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# Veterans Are Our Passion: Exploring the Efficacy of Team Rubicon as a Community Building Model

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To my own personal hero and the greatest veteran I have ever known, this is for you.

John de Melim

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**Abstract**

The purpose of the study is to explore whether a post-military service organization builds community and ultimately improves the reintegration process for veterans. Transitioning from military service to civilian life is an inevitable shift that veterans often endure without ease. Significant attention has been paid to the mental and physical health, employment status, and family situation of OEF and OIF veterans, however there is a lack of focus on the role their own service on the home front can play in their successful reintegration. This study investigates the efficacy of Team Rubicon, an international disaster relief organization, as a community-building model between veterans and civilians, while asking whether veterans who engage in skills-based civic engagement transition better from military to civilian life. Specifically, a survey was distributed to Team Rubicon Region VI veterans. The survey data was utilized in order to identify participants for two focus groups. The qualitative data obtained from the focus groups was thematically analyzed and then triangulated with McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community framework. Several themes emerged that were consistent between both groups, as well as with the four elements that comprise McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. These findings provide evidence of the efficacy of Team Rubicon as a community-building model and offer a basis for future research to explore this claim on a national scale.

*Keywords: Veterans, Team Rubicon, Reintegration, and Sense of Community*

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**Introduction**

In the wake of a disaster, volunteers play a critical role in speeding up the recovery process of disaster-stricken areas and reducing costs (FEMA, 2017). Disasters require immediate emergency response to satisfy critical human needs and may require external support for long term recovery. The use of spontaneous volunteers is common after a disaster, yet their limited training and experience can create a danger not only for the community they are serving, but for the volunteers as well. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) attempts to mitigate this problem by advising people who are interested in volunteering to do so through organized volunteer organizations, such as Team Rubicon (FEMA, 2017).

Team Rubicon (2018), an international disaster and emergency response organization, avoids this problem by utilizing the unique skill sets and experiences of military veterans and civilian first responders to rapidly deploy response teams to domestic and international disasters. Military personnel and veterans, individuals who have left military service, may be considered ideal volunteers in disaster settings, because they are trained in survival skills, are used to operating in chaotic situations, and have previous exposure to traumatic sightings. There are common elements between military training and disaster response, and these shared transferable skills make veterans uniquely qualified to help their communities.

While the primary mission of Team Rubicon is providing disaster relief to those affected by natural disasters, they also seek to help veterans transition from military to civilian life. Reintegration is defined as "the post deployment achievement of satisfactory levels of functioning at home, at work, in relationships, and in the community" (Sayer et al., 2011, p. 3 as cited in Kranke et al., 2016, p. 75). Veterans often face numerous challenges reintegrating into society. Team Rubicon (2018) mitigates some of these challenges by providing veterans with

three things they lose after leaving the military: a purpose, gained through disaster relief; community, built by serving with others; and identity, from recognizing the impact one individual can make.

Findings show that Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) veterans are underutilized assets in their communities, and continuing their service in the civilian sector is likely to improve their reintegration (Yonkman & Bridgeland 2009, p. 9). Team Rubicon has a unique model that appears to be truly reciprocal for both the veteran volunteers and the communities they serve. Although there have been a small number of studies investigating various aspects of the Team Rubicon model, including a strength based approach, peer-supportive environment, and destigmatizing experience, these studies are not generalizable and one must be cautious about the findings due to the fact that they were all conducted with a small self-selected sample of males.

This research capstone offers the first-ever mixed-methods study investigating the efficacy of Team Rubicon as a community building model grounded in skills-based civic engagement, where veterans work alongside civilians and fellow veterans in order to help them transition from military to civilian life. This research is significant because transitioning from military service to civilian society is an inevitable shift that veterans often endure without ease. Significant attention has been paid to the mental and physical health, employment status, and family situation of OEF and OIF veterans, however there is a lack of focus on the role their own service on the home front can play in their successful reintegration.

## Literature Review

This section focuses on defining the challenges veterans face reintegrating into civilian society, exploring the history of civic engagement and military culture, understanding the gaps

and limitations of current veteran service organizations and research, discovering the benefits veterans experience engaging in civic service, and examining the theoretical framework of sense of community.

**Challenges to Veteran Reintegration**

Veterans are considered to be a vulnerable population, particularly during their transition out of the military. There is a growing body of literature documenting the significant challenges they encounter while reintegrating. Returning home is challenging in various ways including adapting to civilian life, public stigma, mental health issues, lack of social support, complicated relationship dynamics, economic strains, and higher education struggles. According to the Pew Research poll of veterans, "44% of veterans say their readjustment to civilian life was difficult" (Morin & Taylor, 2011 as cited in Coon, 2016, p. 43). Therefore, it is crucial to examine these challenges in depth.

Veterans are often perplexed by the stark contrast between civilian and military culture (Hicks, Weiss, & Coll, 2017). Collins (1998) describes this difference in values as a "civil-military cultural gap" (as cited in Demers, 2011). Veterans are often caught in this gap between military culture, where they understand appropriate behavior and feel a sense of belonging, and civilian culture, where they don't understand the rules and feel misunderstood (Demers, 2011). In fact, the civilian world feels so abnormal to some veterans that they would rather return to war than try to fit into civilian culture (Demers, 2011). In addition to not fitting into the civilian world, veterans also struggle with the difference in the amount of respect they experience in civilian life compared to the military (Demers, 2011). Veterans perceive a lack of respect from civilians and describe being disrespected by civilians who don't understand what they have experienced in war (Demers, 2011). The fact that there is an all-volunteer military has resulted in

fewer individuals having direct contact with someone who has served in the military and has

allowed civilians to become detached from military issues, which leads to a lack of

understanding (Demers, 2011). Even in the midst of family and friends, veterans often feel alone

and are unable to find common ground (Demers, 2011). As a result, many veterans report that

they only feel comfortable around other veterans (Hicks et al., 2017).

      Public stigma contributes to the struggle veterans face reintegrating into civilian life

(Kranke et al., 2017b). Link and Phelan (2001) define public stigma as a "psychological and

social process that recognizes and distinguishes human differences, which are then linked to

negative stereotypes that place labeled individuals in separate categories with undesirable

characteristics" (as cited in Kranke et al., 2017b, p. 630). Due to the fact that veterans possess

some attributes of differentness, others in society may create stigmatized perceptions of them and

devalue their skills (Kranke et al., 2017b). Veterans, particularly combat veterans, are

stereotyped as having high rates of PTSD and being prone to violence, which can make civilians

question whether they can be trusted to not act aggressively toward others (Hicks et al., 2017).

These negative stereotypes reduce opportunities for veterans in education, employment, housing,

and relationships, and socially stigmatize them as being a burden on society (Kranke et al.,

2017b). Veterans internalize these negative stereotypes and stigmatizing views and incorporate

them into their own self-perceptions, which contributes to their feelings of being marginalized

and isolated from society (Kranke et al., 2017b).

    The stigma surrounding discussing and seeking care for mental health issues also negatively

affects veterans (Kranke et al., 2017a). Military values reinforce this stigma and instill fear in

veterans that others' awareness of their mental health issues will cause them to be viewed as

vulnerable and have negative repercussions on their career or reputation (Kranke et al., 2017c).

This stigma can be life threatening, as it is well documented that OIF/OEF veterans face significant mental health challenges (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). According to Tanielian and Jaycox (2008), 31% of veterans have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and combat experience is related to increased risk for symptoms of anxiety, depression, and anger (as cited in Demers, 2011). The outcome of being stigmatized to seek help may be highly correlated to the growing rate of veteran suicides (Kranke et al., 2017a). This rate is alarming as the number of suicides among OIF/OEF veterans may exceed their combat death toll (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009).

One of the risk factors for suicide among veterans is a lack of a social support (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Studies have found that a social network is essential in helping veterans work through the problems confronting them and cope successfully with the stress of reintegration (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Unfortunately, veterans often return home with a limited social network due to the distancing and changing of relationship dynamics that occurs while they are away during deployment (Kranke et al., 2017b). Additionally, veterans find it difficult to connect or relate across the divide of their military experience and identity, and experience trust issues with family and friends who do not have experiences in war contexts (Kranke et al., 2017b). As a result, social relationships with civilians, even family members, are strained and some veterans choose to limit their interactions with non-veterans (Kranke et al., 2017b).

Interacting with family and friends makes veterans aware of how much they have changed (Demers, 2011). According to Van Gennep (1960) as cited in Demers (2011), the journey from one identity to another is comprised of three stages: separation, liminality, and incorporation. Returning veterans appear to be in the second stage of identity development, liminality, where they are caught in transition between who they were in the military and who

they are in the civilian world (Demers, 2011). Veterans return home a different person than the one who went off to war and they must confront the fact that the person who they once were is someone they can no longer relate to or see in themselves (Demers, 2011). Confronting the loss of who they were and trying to figure out who they are now leads to feelings of being misunderstood and uncertainties about their identities (Demers, 2011). While in the military, veterans felt a sense of purpose, but the change in status to civilian life leads to a loss of self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Demers, 2011).

Veterans felt worthwhile in the military, however in civilian society they perceive that their military experiences and skills are not valued (Kranke et al., 2017b). They believe that their veteran status limits their opportunities and that prospective employers won't hire them due to negative stereotypes and the marginalization of veterans (Kranke et al., 2017b). Additionally, civilian work is often viewed as undesirable, because it does not carry the same meaning as their work in the military (Kranke et al., 2016). As a result, many veterans are unemployed and the unemployment rate for OIF/OEF veterans actually outpaces the adult unemployment rate (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). Unemployment causes economic strains, chronic debt, and income shortfalls, which increases stress and the likelihood of becoming homeless (Demers, 2011). Many unemployed veterans choose to take advantage of the GI Bill and go back to school in hopes of improving their employment outlook (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009).

Congressional passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, otherwise known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, significantly increased higher education benefits for individuals who served in the U.S armed forces after September 10, 2001 (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). As a result, there has been a direct increase in the number of veterans returning to college campuses (Steele et al., 2010). Despite the fact that the military has instilled in them the

focus, discipline, and drive to succeed academically, numerous veterans report struggling to adapt to student life (Steele et al., 2010). Veterans face different challenges than traditional students, including balancing academic requirements with other responsibilities, like working to support their families, managing service-connected injuries such as bodily injuries or mental health issues that make it more difficult to get around campus or learn, and relating to non-veteran peers due to a difference in age, maturity, and life experiences (Steele et al., 2010). Veterans also struggle to connect with faculty members and wish that their professors would acknowledge their veteran status and attempt to understand them as a student population (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Consequently, veterans indicate a desire to connect with other student veterans and for assistance transitioning into the larger campus community (DiRamio et al., 2008).

