the interview. The recording device used is an Olympus digital recorder.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the study:**

The study has minimal risks. First, information may be determined as classified by your organization. Prior to conducting interviews organizations have been contacted and informed of the content of interviews and have given consent to interviews. If at any time you do not wish to answer any question or would like to remove information from the interview you may contact Kevin Beaudry and ask for information to be removed from the interview. Second, participants may identify questions are critical of work completed. In addition to precautions listed above participants are encouraged that study is being conducted to increase effectiveness and better understand outreach with the assumption that OEF/OIF veterans are difficult to connect to. Researcher will terminate information from interview at any time prior to presentation if participant desires to revoke information obtained from research study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research. After completion of research information from research will be offered to participants with possible benefits for organizations to increase participation for OEF/OIF veterans.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented. After conducting interviews information will be transcribed and identifying information will be omitted. Recorded identifying information prior to transcription will be kept behind no less than 2 locks, and will be deleted after transcription.



I will keep the research results in a locked file cabinet in Lutheran Social Services internship office and only I and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by April 15th. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you. Recording of interview will be kept in office in fireproof lockbox on a flash drive and will be disposed of after information is transcribed and identifying information is removed.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Thomas nor St. Catherine University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

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**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Kevin Beaudry, at 651-788-0575. You may ask -questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Dr. Vang Pa [pdvang@stkate.edu](mailto:pdvang@stkate.edu), will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or [jsschmitt@stkate.edu](mailto:jsschmitt@stkate.edu).

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study.

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I consent to participate in the study and I agree to be audio taped.

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Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

Date

## Appendix B

### Organizational Consent

Dear *VFW/American Legion Representative*

I am a student undertaking a graduate level research project at the St. Catherine University and St. Thomas. As part of my course I am undertaking a research study titled: *OEF/OIF Veteran Participation in Service Organizations*. This study will consist of interviewing between 8 and 10 local Veteran Service Organization's outreach coordinators gaining information about effective outreach for OEF/OIF veterans. The desired outcome is to better understand how to connect to this group to decrease isolation. The area I am targeting is Ramsey County, Dakota County, and Hennepin County.

Prior to undertaking the study I need your consent to approach the local Twin Cities Veteran Service Organization coordinators within your organization to take part in the study. I will recruit people to the study by calling local organizations and asking if they are willing to meet for an interview. I hope to recruit 10 participants from the VFW and American Legion.

I can assure you that I will make every effort to ensure the study does not disrupt the working environment or student lectures in any way and any data collected will remain confidential. I am applying (*or have gained*) ethical approval for the study from the St. Catherine University, Graduate College of Social Work and Institutional Review Board.

My research is supervised by Dr. Pa Der Vang

Please let me know if you have further questions. Your approval is needed prior to beginning this project.

Yours Sincerely

Kevin Beaudry  
[Beau0050@stthomas.edu](mailto:Beau0050@stthomas.edu)  
651-788-0575

## Appendix C

### Telephone Transcript

Hello, my name is Kevin Beaudry I am a Graduate level Social work student with the university of St. Catherine University and St. Thomas. I am contacting you because I would like to conduct an interview for research to gain information on participation of OEF/OIF veterans. The purpose of this study will be to identify how outreach affects participation and perceived benefits of participation. The desired outcome of this study is to increase participation of OEF/OIF veterans to decrease isolation. Prior to gaining your consent I have obtained organizational consent for interviewing. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes. Data obtained during the interview will be kept confidential.

Would you be willing to consent for these research purposes?

After completing research information will be offered to organizations. The next step will include sending you a copy of the consent form, the questions that will be asked during the interview, and scheduling an interview. Do you have a private space that we can meet so that I can record the information obtained?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Interview Questions**

1. What does participation in Veteran Service Organization do for its members? What are the perceived benefits?
2. How much participation is done by OEF/OIF era veterans?
3. What are some of the regular outreaches that your organization does?
4. What outreaches have had the biggest increase in member numbers?
5. What outreaches have had the least impact on member numbers?
6. What outreaches and activities have you conducted that helped the most with participation?
7. Have you done any outreaches especially aimed at OEF/OIF Veterans?
8. Have you done any outreaches especially aimed at female veterans?