



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

RESEARCH BRIEF

| AUGUST 2011 | CSD PUBLICATION NO. 11-25 |

The Mission Continues: Engaging Post-9/11 Disabled Military Veterans in Civic Service

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Introduction

The Mission Continues, a socially innovative national non-profit founded in 2007, challenges post-9/11 disabled veterans to continue to serve their country through volunteer service after their time in the United States military has ended.

The Mission Continues' flagship program, the Fellowship Program, provides disabled veterans a stipend to serve as a volunteer at a nonprofit organization for a period of 14-28 weeks, typically at social service, youth, or veteran's organizations. This period of civic service is termed a fellowship. The goals of the fellowship are to aid in the veteran's career and educational development and to provide leadership and service to veterans' communities.

Civic engagement research on Iraq and Afghanistan veterans focuses on their reintegration challenges, their ongoing desire to continue to serve, and offers policy recommendations to increase service opportunities¹. Research on impacts of volunteering on disabled veterans is limited. This study attempts to address this gap.

This study focuses on the first cohort of post-9/11 disabled veterans to complete the Fellowship Program. The aim of this study is to assess participant

characteristics; perceived impacts on participants' personal, professional, and social relationships; participants' history of civic engagement; and participants' motivation for pursuing the fellowship.

Research Question and Methods

Research on service across the life course suggests that participation in civic service can influence many psychosocial factors in a persons' life, leading to improvements in health and engagement.² If disabled veterans are challenged to continue to serve in their communities, and if their well-being improves from participating in civic service, then the well-being of veterans and their communities will improve.

In this study, we examine the degree to which participation in the Fellowship Program impacted the veteran's health, mental health, psychosocial well-being, education, continued service, and employment opportunities using self administered and standardized measures.

The first cohort studied consisted of all 52 Fellowship Program alumni who completed the program between June 2007 and December 2010. No incentives were offered for participating in the web-based survey. The response rate is 52% (N=27). Survey participants do not differ demographically from non-participants.

This study was led by Washington University in St. Louis. The Mission Continues provided logistical support for data collection.



FINDINGS

Participant Characteristics

The Mission Continues Fellows are all United States military veterans, who were discharged after September 11, 2001, and report having a service-connected disability. Eighty-eight percent of the Fellows served in Iraq, Afghanistan, or both, the majority having served multiple tours. Most Fellows are under the age of 35 (67%), Caucasian (67%), and male (83%). Half have children (50%).

Permanent and severe disabilities such as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Major Depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) adversely affect Fellows' social, occupational, and interpersonal functioning. Over half have been diagnosed or treated for TBI (52%). Two-thirds screened positive for PTSD (64%) and more than one quarter screened positive for depression (28%). In addition, only 65% of the fellowship participants self-rate their current health as excellent, very good, or good, a much lower rating than that of the general population (84%).³

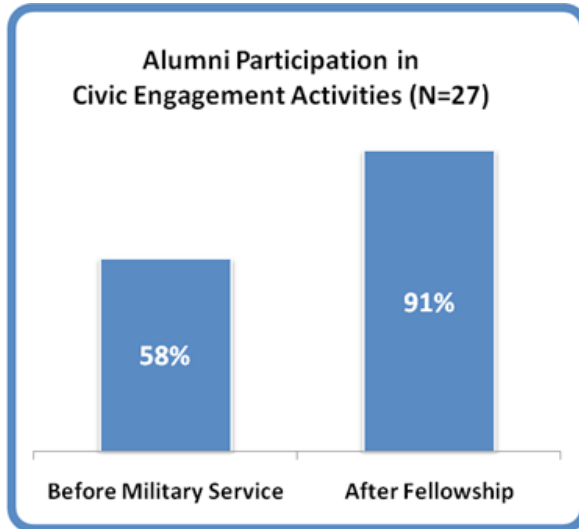
Perceived Impact

Eighty-six percent of participants report that the Fellowship Program was a positive life changing experience. Subsequent to the fellowship, 71% have furthered their education; 86% have transferred their military skills to civilian employment; and 91% have built networking opportunities for a future career path.

The majority of participants report that the fellowship helped them to become leaders within their communities (86%) and to teach others the value of service and sustain a role for service within their communities (91%). All participants (100%) would recommend The Mission Continues Fellowship Program to a friend or family member.

Participants' History of Civic Engagement

Fellows report sustained roles in civic engagement across their life course. A majority of Fellows were civically engaged before joining the military. Subsequent to their fellowship, a much higher percentage continues to volunteer in their communities. The majority of Fellows serving after their fellowship do not receive a monetary stipend for their volunteer work. Most serve an average of once a week at an organization that provides social services or assists veterans.



Motivations to Join and Lasting Impacts

Half of the study participants report that The Mission Continues staff and volunteers were the most influential in their decision to apply for the Fellowship Program. Some Fellows report pursuing the fellowship to address personal challenges, as illustrated below:

- » “I was at the peak of a major depressive phase and didn’t know what else to do to make ends meet.”
- » “I was going through a stage where I felt my work was over, due to my injuries and feeling that the Army is all I knew...”
- » “The staff understood what my colleagues and I were trying to do and what our goal was for student veterans.”

After their fellowship, alumni reported renewed inspiration for leading and serving others:

- » “The Mission Continues empowered me and allowed me to feel worthy and important again. This organization helped me to find a purpose and share my life lessons and struggles with others who are going through what I’ve gone through.”
- » “It has continued to build my confidence in continuing to serve my country and community and that my effort does make a difference.”

Summary and Implications

By challenging returning disabled veterans, an at-risk group, The Mission Continues Fellowship Program provides a structured transition to employment, education, and continued service.

This challenge also offers innovative pathways to improve personal, professional, and social relationships.

After completing the fellowship, many of the Fellows report starting a job, enrolling in school, or continuing to serve in their home communities. Study participants perceive that the fellowship provided a direct linkage to lifestyle changes. The post-only study design and the small sample size limit the conclusions regarding long term impacts.

Nevertheless, this research suggests that non-profit sponsored civic service programs need to maximize the potential of returning disabled veterans by increasing access to and providing funding for high quality service opportunities in their local communities. The capacity of governmental and nonprofit agencies is currently insufficient and lacks an integrated model for service delivery.

Civic service as an emerging social institution shows great promise for positively reengaging disabled post 9/11 and future veterans as part of a holistic approach to personalized care. Programs such as The Mission Continues offer a conduit for veterans to engage with their communities, improving their own well-being and that of the communities in which they serve.

Endnotes

1. Yonkman, M.M. & Bridgeland, J.M. (2009). *All Volunteer Force: From Military to Civilian Service*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.
2. Morrow-Howell, N., Hinterlong, J., Rosario, P.A., & Tang, F. (2003). Effects of volunteering on the wellbeing of older adults. *Journal of Gerontology*, 58b(3), S137-S145.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2010). *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data*. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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