**Military Culture as a Pathway to Civic Engagement**

According to Flanagan and Levine (2010), "serving in the military is arguably the ultimate form of civic engagement as military members offer their very lives protecting and serving their country" (as cited in Hicks et al., 2017, p. 182). Individuals enter the military from a diverse array of cultural backgrounds, however one of the goals of boot camp is assimilation into military culture. The military accomplishes this by stripping recruits of their civilian identity and replacing it with a military identity (Demers, 2011). This new identity is rebuilt by constant exposure to military norms, discipline, values and authority (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Military identity is infused with the values of duty, honor, and loyalty to comrades, the unit, and the nation (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Therefore, an important phase of military training is centered on team building, which introduces the recruit to the concept of a "battle buddy", where they must learn to depend on and be responsible for someone else (Coon, 2016). The final step in

military acculturation emphasizes unit cohesion and building strong and resilient relationships, in order to perform in difficult and dangerous conditions (Coon, 2016). The trust and cohesion required for military effectiveness must also exist between the military and the society it defends, which ultimately upon release from service sets veterans up for greater participation in society (Coon, 2016).

As a bureaucratic and hierarchical organization, members of the military are shaped by their experience, which provides a gateway into civic service and volunteerism (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Throughout their military career, veterans are constantly exposed to the idea of selfless service and sacrificing for others (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). Successful military socialization influences veterans democratic values, attitudes, and abilities, making them more prepared and willing to set aside their own self-interest and continue to serve their country in the civilian sector (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Therefore, a veteran's service commitment does not end on the battlefield, but continues after they return home (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). From a military cultural standpoint, it is not surprising that veterans continue to be civically engaged (Hicks et al., 2017). U.S. military culture is founded on patriotism and commitment to service, and promotes values such as honor, integrity, commitment, loyalty, and devotion to duty (Hicks et al., 2017). Additionally, military culture involves working with diverse groups of people that come together for a common purpose and overcome difficult problems, which is a requirement of civic engagement (Hicks et al., 2017). Civic engagement is therefore highly compatible with veterans' beliefs about service, leadership, and working in diverse groups (Hicks et al., 2017).

It has been found that military service is positively related to measures of civic engagement, such as volunteering, for certain groups of people who have served in the military

(Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Military service is most likely to positively influence the

volunteering behavior of veterans who are black or Hispanic, married, over the age of 65, and

served in the military during a time of war (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Compared to civilians,

veterans volunteer at a higher rate and greater intensity (more hours) per year, are more likely to

be involved in civic groups working to solve community problems, and are more politically

engaged (Hicks et al., 2017). An OIF/OEF veteran survey found that 92% of veterans thought

serving their community was important and 90% believed it was a basic responsibility of being

American (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). This provides evidence that exposure to military

service interacts with other aspects of individual identity including ethnicity, marriage, and life

course to lead to greater civic engagement (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011).

In general, veteran civic engagement comes from a sense of civic duty, which stems from

military culture's emphasis on service (Hicks et al., 2017). However, veterans have various

motivations for volunteering, including self-interest and the desire to improve their current

situation (Hicks et al., 2017). It provides them with an opportunity to make a positive difference

for themselves, as well as for others (Hicks et al., 2017). Almost half of the veterans surveyed,

indicated their primary motivation for serving was internal (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). That

being said, 76% strongly agreed or agreed that they are also motivated to serve by respected

veterans (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). Therefore, one of the most powerful asks to serve

comes from fellow veterans (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). Although the desire to help others

and the motivation of altruism is prevalent for some veteran volunteers, others are motivated by

more self-centric reasons (Hicks et al., 2017). Many volunteers believe that engaging in

volunteering activities can create new opportunities that will increase their social network and

skills, which ultimately will assist them in finding employment (Kranke et al., 2016).

Additionally, some veterans volunteer for the protective enhancement it has on one's self esteem

(Hicks et al., 2017). Positively contributing to society allows them to regain their sense of

purpose (Hicks et al., 2017). While veterans volunteer for a number of different causes, they

consistently report that they are motivated to work with military members and their families

(Yonkman & Bridgeland 2009).

**Veteran Service Organizations and Team Rubicon**

As a country, the U.S. focuses on the important challenges veterans encounter during

their critical transition home, such as their physical and mental health, employment status, and

family well being (Yonkman & Bridgeland 2009). There are a number of organizations that have

a primary mission of providing services to veterans in order to address these challenges (Coon,

2016). These organizations are referred to as Military Service Organizations (MSOs) and

Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) (Coon, 2016). According to Yonkman and Bridgeland

(2009), while boot camp provides the necessary transition resources to integrate into military

culture, there is no equivalent to assist veterans with successful reintegration into civilian

society. Therefore, a continuum of services is needed to support them. That being said, it is time

to change our national dialogue to view veterans as civic assets instead of charity cases, and to

investigate the role their own service on the home front can play in their successful transition

from military to civilian society. When the U.S. considers veterans' transition home, they should

provide meaningful opportunities for them to serve (Yonkman & Bridgeland 2009). Veterans are

underutilized assets in their communities and when those opportunities are provided they have

more successful transitions (Yonkman & Bridgeland 2009).

Team Rubicon, an international disaster relief organization, is unique in the fact that

veterans are the agent of their mission, rather than the object (Team Rubicon, 2018). There are

over 22 million military veterans living in U.S. and Team Rubicon believes that their unique

skills, experience, and passion for serving others make them America's greatest national resource

(Team Rubicon, 2018). Of the nearly 50,000 Team Rubicon volunteers, roughly 70% are

veterans (Team Rubicon, 2018). By engaging veterans in continued service through disaster

response, not only does Team Rubicon provide relief to affected communities, but they also

assist many veteran volunteers in regaining three things they lost leaving the armed forces:

purpose, community, and identity (Team Rubicon, 2018).

Although Team Rubicon was founded in 2010 by two former Marines, Jake Wood and

William McNulty, and has grown exponentially over the past eight years, very little research

exists on Team Rubicon (Team Rubicon, 2018). Of the five research studies that do exist,

Derrick Kranke is the lead researcher on all of them. Four of the articles utilize a similar

methodology, which consists of a cross-sectional qualitative study design conducted with nine

male Team Rubicon members. The fifth article is a case study consisting of a single male

subject, who had engaged in peer-led disaster volunteer work with Team Rubicon after serving

in the military (Kranke et al., 2017a). Due to the case study format and the small self-selected

sample of males used in the other studies, the results from all of the studies are not generalizable.

As a result, future research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to investigate the

efficacy of Team Rubicon as a community building model and explore whether engaging in

skills-based civic engagement alongside civilians and fellow veterans helps veterans transition

from military to civilian life.

**Benefits of Civic Service**

Despite the fact that the findings from these studies are not generalizable, they are

promising and it is important to acknowledge them. While each of the studies researched

different questions, they all identified key benefits veterans experience by engaging in civic service with Team Rubicon. Kranke found across his studies that these benefits address some of the challenges veterans face reintegrating into civilian life and include dispelling stereotypes, improving mental health, increasing social support, providing a sense of purpose, and enhancing skills.

One study by Kranke et al. (2017b) assessed whether personal contact with civilians, fostered by Team Rubicon, eradicates the effects of stigma and labeling. Personal contact is assumed to reduce stigma, because it provides direct interaction, which allows targeted individuals to demonstrate their value and dispel negative attitudes others may have of them (Kranke et al., 2017b). Participants' responses indicated that engagement in Team Rubicon promoted interaction with civilians in a disaster context, which alleviated negative stereotypes about veterans and reduced the impact of labeling (Kranke et al., 2017b). The destigmatizing environment of Team Rubicon is crucial for this to occur, because it provides veterans with a setting where civilians value their military skills and identity (Kranke et al., 2017b). Furthermore, the findings illustrated how volunteering with Team Rubicon helped veterans bridge the "us vs. them" gap between veterans and civilians (Kranke et al., 2017b). Providing disaster relief to civilians helped veterans to see beyond their own struggles and emotionally connect with the civilians they were serving (Kranke et al., 2017b). Ultimately, Team Rubicon helped veterans feel they were of value to society, dispelled negative beliefs civilians may have had of them, improved their ability to emotionally connect with others, and made them more optimistic about their ability to connect with civilians (Kranke et al., 2017b).

Exploratory research led by Kranke suggests that veterans who engage in disaster relief with Team Rubicon have positive mental health responses (Kranke et al., 2017d). Veterans

experienced benefits to their mental health, because the volunteer work helped them feel reintegrated into civilian society, created an opportunity to connect with fellow veterans and civilians, and provided them with a renewed sense of purpose by utilizing their specialized skills (Kranke et al., 2017d). Findings show that identifying as saviors of disaster victims ignited a direct emotional connection to civilians, which helped veterans feel a sense of belonging in society that many had not felt since leaving the military (Kranke et al., 2017d). Additionally, participants reported mental health benefits due to establishing a social network of fellow veterans, who engaged in peer support to share their experiences, confront emotional triggers and normalize mental health issues (Kranke et al., 2017d). This network helped them overcome feelings of shame and increased their self-esteem (Kranke et al., 2017d). Finally, Team Rubicon helped veterans feel a sense of purpose outside of serving in the military, which promoted happiness and well-being (Kranke et al., 2017d).

Recent research by Kranke demonstrates that veterans' involvement in Team Rubicon promotes camaraderie and peer support (Kranke et al., 2017c). Due to their shared military experiences, veterans describe fellow service members as feeling more like family than their own relatives (Kranke et al., 2016). Therefore, after leaving the military, veterans often yearn for connection with fellow veterans and Team Rubicon facilitates that connection (Kranke et al., 2017c). Team Rubicon's organizational structure considers everyone as equals, which not only helps to bridge the divide between veterans and civilians, but between combat and non-combat veterans and branches of service as well (Kranke et al., 2017b). This assisted veterans in creating a shared identity and reduced their sense of differentness and isolation (Kranke et al., 2017b). Engaging in peer support through Team Rubicon was a mutually beneficial process, which benefited both the veterans acting as support providers and the veterans who were in the earlier

stages of the recovery continuum (Kranke et al., 2017c). In one study, all participants described an overwhelming show of support from fellow Team Rubicon members (Kranke et al., 2017d). The social support extended beyond deployment settings, as veterans continued to communicate with each other through social media after returning home (Kranke et al., 2017d).

Another study led by Kranke investigated the benefit of Team Rubicon's strengths-based model on veterans' reintegration (Kranke et al., 2016). Findings showed that Team Rubicon made veterans aware that their specialized skills could be applicable in civilian life and allowed veterans to identify ways they could apply their skills and engage in meaningful work as civilians (Kranke et al., 2016). Additionally, Team Rubicon provided veterans with practicable skills that were transferable in the civilian sector (Kranke et al., 2016). Transferring military skills to civilian society is critical in helping veterans feel a sense of purpose in their work (Kranke et al., 2016). It appears that Team Rubicon veterans are better positioned to transfer their skills, since there are common elements between military training and disaster response (Kranke et al., 2016). Military training to manage chaos, assess and be aware of threats in their environment, and function as a unit helped veterans address and mitigate problems quickly, complete essential tasks, and ultimately be more efficient and effective in providing disaster relief (Kranke et al., 2016; Kranke et al., 2017d). Team Rubicon emphasizes and utilizes the specific strengths of veterans, such as grit, perseverance, teamwork, camaraderie, loyalty, strength in the face of adversity, and desire to serve, as tools to tackle the challenge of reintegration (Kranke et al., 2017b).

**Theoretical Framework: Sense of Community**

In order to investigate the efficacy of Team Rubicon as a community building model, it is necessary to first understand what the elements of a strong community are. According to

Gusfield (1975), there are two major uses of the term community. The first is the territorial and geographic notion of community, and the second is concerned with human relationship (as cited in McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It appears that while the two uses are not mutually exclusive, modern society forms community around interests and skills, more than around location (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Chavis (1986) propose a definition and theory of sense of community that is comprised of four elements. These elements include (1) membership, the feeling of belonging and sharing a sense of personal connection among members, (2) influence, a reciprocal sense of mattering and making a difference between the group and its members, (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, the belief that members' needs will be met through resources provided by their membership in the group, and (4) shared emotional connection, the commitment of members to share history, common places, time, and similar experiences. In a sentence, McMillan and Chavis define sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (1986, p. 9).

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), membership has five attributes that work together in order to establish who is a part of the community and who is not. These attributes include: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Boundaries established by membership criteria provide the structure and protection for intimate social connections to occur (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Therefore, emotional safety is part of the broader notion of security that is established by boundaries (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). A sense of belonging and identification involves the feeling of acceptance by the group, the belief that one has a place in

the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This connects

to personal investment, which is the belief that if one works for their membership, they will feel

that they have earned their place in the group and consequently their membership will be more

meaningful and valuable (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Additionally, a common symbol system

serves an important function in maintaining a sense of membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Influence is a reciprocal concept in which a group member has some ability to influence

the community, while the group has the ability to influence its members (McMillan & Chavis,

1986). McMillan and Chavis (1986) note that members are more attracted to a group in which

they feel they are influential. Meanwhile, group cohesiveness is contingent on the community's

influence on its members to conform. Consensual validation research demonstrates that the

pressure for conformity and uniformity comes from the needs of the individual, as well as from

the community. Uniform and conforming behavior serves as a force for closeness and an

indicator of the strength of the bond. Therefore, in tightly knit communities one might expect to

see influence of a member on the community and influence of the community on a member

operating simultaneously (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Integration and fulfillment of needs plays a key role in creating and maintaining a sense

of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Chavis (1986) explained that

reinforcement is a motivator of behavior and a primary function of a strong community. In order

for a group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the membership must be individually

rewarding for its members. Some rewards that effectively reinforce community include status of

membership, group success, and competence or skills of other members. People are attracted to

individuals and groups that offer the most rewards and benefit them in some way. When

individual values are shared among group members, they find that they have similar needs,

priorities and goals, and that by joining together they are better able to fulfill these needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As a result, a strong community brings people together so that members meet each other's needs, while simultaneously meeting their own (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Finally, a shared emotional connection is the fourth element of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community. A shared emotional connection is facilitated by contact, the interactions of members in shared events; quality of interaction, positive experiences and success which facilitate cohesion; closure, ways to resolve important events positively; investment, the money, time, energy, and intimacy one invests leads to greater emotional involvement; honor, the effect of reward in the presence of community; and spiritual bond, a spiritual connection present to some degree. This shared emotional connection is based in part on a shared history that members identify with. The amount of interpersonal emotional risk one takes with the other members will affect the extent of one's general sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

## Methodology

I applied McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theoretical framework of sense of community through a multi-phase mixed methods exploratory approach to gather both qualitative and quantitative data on the efficacy of Team Rubicon as a community building model. I chose a mixed methods approach, because it provides a more complete understanding of the research problem. For my mixed methods research, I conducted a survey as well as two focus groups. It was necessary for me to conduct the survey first, in order to identify participants for the focus groups. After obtaining the data, I conducted a thematic analysis of the survey and focus group data and then triangulated it with the literature review and McMillan and Chavis' sense of

community framework, in order to gain a better understanding of the efficacy of Team Rubicon as a community building model.

**Survey**

I chose to administer a survey as the first phase of my multi-phase approach. My sample population was comprised of Team Rubicon Region VI veterans. The purpose of my survey was to identify a representative sample of that population for my focus groups. Furthermore, the survey was necessary to allow the participants to self identify their various levels of involvement in Team Rubicon, in order for me to separate them into two different focus groups. Therefore, the survey, located in Appendix A, was comprised of 23 questions based on a variety of factors including demographics, military experience, and indicators of involvement in Team Rubicon. The survey questions were modeled after similar questions asked in the national Team Rubicon 2018 Impact Survey to ensure participants would be familiar with the terminology.

The Team Rubicon Region VI Membership Coordinator administered the survey. She distributed the survey by posting the link to my survey on the "Team Rubicon - Region 6" Facebook page, which has over 3800 likes and in the "Team Rubicon: Texas" Facebook group, which has over 1600 members. Additionally, she posted the survey link in a Slack group of approximately 50 Region VI leadership members. Initially, it would appear that the survey was available to approximately 5,500 individuals, however there are two caveats to this assumption. The first disclaimer is that members of the "Team Rubicon: Texas" page and Region VI Slack group may have also liked the "Team Rubicon - Region 6" Facebook page and vice versa. Therefore, this could have resulted in a fewer number of individuals seeing the survey and a greater number of individuals seeing the survey more than once. The second disclaimer is that this survey was only open to veterans, while Team Rubicon members are comprised of both

veterans and civilians. Approximately 75% of Team Rubicon Region VI members are veterans;

therefore it is safe to assume that 25% of individuals that saw the survey were ineligible to

respond to it. The survey link was active for one week and during that week I collected twenty-

three survey responses.

Upon the close of the survey, I compiled the data and conducted an analysis. I separated

the responses into two groups based on their level of involvement in Team Rubicon. In the

survey, involvement was defined as the degree to which one feels that an organization is

meaningful, important, relevant, and interesting. The first group had ten individuals who had self

identified as "slightly involved" or "somewhat involved" in Team Rubicon and the second group

had thirteen individuals who had self identified as "moderately involved" or "highly involved in

Team Rubicon. I chose to separate the survey responses into these two groups in order to explore

whether level of involvement impacted the participants' perceptions of their experience within

the organization.

**Focus Groups**

For the second phase of my research, I conducted two online focus groups with

participants that were self selected from the pool of survey respondents. I chose to host the focus

groups online, as the participants were located throughout Team Rubicon Region VI, which is

comprised of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana, and it was not feasible

to convene in person. Additionally, I believed that the anonymity of hosting the focus groups

online would help participants feel more comfortable and encourage them to open up about their

experiences.

I emailed all twenty-three survey respondents, notifying them that they had been chosen

to participate in a focus group and asked them to select their availability for a 90 minute session

from a variety of dates and times. I gave the participants a week to respond to the email. At the

end of the week, I had received eight responses and had not heard back from fourteen.

Additionally, one of the emails was not delivered and was returned to me because the address

could not be found or was unable to receive mail. I sent a follow-up email to the fourteen

individuals I had not heard back from and gave them another week to respond. I received three

additional responses, however one individual was not available to participate in any of the

provided time slots. I sent a final email requesting participation in the focus groups to the eleven

individuals I still had not heard from and received three responses. Therefore, in the end I

received correspondence from fourteen out of the twenty-three survey participants, but only

thirteen were available to participate. Of those thirteen individuals, one had self identified as

"slightly involved" in Team Rubicon, two had self identified as "somewhat involved" in Team

Rubicon, three had self identified as "moderately involved" in Team Rubicon, and seven had self

identified as "very involved" in Team Rubicon. After looking at the availability of the

participants, I selected the date and time for each focus group that had the greatest number of

responses and emailed all thirteen participants to ensure they were still available. I heard back

from nine individuals. Six confirmed their availability, one announced he was no longer

available to participate, and one stated he was potentially available. I removed the individual

who was unable to participate and emailed the remaining twelve participants a reminder the day

before the focus group and an hour before the focus group with information on how to access the

focus group in the web-based conferencing platform BlueJeans.

　　　　Throughout the month of February, two semi-structured focus groups were conducted

and recorded. Each focus group utilized the same protocol and was asked the same questions.

The focus group protocol, located in Appendix D, is grounded in the literature referenced

throughout the literature review above, as well as McMillan and Chavis' theoretical framework

of sense of community (1986). The questions were designed to delve into the four elements that

comprise the theory of sense of community. In the end, the first focus group had two individuals;

one who had self identified as "slightly involved" in Team Rubicon and one who had self

identified as "somewhat involved" in Team Rubicon. The second focus group had six

individuals; one who had self identified as "moderately involved" in Team Rubicon and five

individuals who had self identified as "very involved" in Team Rubicon. Each focus group lasted

between 60-90 minutes. Following the completion of the focus groups, all participants were

emailed a thank you note.

Before data analysis began, I transcribed the focus group sessions by hand and then

listened to the focus group recordings several times to ensure they were accurately depicted in

the transcription. After the transcriptions were complete, I began the process of analyzing the

focus group data utilizing a qualitative data analysis technique called constant comparison

analysis. Three major stages characterize constant comparison analysis, including open coding,

axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the first stage of open

coding, I grouped the data into smaller units and attached a code to each unit. Then during axial

coding, I grouped these codes into categories that are presented in the findings section. Finally,

in the third stage of selective coding, I utilized McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of

community framework to develop themes that accurately expressed the content of each of the

groups of categories.

**Limitations, Anonymity, and Positionality**

When conducting my research, I encountered several limitations. Originally, I planned on

working with Team Rubicon headquarters to administer my survey nationally to all Team

Rubicon veterans. However, after encountering some administrative challenges, I had to create a new plan and opted to work specifically with Team Rubicon Region VI instead. This decision limited the number and range of Team Rubicon veterans that my survey was available to. However, after witnessing the low survey response rate to the national Team Rubicon 2018 Impact Survey, I was hopeful taking a more local approach would improve my survey response rate. Time was another challenge, as I only had one month to complete data collection, which limited the amount of time I was able to recruit participants and conduct the focus groups. As a result, my survey link was only active for one week and received twenty-three responses. Furthermore, despite the numerous email messages I sent to the survey respondents, I heard back from fourteen out of the twenty-three respondents and only twelve of them were available during the scheduled focus group time slots. Additionally, four individuals who had originally claimed to be available did not show up to their scheduled focus groups. These uncontrollable factors not only limited the number of focus group participants, but unfortunately limited the gender of the participants to only self identified males. It also limited several other demographic factors including age, race and sexual orientation of the participants. I had planned on ensuring that the focus group participants I selected would be a representative sample of the veterans in Team Rubicon Region VI however, due to the low response rate this was impossible to do.

    I ensured anonymity throughout the entire research process. I used Google Forms to collect my survey results. The survey did not ask participants for their names, and the only contact information that was collected was their email addresses. Their email addresses were solely used to contact individuals for participation in the focus groups. During the focus groups, individuals introduced themselves via first name only. During the transcription process, each participant was coded with a number so that the data was not stored with his name. After the

focus groups recordings were transcribed, the recordings were destroyed. Additionally, all of the information and data was stored on my password protected personal computer.

As a researcher, I tried to remain impartial and not allow my bias to affect my research. However, it is important to note that I am a member of Team Rubicon and I have a positive bias towards this organization. Therefore, there is a chance that my personal experience with Team Rubicon impacted the lens in which I analyzed the data through.

## Findings

The findings from the survey and focus groups are outlined below. These findings provide an overview of the survey respondents' demographic information, military experience, and level of involvement in Team Rubicon; and an understanding of the information and themes collected from the focus group participants.

### Survey Findings

The survey asked participants questions pertaining to their military background, their involvement in Team Rubicon, and their identity. All twenty-three of the survey responses were valid. Although the survey collected a lot of interesting data, a selection of the most relevant findings was chosen and is presented in the figures below.

Figure 1 shows the different branches of the military the veterans served. Survey participants represented five different military organizations, including the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and National Guard. Figure 2 depicts the length of time participants had served on active duty. The years of active duty service spanned from 1-4 years all the way to more than 24 years. Figure 3 shows how many years participants had been members of Team Rubicon for. It is interesting that 52% of participants had only been members of Team Rubicon for less than two years. Figure 4 displays participants' self-selected level of involvement in Team Rubicon.

Despite the fact that more than half of the participants had only been members of Team Rubicon for two years or less, 57% of individuals identified as either moderately or very involved in the organization. Figure 5 depicts the gender identity of the participants. Unfortunately, this was not evenly distributed, as 78% of the participants identified as male. Finally, Figure 6 shows the age range of the participants. It is important to note that while their ages spanned from 21-29 to 70 or older, 88% of the participants were over the age of 50.
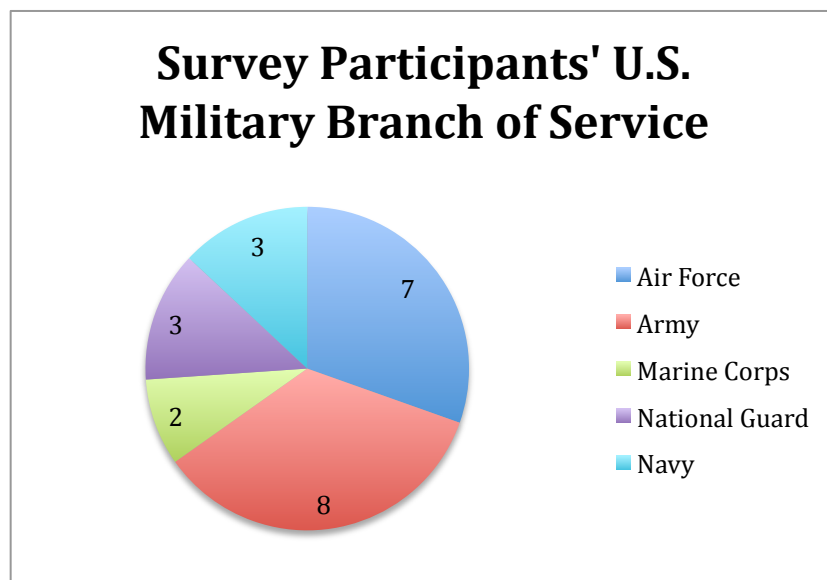


Figure 1: Survey Participants' U.S. Military Branch of Service
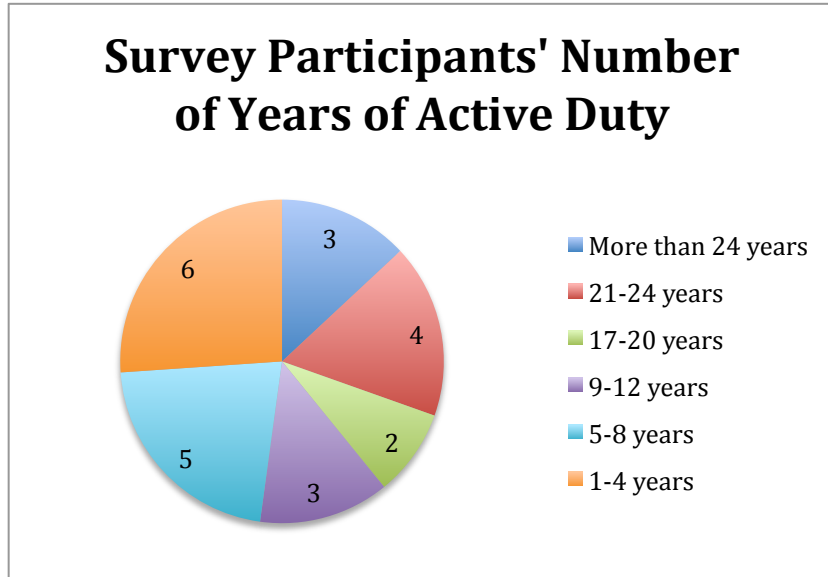
Figure 2: Survey Participants' Number of Years of Active Duty
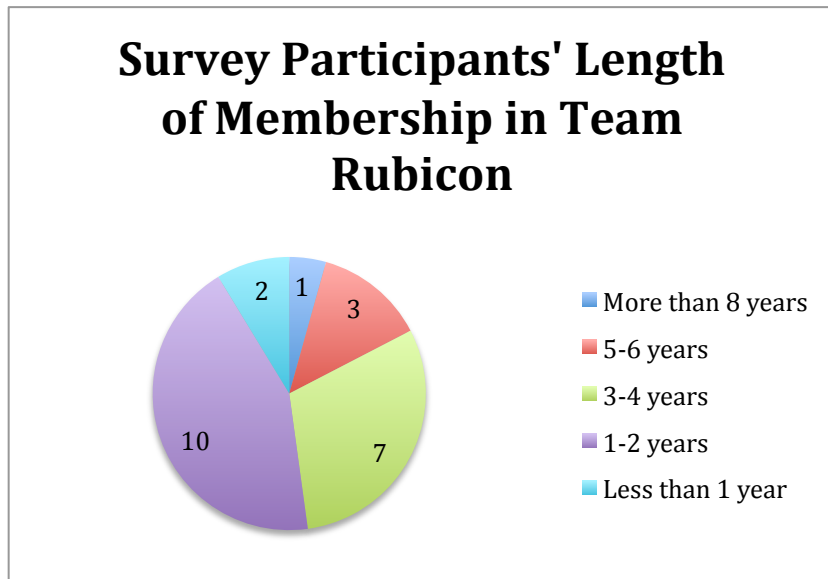


Figure 3: Survey Participants' Length of Membership in Team Rubicon
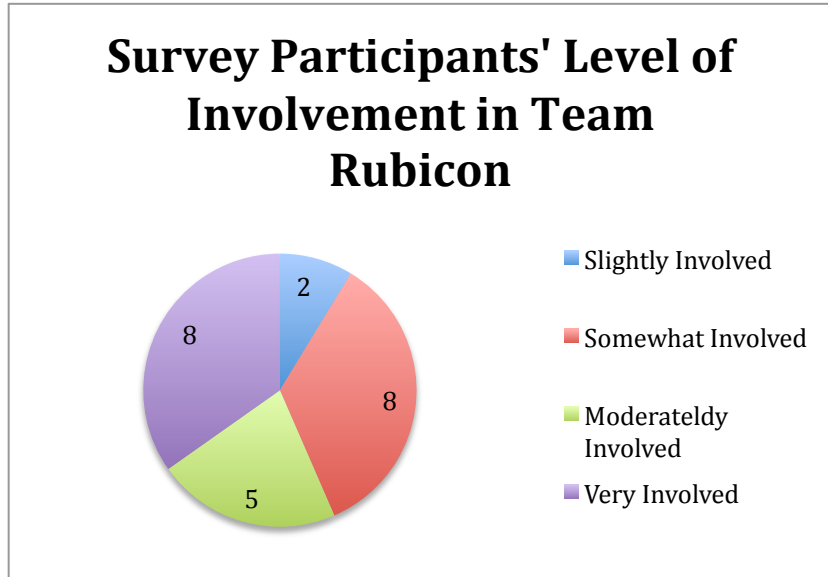
Figure 4: Survey Participants' Level of Involvement in Team Rubicon
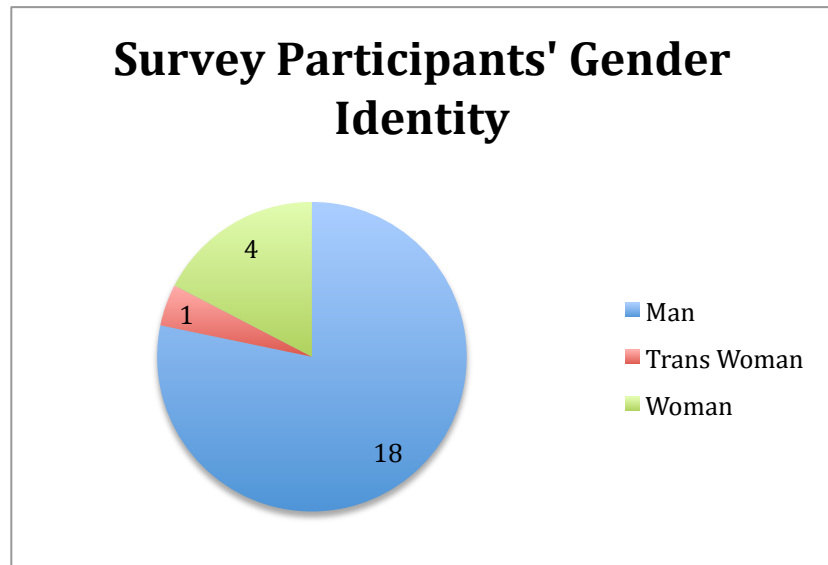


Figure 5: Survey Participants' Gender Identity
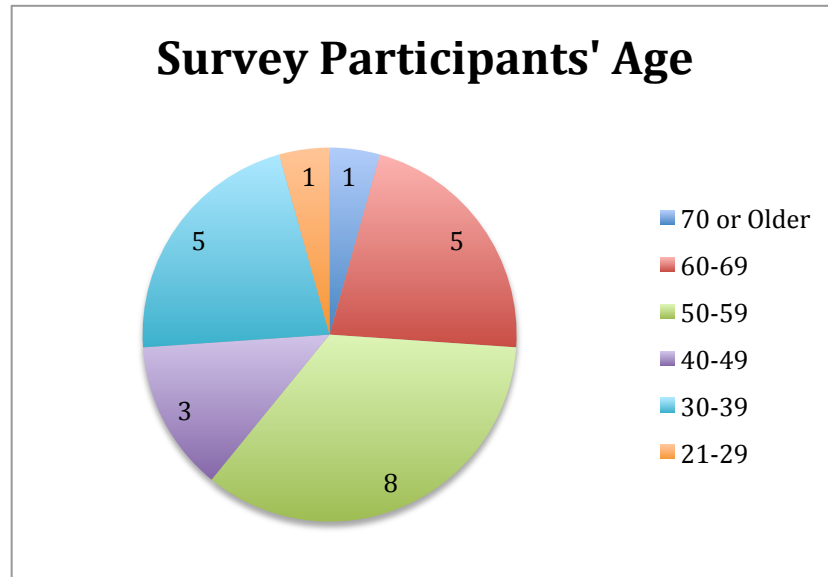
Figure 6: Survey Participants' Age

It is important to note that although twenty-three survey responses were received, only eight of those individuals participated in the two focus groups. In order to provide background context for the individuals discussed below, their survey responses are included in Appendix B and C. Appendix B shows the demographic data and military experience that was collected in the survey, while Appendix C depicts the survey data pertaining to level of involvement in Team Rubicon.

**Focus Group Findings**

After reviewing the two focus groups, several themes emerged that were consistent between both groups, as well as with the four elements that comprise McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community:

1. Membership

2. Influence

3. Integration and fulfillment of needs

4. Shared emotional connection

**Membership** is the feeling of belonging and sharing a sense of personal connection among members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When focus group participants addressed why they had chosen to become a member of Team Rubicon, common factors were revealed. This included a desire to volunteer with fellow veterans (3), a recommendation from a fellow veteran or veteran based organization (3), or a personal connection to the mission of Team Rubicon (2). During the coding process, four additional categories of membership were identified including camaraderie, feeling of belonging, familiarity to military culture, and equalizing force between veterans and civilians.

During both focus groups, participants spoke about why they remained involved as a member. In Focus Group 1, Four said, "I get a sense of accomplishment being back involved in an organization, the camaraderie, people associating with people like minded, not in everything, but being able to have some down time with folks who understand each others humor." The theme of camaraderie was mentioned again in Focus Group 2 when Nine said,

> There are several other things that I've definitely gotten out of Team Rubicon… One of those is developing the friendships and the camaraderie of other greyshirts who are on deployment or that you interact with in your local area for service projects, training and social events.

Another aspect of membership revealed in Focus Group 2 was the feeling of belonging. Seventeen said, "The experience feeling a part of, belonging to something, it really feels great. I've had some bouts with depression and this has been a self boost, helping me out quite a bit, so I appreciate that part of TR."

During Focus Group 2, several other factors that influenced membership were also discussed, including the familiarity of Team Rubicon to the military and the fact that Team

Rubicon serves as an equalizing force between veterans and civilians. All participants in the second focus group agreed upon the idea that Team Rubicon has opened up a world of variation of the military. Six explained how Team Rubicon's cultural familiarity to the military provides a "home" feeling by saying,

> I tell veterans it's a great place to be and a great place to spend time, because it does kind of make you feel at home. It reminds you a lot of being in the service, without all the regimentation and the haircuts and the uniforms and everything. At the same time as [Nine] pointed out, we use a lot of the same terminology. Using certain methods that are similar to the way the military does things, kinda gives you that home feeling.

All participants also unanimously agreed that on an operation it is often difficult to tell who are civilians and who are prior military. As Twenty-three stated,

> One of the things that I figured out right away is that Team Rubicon is an equal opportunity abuser. So if you're a civilian, most of the time you have to ask someone if they are a veteran or not, because you can't really tell. They get out there and kickass just like we do and they are considered peers. They don't have any war stories, but some of them have "war" stories from their civilian life, they're just the same as us, so I think that is great.

**Influence** is a reciprocal sense of mattering and making a difference between the group and its members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In both focus groups, it was clear that participants believed their involvement in Team Rubicon provided them with an avenue to have a direct positive impact on the lives of other people, with opportunities to step up into a leadership role and positively influence the organization, and in turn helped them discover a sense of purpose.

In Focus Group 1, participants spoke about the positive interactions they had with the civilians they served on operations. Four talked about how Team Rubicon members went above and beyond the traditional scope of disaster relief, saying, "you bake birthday cakes for one gentleman who lost his roof and his tree, you get to hug people and comfort them." Fourteen agreed and said, "on the ops that I've been on, the civilians always come away with being overwhelmed with how fast we all get together, as far as the veterans go, and they are usually amazed by that." In Focus Group 2, Seventeen expressed a similar sentiment when he told a story about going to assess a home and witnessing the homeowner collapse. He explained that, "not only did we do damage assessment, I probably helped save a guy's life." Additionally, Twenty-two stated that, "for the civilians, especially the emergency management crowd… I think Team Rubicon is a gift… and the more they know about it and can utilize us, the better for them."

Beyond the desire to make a difference in the lives of others, Focus Group 2 participants expressed a desire to influence Team Rubicon, through continued and deeper involvement in the organization. Twenty-two explained how,

> The longer I am in, the more I realize how much work people do so that we can work, whether the we is on a strike team or a strike team leader, whatever level you're on, there are other people you may or may not know who they are who had to work really hard for you to be able to do your job.

All six participants explained how they have stepped up and helped influence Team Rubicon through continued deployments on operations and taking on the extra responsibility of a volunteer leadership role. Six said he, "went on Operation Go Big and became addicted… over Christmas was my twentieth national deployment to Amberjack." Seventeen talked about how

after his second operation he fell in love with logistics, came home, "went through the whole

interview process and everything" and accepted a volunteer leadership position in his city, and

then a week later "put in for Kickback and was the Logistics Section Chief for that one".

Twenty-three spoke about being one of the original members from his region and said,

"Amberjack was my eleventh deployment, I've been on some of the big ones and… my goal is to

get carried off the field by my TR compatriots."

An important aspect of influence is this idea of reciprocity and that in addition to making

a difference in the lives of others and in the organization itself, involvement in an organization

makes a difference in the lives of its members. During Focus Group 2, this was clearly expressed

by four individuals who explained how serving others through Team Rubicon provided them

with a sense of purpose. Twenty-three shared how finding purpose through Team Rubicon

influenced his mental health by saying,

> I like to think that people should be doing this out of a sense of compassion. And anytime
>
> you have a chance to exhibit compassion, I think that's very healthy, it's good for you.
>
> And so in that respect, I think it's given me something to do that had a higher purpose
>
> and I think that's made me a healthier person.

Nine explained how Team Rubicon gave him a sense of purpose that was lacking in his job. He

said,

> In the last several years, I've been in a role where finding that sense of purpose is really
>
> difficult… I really liked the idea of being able to have a bit more of a direct impact on
>
> someone at their time of need. And at least during the two ops that I've been on, I did
>
> have that opportunity. It was very invigorating or exciting to be able to be part of that and
>
> it not be something that is part of your job, something that's part of what you're expected

to do, but something that you're able to do. To have the opportunity to help someone,

that's a thrilling opportunity. I had several of those types of opportunities, especially in

Amberjack and I look forward to being able to have more of those in the future.

**Integration and fulfillment of needs** is the belief that members' needs will be met

through resources provided by their membership in the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). After

reviewing Focus Group 1 and 2, four categories emerged in this theme that were present

throughout both focus groups. Those categories include utilizing their military skills, learning

new skills, providing opportunities for new career paths, and overall reintegration.

During both focus groups, participants talked about how the skills they gained in the

military help them to be successful in Team Rubicon. In particular, the skills of leadership (4),

drive to accomplish a mission, i.e. "get shit done" (6), and ability to thrive in unfamiliar

environments or stressful situations (3) were mentioned multiple times. It was also expressed that

Team Rubicon finds unique ways to utilize an individual's specific skill set. Nine explained that

Team Rubicon does not discriminate against individuals of various abilities by saying,

> There is a job for just about anybody, regardless of your skill set or abilities, and I might
>
> say in particular physical abilities. Whether you have some type of disability or… maybe
>
> you just don't have the ability to wear a mask and do muck out all day long or haul logs
>
> as a swamper… there are jobs and ways to put almost anyone to use.

In terms of learning new skills, participants from both groups talked about learning

practical skills like mucking out a house. Four said,

> I've done a lot of things that I've never done before, like demolition… although I'm
>
> pretty handy and I've done a lot of stuff in homes, I'd never put siding up, so I got to do
>
> that and I laid flooring.

Nine expressed a similar sentiment saying, "most of the types of skills I have learned are things like mucking out a house, I'd never done that before… But you know there are a lot of things throughout the training… that I think really helped me." Additionally, five participants spoke about learning about the world of emergency management through Team Rubicon.

Due to their experience in Team Rubicon, three out of the eight focus group participants discovered a new career path. In Focus Group 1, Fourteen said,

> With Team Rubicon, the greatest impact that it provided for me, was it got me back into a mindset of helping people… After I got out of the military there was a short vacuum there when I was working in the civilian sector and getting with Team Rubicon kind of put me down a whole new career path you could say. I started volunteering with Team Rubicon and training and then because of that I actually went back to school to become a paramedic and I do that on a day to day basis.

In Focus Group 2, both Six and Twenty-three were offered jobs for long term disaster relief organizations, because of their connection to Team Rubicon. According to Six,

> The honest to God truth is the only reason I'm here in my job is because I was here for almost two months after Hurricane Harvey on the operation. I got to know the local people and they reached out to me and asked if I'd come help run the long term recovery group, so that's pretty much how I ended up here… I certainly wouldn't be in my place of employment now without having been a part of Team Rubicon that's for sure.

Twenty-three share a similar story stating, "I basically was offered this job because I showed up one day with a polo shirt that said Team Rubicon on it" and confessed that his county

> Was one of the hardest hit areas in Hurricane Harvey. We still have a lot of damage that's being done… So that created an opportunity for me. I had my own medical business and I

kinda backed out of that and this is where I am supposed to be, having been with Team

Rubicon.

Other participants were optimistic that although their involvement in Team Rubicon has not led

to some type of employment opportunity or impact on a job, it could in the future. Twenty-three

had some wisdom to share on this topic. He said,

I think it's good for people to understand too and I think [Six] and I are good examples,

that a lot of the stuff they do within Team Rubicon they can take outside. They can take it

to their job or they can take it to other nonprofit groups that they work with. Team

Rubicon is really big on pushing people up. You can start out as a plebe and they are

going to push you up and help you rise up into positions of leadership. I think some

people don't realize that they have skills and they can develop skills that are going to

make them better as a person and as a professional.

Finally, in regards to overall reintegration, both focus groups had some interesting things

to share. In Focus Group 1, Four said,

When I came to Austin in 2011, I guess it would have been like coming fresh out of the

military into a new situation, not knowing anybody, and yes Team Rubicon did in that

situation get me integrated into a community, where I could start serving and feel I don't

know if useful is the word, but feel connected.

In Focus Group 2, the participants talked about how they had all transitioned out of the military

many years ago. However, they all agreed that a strong benefit of Team Rubicon is the way it

helps younger veterans. Twenty-two explained that Team Rubicon helps veterans regain three

things that are often difficult to find after leaving the military. He said,

To the military folks I would say this identity, purpose, community thing, that's a thing.

Whether it supplements those aspects of your life that you have already or it is the thing, I

mean it's a thing and it's a legit thing.

**Shared emotional connection** is the commitment of members to share history, common

places, time, and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). After reviewing both focus

groups, three themes emerged under the category of shared emotional connection. These themes

are similar experiences, friendship as a support network, and the commitment to help each other.

Similar experiences refer to both their experiences in the military, as well as in Team

Rubicon. In Focus Group 1, Fourteen explained, "it was good getting back with people that had

the same kind of mindset that I had while I was in the military." During Focus Group 2, Nine

emphasized that while the veteran connection was important, the added similar passion for Team

Rubicon lead to the development of a deeper emotional connection. He elaborated saying,

I'd meet a lot of veterans, but I didn't have any type of common connection with them

really other than the fact that we had all been in the service at one point or another, but

not necessarily together in the service so to speak. The difference with TR that I find is

that kind of brings back another group where you have something in common with each

other, right something beyond oh you were both veterans, but not only are you both

veterans, but you are part of TR. And that's especially true for those with who you've

maybe been on an operation or some type of training or service project. And so it's a bit

of a deeper relationship that you have with those, than maybe someone you meet in your

local community who is a veteran. It has definitely been a big help for me in that regard.

In Focus Group 2, participants also discussed how their experiences in Team Rubicon bonded them together. In particular, they talked about the destruction they have seen and how difficult it is to try to explain that to someone who was not there to experience it for themselves. Seventeen explained this challenge well when he said,

> All week you got those times at the fire pit at the end of the night and that camaraderie and everything. But then you come home and you try to tell your spouse what you did or what you experienced and they just look at you like, "okay that's nice, goodnight." It's kinda hard. I guess that's where those social groups and things like that come back in. I think it's probably one reason we contact each other so much on Facebook and stuff after an op, because you're still trying to hold on to that experience you had last week a little bit or relive those memories.

> This is a good transition into the next theme of friendship as an informal support system. In both focus groups, participants expressed the importance of staying in contact with other Team Rubicon members after an operation via social media. In Focus Group 1, Fourteen explained, "Team Rubicon has been a force multiplier in my friends list when it comes to Facebook. There are a few that I stay in regular contact with, but definitely the Facebook and the social media aspects of it." This idea of using social media as an informal support system was also expressed in Focus Group 2 by Six who said,

> Yeah big support system in the sense that on any given day I'm chatting on Facebook with or texting with people from all over the country. In a weird way, that social interaction is in its own way a support system.

All of the focus group participants agreed with Six and Twenty-two elaborated saying,

I've expanded the world of veterans I know and I'm kinda with [Six], in that if you call

friends and increasing friends a support system then yes, but I think I've just been blessed

with gaining more friends and friends through common works, you know working on

something together.

Seventeen talked about how quickly that friendship forms, "it's just amazing you know, you see

a team start off strangers on that Saturday or Sunday, and by the time Wednesday comes around,

it's like these are a group of old friends meeting again."

As the participants in both focus group spoke, it became clear that the relationships they

formed in Team Rubicon went beyond a simple social support system and a deeper commitment

to help one another was revealed. In Focus Group 1, Four said,

It's kind of one of those things, where you're in an environment, where you're all

working together as a team, and you see people excelling in the environment, and then it's

difficult or sad to hear when some of those people go back and they're not operating the

same, they might have PTSD or whatever. I've done the Assist training and tried to be

more educated on that, but sometimes it's a little helpless feeling that you can't be a better

asset to those people… But I appreciate that Team Rubicon helps a lot of veterans. I am

grateful to be a part of that.

In Focus Group 2, Twenty-three expressed a responsibility to care for his fellow veterans,

I've seen people step up for one another. I've had to send guys home on deployments that

got triggered or whatever by PTSD and traumatic brain injury stuff. We run into our

fellow veterans that are exhibiting symptoms and stuff like that, so I think it's incumbent

on us to take care of them and take care of one another. It's been a great part of my

personality now that I can reach out to people and help them.

In Focus Group 2, Nine explained how he helps fellow student veterans reintegrate,

> I am a student at a local university and I am part of the veterans group there. Of course I
> am the old guy there that transitioned long ago, all the rest of them are mostly in their
> twenties and have just gotten out… But I have the opportunity to interface with them and
> tell them about TR and try to help them in terms of their integration or that transition into
> the civilian world.

This commitment to help each other is reciprocal and Twenty-three explained this saying,

> Everyone goes through their ups and downs and I know that if I have a problem I can call
> [Six], I can call [Twenty-two], I can call [Nine] and talk to them, tell them I'm having
> kinda a rough day. They'd say, "yeah you know we've been there, you're gonna get
> through it, we've got your back." I feel confident that things are gonna be good and if I
> do hit some rough spots, I know that I've got backup to take care of me, so it's a good
> thing.

**Discussion**

Team Rubicon claims that by engaging veterans in continued service through disaster response, "many veteran volunteers begin to regain the purpose, community, and identity that is difficult to find upon leaving the armed forces" (Team Rubicon, 2018). This study investigated this claim and explored the efficacy of Team Rubicon as a community building model. Based on the responses from the two focus groups, it appears that involvement in Team Rubicon improves the reintegration of veterans, because the organization builds a strong community of both veteran and civilian volunteers. Twenty-two summarized this well by saying, "this identity, purpose, community thing, that's a thing. Whether it supplements those aspects of your life that you have already or it is the thing, I mean it's a thing and it's a legit thing."

The research presented in this capstone suggests that Team Rubicon can have a positive impact on the lives of its veteran members. Even the individuals who self identified as only "slightly" or "somewhat" involved, reported benefits. The findings from this study were generally consistent with the literature. What sets this research apart is the application of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community, which provides a framework to understand why Team Rubicon's model is potentially efficacious in building a strong community and improving the reintegration of veterans.

Previous studies on Team Rubicon took a siloed approach to investigating their model, as each study only looks at one aspect of the organization and its impact on veterans. While these studies reveal important information, they do not have an underlying framework that connects all of the different factors to ultimately explain why Team Rubicon's model works. Topics that were previously investigated include Team Rubicon's strength-based approach, peer-supportive environment, empowerment lens, destigmatizing experience, and mental health impact. After applying McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community framework to this study, it was revealed that all of those aspects were represented throughout the four elements of the theory, which include membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

**Membership**

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), membership is comprised of five attributes that work together in order to establish who is a part of the community and who is not. One of these key attributes is a sense of belonging and identification, which involves the feeling of acceptance by the group, the belief that one has a place in the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Membership in Team Rubicon is attractive to

veterans for a variety of reasons, but the ability to volunteer alongside other veterans and the familiarity of Team Rubicon to military culture were key components in establishing a sense of belonging. When veterans transition into civilian society they are often caught in this "civil-military cultural gap" between military culture, where they feel a sense of belonging, and civilian culture, where they feel misunderstood (Demers, 2011). Team Rubicon eases that gap by opening up a world of variation of the military that uses similar methods and language, which as Six described, "kinda gives you that home feeling." Seventeen highlighted the impact a sense of belonging can have when he shared a story about helping to cook dinner for 130 people on an operation and said, "for my mental health and everything that felt great, it felt great being you know part of something again."

This notion of belonging does not just apply to the veteran members of Team Rubicon. It was evident that membership in Team Rubicon serves as an equalizing force between veterans and civilians. Six expressed that when civilian members first join they are often concerned the veterans won't accept them. However, he said, "it's a great experience for civilians when they realize holy crap these people will accept me as long as I'm doing everything I can." Furthermore, everyone agreed on an operation it is often difficult to tell who is civilian and who is prior military, because as Seventeen stated, "they have the same willingness to go out and help people as we do." These relationships that form between veterans and civilians through membership in Team Rubicon help to dispel the negative stereotypes and stigmatizing views of veterans in society, which ultimately helps veterans feel more connected and less isolated from society.

**Influence**

McMillan and Chavis (1986) note that members are more attracted to a group in which they feel they are influential. This notion of influence is reciprocal and in tightly knit communities, influence of a member on the community and influence of the community on a member operate simultaneously (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It is evident that influence is a key factor in veteran members continued participation in Team Rubicon. Returning veterans are often caught in transition between who they were in the military and who they are in the civilian world (Demers, 2011). While in the military, they felt a strong sense of purpose that they often lose when they leave the service (Demers, 2011). During the focus groups, participants talked about this desire to feel beneficial and contribute to something again. Team Rubicon helps fill that void by allowing veterans to positively influence their communities by being on the response and relief side of a natural disaster. As Twenty-two stated, Team Rubicon essentially is a "group of friends who are trying to accomplish something for the good of other people." Team Rubicon is primarily a volunteer led organization and relies heavily on the personal investment of members. Six of the eight focus group participants sought a deeper involvement in the organization and positively influenced Team Rubicon by taking on a volunteer leadership role. In the process of making a difference in the lives of others and in the organization itself, involvement in Team Rubicon positively influences the lives of its members through renewing their sense of purpose. According to Nine, "Team Rubicon has helped me with one thing in particular, which would have to be that sense of purpose."

**Integration and Fulfillment of Needs**

Integration and fulfillment of needs plays a primary role in the creation of a strong community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) A strong community brings people that have similar

needs, priorities and goals together, so that by joining together they are better able to fulfill these needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). A critical "need" for many veterans is employment, as the unemployment rate for OIF/OEF veterans actually outpaces the adult unemployment rate (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). However, veterans perceive that their military experiences and skills are not valued in civilian society and prospective employers won't hire them due to negative stereotypes (Kranke et al., 2017b). Team Rubicon not only uses the unique skill set of veterans to meet their mission, they also teach them new skills and provide them with opportunities for new career paths, which ultimately improves their reintegration.

Veterans are the agent of Team Rubicon's mission, comprising over 70% of their volunteer base. The skills they gained in the military such as perseverance, hard work, leadership, drive to get a mission done, teamwork, discipline, and ability to execute operations in a stressful environment are valued by Team Rubicon and make them uniquely qualified to provide disaster relief. Nine explained that "it wasn't any of the technical skills, it was… leadership, sense of urgency, teamwork and focusing on the overall mission and getting it done… and I believe that they are largely at play at Team Rubicon as well." Furthermore, membership in Team Rubicon opens up the world of emergency management to veterans. In fact, participation in Team Rubicon led several focus group participants down new career paths in the field of emergency management. Although not everyone's involvement has led to an employment opportunity, there are other professional benefits to being a member of Team Rubicon. Twenty-three provided an example of this saying, "I actually wrote letters of recommendation for other people on the team that they could take on their next op or take to a potential employer." The ability to learn new skills and network within Team Rubicon fulfills a need.

**Shared Emotional Connection**

Finally, the amount of shared emotional connection among members affects the extent of one's general sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This shared emotional connection is facilitated by quality interactions of members in shared events and is based in part on a shared history that members identify with (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Veterans often return home with a limited social network and find it difficult to connect with family and friends who do not have experiences in war contexts (Kranke et al., 2017b). A social support system, particularly of veterans, is crucial in helping veterans feel comfortable discussing and seeking care for mental health concerns and coping with the stress of reintegration (Nesbitt & Reingold, 2011). Team Rubicon is poised to help veteran members create a support system by developing a shared emotional connection through similar experiences, friendship, and the commitment of veterans to help each other.

Team Rubicon veterans have a shared history of military service that initially bonds them, however that relationship deepens through participation in Team Rubicon. They quickly realize that they have commonalities beyond their military past, such as a passion for helping others. Additionally, similar to their time in the military, during Team Rubicon operations they encounter difficult circumstances that are hard to articulate to someone who was not there to experience it. Twenty-three explained this concept by saying, "the pictures that you see don't give it justice. You have to be on the ground and see it live to have an impact." Therefore, when they return home to their families they struggle to explain what they have experienced and rely on the social network of Team Rubicon members to as Seventeen shared, "hold on to that experience you had last week a little bit or relive one those memories you had last week." It was evident in both focus groups that social media platforms like Facebook served as a crucial

informal support system for Team Rubicon veterans after an operation. This support system is especially critical for veterans experiencing mental health challenges. Focus group participants spoke about how it is incumbent on Team Rubicon members to take care of one another. Twenty-three expressed this by saying "I feel a sense of responsibility to help anybody who needs help reintegrating. I'm gonna step up and help them anyway I can… whatever I can do to help them that's what I'm gonna do, because that's what we're about." By developing a shared emotional connection, Team Rubicon veterans are able to rely on each other in order to ease their transition into the civilian world.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates how the four tenets of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community, including membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection, are utilized by Team Rubicon to build a strong community of veterans. Unfortunately, this research is not generalizable, because it was conducted with a small sample of primarily older, white, male Team Rubicon Region VI members. Therefore, future research is needed to confirm its findings. It is essential that future studies assess a large, representative, national sample of Team Rubicon veterans. In particular, it is crucial that the experiences of women are assessed. Additionally, representation from various racial, ethnic, and other minority groups should be included. Furthermore, future samples should include younger veterans who have recently separated from the military. While some participants in this study had been members of Team Rubicon for five to six years, others had only joined less than a year ago. This study was cross-sectional and therefore the long-term effects of Team Rubicon membership for these veterans are unknown. It is recommended that a follow-up study is conducted or that future studies investigate the long term trajectory of Team Rubicon veterans.

Due to the passing of the G.I. Bill and the challenges veterans face finding employment, the number of veterans enrolled in institutions of higher education has increased. Unfortunately, veterans often struggle to connect with other students and have difficulty transitioning into the larger campus community. I think it would be interesting for future research to explore the efficacy of implementing a Team Rubicon model on college campuses. I believe there is potential for this to help student veterans build a community on campus, which could help them not only reintegrate into society, but integrate into their campuses as well. Furthermore, the potential for and risk of natural disasters is increasing and universities need to be proactive in preparing a response plan. Having an established Team Rubicon group on campus could potentially assist universities in their recovery efforts by dispatching trained volunteers.

Team Rubicon's model appears to effectively ease veterans' transition into the civilian world by helping this seemingly marginalized population become part of a community. This study demonstrates that Team Rubicon's impact is the result of a number of factors, such as the reflection of a familiar environment of military culture and the provision of a feeling of belonging, a sense of purpose, and a support network. All of these factors are a result of how Team Rubicon's model reflects the ways in which a strong sense of community is established, according to McMillan and Chavis. I believe that their sense of community framework could be beneficial if other organizations applied it to different marginalized communities.

Another consideration for future research would be to investigate whether there is a better framework to explore the efficacy of Team Rubicon as a relationship-building model. Although McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community comes close to explaining how the connection between veterans and civilians is built and maintained, the term "community" may not be the best word to explain this relationship. During the focus group discussions, Six used the

word "family" to describe the bond of Team Rubicon members. He said, "it's very much like a family in the sense that it brings you joy and will completely piss you off other times too, but you're always going to show up for Thanksgiving dinner and it's not like you're going anywhere." This use of familial terminology could be a reflection of the military "brotherhood" veterans are accustomed to. Furthermore, similar to a family, focus group participants discussed how their connection is not dependent on location. Despite being geographically separated after an operation, Team Rubicon veterans maintain a close knit bond through the use of social media. Instead of applying McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community framework, future research could explore the application of a familial building framework to Team Rubicon.

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**Appendix A: Survey**

# Veterans Are Our Passion: Exploring the Efficacy of Team Rubicon as a Community Building Model

We are collecting email addresses for the sole purpose of contacting survey participants to participate in a voluntary online focus group. Your email address will not be used for any other purpose.

## Email address *

Valid email address

This form is collecting email addresses.   Change settings

## Consent to Participate in Research Study

Title of Study: Veterans Are Our Passion: Exploring the Efficacy of Team Rubicon as a Community Building Model
Investigators: Samantha de Melim, Graduate Student and John Giordano, Professor
IRB Number: IRB-FY18-19-111

Introduction
You are being asked to be in a research study of Team Rubicon veterans. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a veteran of the United States military and a member of Team Rubicon Region VI. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study
The purpose of the study is to investigate and assess the personal and social impacts of veterans joining and engaging with Team Rubicon. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented to the public.

Description of the Study Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, you may be asked to participate in an online focus group session that should take approximately 90 minutes.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study
There are no known reasonable, foreseeable or expected risks associated with participating in this study. However, there may be unknown risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study
There are no expected benefits of participation, however we hope that your participation will contribute to the limited field of research on veterans' engagement in civic service.

Confidentiality
The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the researcher will have access to the passwords. The audio or video tape recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and any identifying information will be removed. Once the transcription is complete the recordings will be destroyed. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you. Please be advised that although the researcher will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researcher from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researcher would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

Non-Disclosure Statement
I agree to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed by all of the participants and researcher during the focus group session. If you cannot agree to the above stipulation please see the researcher as you may be ineligible to participate in this study.

Payments or Compensation
You will not receive any payment or compensation for participating in this study.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study, Merrimack College or any study partners. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview or survey at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns
You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Samantha de Melim at demelims@merrimack.edu or by telephone at 401-339-9471. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators, you may contact the Chair of the Merrimack Institutional Review Board at (978) 837-5280 or by email at irb@merrimack.edu. If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can report them to the Chair of the IRB at the contact information above.

Informed Consent
Continuing with this survey indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above.

## Survey Questions

Description (optional)

### Are you a post 9/11 veteran of the U.S. military? *

○ Yes

○ No

### What branch of the U.S. military did you serve in? *

○ Air Force

○ Army

○ Coast Guard

○ Marine Corps

○ National Guard

○ Navy

○ Armed Service of a NATO Ally

○ Other...

How many years on active duty have you served in the military? *

○ Less than 1 year

○ 1-4 years

○ 5-8 years

○ 9-12 years

○ 13-16 years

○ 17-20 years

○ 21-24 years

○ More than 24 years

What is / was your Military Occupational Specialty code or designation? *

Short answer text

How many deployments have you been on in war affected areas? *

○ 0

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4

○ 5

○ More than 5

How many months were you deployed to war affected areas? *

○ Less than 1 month

○ 1 - 6 months

○ 7 - 12 months

○ 13 - 18 months

○ 19 - 24 months

○ 25 - 30 months

○ 31 - 36 months

○ 37 - 42 months

○ 43 - 48 months

○ More than 48 months

Select ALL the conflict(s) for which you deployed: *

☐ Iraq War

☐ Afghanistan

☐ Global War on Terror

☐ Kosovo

☐ Bosnia

☐ Somalia

☐ Persian Gulf War

☐ Vietnam

☐ Not Applicable

☐ Other...


How long have you been a member with Team Rubicon? *

◯ Less than 1 year

◯ 1-2 years

◯ 3-4 years

◯ 5-6 years

◯ 7-8 years

◯ More than 8 years

## In general, how often do you participate in TRAINING with Team Rubicon? *

◯ Often

◯ A moderate amount

◯ Sometimes

◯ Rarely

◯ Never

## In general, how often do you participate in SERVICE PROJECTS with Team Rubicon? *

◯ Often

◯ A moderate amount

◯ Sometimes

◯ Rarely

◯ Never

In general, how often do you participate in SOCIALS with Team Rubicon? *

○ Often

○ A moderate amount

○ Sometimes

○ Rarely

○ Never

In general, how often do you deploy on OPERATIONS with Team Rubicon? *

○ Never

○ Once a year

○ 2-3 times a year

○ 4-6 times a year

○ 7-8 times a year

○ 9 or more times a year

Select ALL years which you have deployed on an operation with Team                    *
Rubicon:

☐ None

- [ ] 2019

- [ ] 2018

- [ ] 2017

- [ ] 2016

- [ ] 2015

- [ ] 2014

- [ ] 2013

- [ ] 2012

- [ ] 2011

- [ ] 2010

Have you taken on a volunteer leadership position within Team Rubicon? *

- ( ) Yes

- ( ) No

If yes, how many years have you held this position?

- ( ) Less than 1 year

○ 1-2 years

○ 3-4 years

○ 5-6 years

○ 7-8 years

○ More than 8 years

Involvement is the degree to which one feels that an organization is                    *
meaningful, important, relevant, and interesting. How involved are you with
Team Rubicon?

○ Not at all involved

○ Slightly involved

○ Somewhat involved

○ Moderately involved

○ Very involved

With which gender do you most identity? *

○ Woman

○ Man

○ Trans woman

○ Trans man

○ Genderqueer/ Non-binary

○ Not listed

○ Prefer not to disclose

## Select your sexual orientation: *

○ Straight/ heterosexual

○ Gay/ homosexual

○ Bisexual

○ Pansexual

○ Queer

○ Not listed

○ Prefer not to disclose

## Select one or more of the following you consider yourself to be: *

☐ White or Caucasian

- [ ] Black or African American

- [ ] Hispanic, latino, or Spanish origin

- [ ] American Indian or Alaskan Native

- [ ] East Asian

- [ ] South Asian

- [ ] Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

- [ ] Not listed

## How old are you? *

- ( ) 18-20

- ( ) 21-29

- ( ) 30-39

- ( ) 40-49

- ( ) 50-59

- ( ) 60-69

- ( ) 70 or older

## What is your highest level of education? *

○ High school graduate

○ Some college

○ Technical/ vocational certificate

○ Associate's degree

○ Bachelor's degree

○ Master's degree

○ Professional degree (MD, PhD, etc)

○ Not listed

## What is your employment status? *

○ Full-time/ Self-employed

○ Part-time, Unemployed

○ Disabled

○ Retired/ Medically retired

○ Student

○ Not listed

## What is your marital status? *

◯ Single never married

◯ Married/ Partnered

◯ Separated/ Divorced

◯ Widow/ Widower

◯ Not listed

**Appendix B: Focus Group Participants' Responses to Demographic and Military**

**Experience Survey Questions**

| Participant | Are you a post 9/11 veteran of the U.S. military? | What branch of the U.S. military did you serve in? | How many years on active duty have you served in the military? | What is / was your Military Occupational Specialty code or designation? | How many deployments have you been on in war affected areas? | How many months were you deployed to war affected areas? | Select ALL the conflict(s) for which you deployed: | With which gender do you most identity? | Select your sexual orientation: | Select one or more of the following you consider yourself to be: | How old are you? | What is your highest level of education? | What is your employment status? | What is your marital status? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Four | Yes | Air Force | More than 24 years | 3c2x0 | 0 | Less than 1 month | Global War on Terror | Man | Straight/ heterosexual | White or Caucasian, Hispanic, latino, or Spanish origin | 60-69 | Bachelor's degree | Full-time/ employed | Married/ Partnered |
| Six | No | Marine Corps | 1-4 years | 0311/2531 | 0 | Less than 1 month | Not Applicable | Man | Straight/ heterosexual | White or Caucasian | 50-59 | Bachelor's degree | Self-employed | Single never married |
| Nine | No | Marine Corps | 5-8 years | 7210 / 0602 | 0 | 0 month | Not Applicable | Man | Straight/ heterosexual | White or Caucasian | 50-59 | Master's degree | Part-time, Unemployed | Married/ Partnered |
| Fourteen | Yes | Army | 21-24 years | 94W4S | 2 | 25 - 30 months | Iraq War, Global War on Terror | Man | Straight/ heterosexual | White or Caucasian | 50-59 | Associate's degree | Self-employed | Married/ Partnered |
| Seventeen | Yes | Air Force | 17-20 years | 3P072 | 0 | Less than 1 month | Global War on Terror | Man | Gay/ homosexual | White or Caucasian | 50-59 | Master's degree | Not listed | Married/ Partnered |
| Nineteen | Yes | National Guard | 1-4 years | 11B | 1 | 7 – 12 months | Iraq War | Man | Straight/ heterosexual | White or Caucasian | 30-39 | Bachelor's degree | Full-time/ Self-employed | Separated/ Divorced |
| Twenty-two | Yes | Army | More than 24 years | 56A | 4 | 31 - 36 months | Iraq War, Bosnia | Man | Straight/ heterosexual | Hispanic, latino, or Spanish origin | 50-59 | Professional degree (MD, PhD, etc) | Retired/ Medically retired | Married/ Partnered |
| Twenty-three | No | Air Force | 1-4 years | 43151E | 0 | Less than 1 month | Not Applicable | Man | Straight/ heterosexual | White or Caucasian | 70 or older | Bachelor's degree | Self-employed | Separated/ Divorced |

**Appendix C: Focus Group Participants' Responses to Team Rubicon Involvement**

**Survey Questions**

| Participant. | How long have you been a member with Team Rubicon? | In general, how often do you participate in TRAINING with Team Rubicon? | In general, how often do you participate in SERVICE PROJECTS with Team Rubicon? | In general, how often do you participate in SOCIALS with Team Rubicon? | In general, how often do you deploy on OPERATIONS with Team Rubicon? | Select ALL years which you have deployed on an operation with Team Rubicon: | Have you taken on a volunteer leadership position within Team Rubicon? | If yes, how many years have you held this position? | Involvement is the degree to which one feels that an organization is meaningful, important, relevant, and interesting. How involved are you with Team Rubicon? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Four | 3-4 years | Sometimes | Sometimes | Rarely | Never | 2018, 2017, 2016 | Yes | Less than 1 year | Slightly involved |
| Six | 3-4 years | Often | Often | Often | 9 or more times a year | 2018, 2017, 2016 | Yes | 1-2 years | Very involved |
| Nine | Less than 1 year | A moderate amount | A moderate amount | A moderate amount | Once a year | 2018 | No | | Very involved |
| Fourteen | 3-4 years | Sometimes | Sometimes | Rarely | Once a year | 2018, 2017 | No | | Somewhat involved |
| Seventeen | 3-4 years | Rarely | Often | Rarely | 4-6 times a year | 2018 | Yes | Less than 1 year | Very involved |
| Nineteen | 3-4 years | Sometimes | Sometimes | Sometimes | 2-3 times a year | 2018, 2017, 2016 | Yes | 1-2 years | Very involved |
| Twenty-two | 1-2 years | Often | Rarely | Rarely | 4-6 times a year | 2018 | Yes | Less than 1 year | Very involved |
| Twenty-three | 5-6 years | A moderate amount | Often | Rarely | 2-3 times a year | 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012 | Yes | 1-2 years | Moderately involved |

**Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol**

**Focus Group Protocol**

**Welcome:** My name is Samantha de Melim and I will be the moderator for today's focus group. I would like to thank you all for volunteering to take part in this focus group. I understand you are busy individuals and I truly appreciate your time. The focus group discussion will take no more than 90 minutes.

**Introduction:** The purpose of this focus group discussion is to investigate and assess the personal and social impacts of veterans joining and engaging with Team Rubicon. All of you have been selected at random to participate in this study because you have served in the United States military and are a member of Team Rubicon. Your point of view and experiences are extremely important in this research study on Team Rubicon. Do you have any questions regarding the purpose of this project?

**Confidentiality:** You have all completed an electronic consent form. By signing this form you agreed to participate in this focus group and to keep our discussion confidential. We will use first names only. Is everyone okay with this discussion being recorded to facilitate my recollection of your comments?

> (If yes, switch on the recorder). Despite being recorded, I would like to assure you that the discussion will be anonymous. The recording will be stored safely until it is transcribed word for word, and then it will be destroyed. The transcribed notes of the focus group will contain no information that would allow individual subjects to be linked to specific statements.

> (If no, the session will not be recorded). Per the request of the group, I will not record this session. I will be taking notes for my recollection, so I may ask for clarification as I write my notes.

**Ground rules:** Before we begin, I would like to go over a few ground rules for the focus group. These rules are in place to ensure that all of you feel comfortable sharing your opinions and experiences.

1. *Voluntary* - If you feel uncomfortable during the discussion, you have the right to leave or to pass on any question. There is no consequence for leaving. Being here is voluntary.
2. *Confidentiality* – As per the non-disclosure statement, please respect the confidentiality of your peers. The moderator will only be sharing the information anonymously with others.
3. *One Speaker at a Time* – Only one person should speak at a time in order to make sure that we can all hear what everyone is saying. There may be a temptation to jump in when someone is talking, but please wait until they have finished.
4. *Use Respectful Language* – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.
5. *Open Discussion* – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. You do not have to agree with the views of other people in the group and you will not be asked to reach consensus on the topics discussed. There will be no right or wrong answers.

6. *Participation is Important* – It is important that everyone's voice is shared and heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. You do not have to speak in any particular order. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!
7. *Questions* - Does anyone have any questions about the ground rules?

**Warm up:** First, I'd like everyone to introduce themselves. Can you tell us your first name, what branch of the military you served in and how long you have been involved in Team Rubicon?

**Introductory Question:** I would like you to take a moment to think about why you joined Team Rubicon. Would anyone like to share what brought them to TR? A friend? Fellow Veteran? Natural Disaster?

**Guiding Questions:**

1. What military skills/assets did you bring to Team Rubicon?
   a. Do you feel your team members valued your skills? The organization overall?
2. What new skills have you learned through Team Rubicon?
   a. How have you leveraged these skills for current or new employment opportunities?
3. Has your involvement with Team Rubicon helped you connect with fellow veterans?
   a. Has your involvement helped you develop a support system?
      i. If so, what is that support like after a deployment is over and you return home?
      ii. If not, what challenges have you faced in developing connections with your fellow veterans?
4. Has your involvement with Team Rubicon helped you connect with civilians?
   a. In what ways?
      i. Did you connect with civilian volunteers? Civilian victims? Family members? Individuals in your community?
5. How has your involvement and engagement with Team Rubicon impacted your personal life?
   a. Has it helped provide a sense of belonging? How?
   b. Has it helped provide a sense of purpose? How?
   c. Has it helped promote a positive sense of self? How?
   d. Has it helped promote positive personal relationships? How?
6. Has your involvement with Team Rubicon impacted your overall reintegration into civilian life?
   a. If it has, can you elaborate on an example(s) of how it has impacted your overall reintegration?
   b. Has your involvement in Team Rubicon influenced you to take new steps in your life?
      i. For example, education? Career? Relationships?
7. Is there an important aspect of your involvement with Team Rubicon that hasn't been brought up today?

**Concluding Question:** Is there anything about Team Rubicon that you think is crucial for Active military, guard or Veterans to know? Anything you think civilians should know?

**Conclusion:** Thank you for participating in today's focus group. This has been a very helpful discussion. The experiences and opinions you have shared will be a valuable asset to the study. If you think of any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share please contact me at demelims@merrimack.edu. As a reminder, please maintain the confidentiality of the other participating individuals; any comments used in the study will be anonymous.