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ARMED TO FARM: DEVELOPING TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR MILITARY VETERANS IN AGRICULTURE*

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ABSTRACT

Farming offers a viable avenue for returning veterans to transition into society and capitalizes on skills that made them successful in the military. However, these opportunities may be missed due to a lack of targeted training programs, guidance, and information for the veteran community. Programs directed toward educating beginning farmers, along with increased awareness and demand for local food production, have provided an opportunity for individuals interested in farming. However, few programs have focused on the needs of veterans interested in agriculture. Since 2007, our team has directly supported approximately 300 veterans interested in farming through workshops, internships, research, and training opportunities and an additional 650 veterans nationally through the Farmer Veteran Coalition. As more programs develop for veterans in agricultural

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disciplines, we believe lessons learned from our partnership with veterans may be beneficial to those working with this population of farmers.

During the last decade, more than 1.5 million American military personnel have served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). The number of U.S. military recruits from rural areas has been consistent during the last 200 years (Heady 2007) and nearly 675,000 returning veterans (about 45%) come from rural America. Recent trends indicate that many of these veterans would like to return to their place of origin and reincorporate themselves into their communities. As veterans return home, they bring with them an opportunity to use their passion, discipline, and sense of service to revitalize America's small farms and rural communities. Fortunately, this comes at a time when there is an increase in demand for locally grown food (Johnson, Aussenberg, and Cowan 2013; Zepeda and Li 2006) and a decrease in new, young farmers wanting to meet this demand (Ahearn and Newton 2009; USDA Census of Agriculture 2014). Small-farm production and agricultural jobs offer an important avenue for returning veterans, allowing them to utilize skills that made them successful in the military, such as discipline, commitment, and teamwork. For some, the self-directed and peaceful environment of agriculture fits their transitional needs. Unfortunately, there is a lack of targeted agricultural training programs offered by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), although the demand for such training has increased.

Through our Armed to Farm Program our team has directly supported approximately 300 veterans in the Southern region, including Arkansas and Missouri, through workshops, internships, research, and training and an additional 650 veterans nationally through the Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC), a nonprofit organization providing resources for military veterans interested in farming. We developed a program that provides educational materials, hands-on activities, mentoring, and networking opportunities for military veterans focused on farming (Donoghue et al. 2013). Our program centers on the needs of poultry and livestock operations, but also provides information on whole farm planning and farm diversification. This program provides specific tools to help veterans during their transition into a rewarding employment option and a fruitful and satisfying civilian life. As new programs develop that target military veteran training in agriculture, we believe the successes and failures of our program may provide insight for those interested in working with veterans. The objectives of this paper are to highlight the need for targeted veteran agricultural training, and to relate our experiences in programs targeted toward veterans. To fulfill the objectives of the program, we have developed a specialized team with expertise in working with veterans, niche

markets (including organics and specialty crops), poultry, small ruminant livestock, and agroforestry, incorporating a range of farming practices that are conducive to diversifying productivity and increasing profitability for producers and rural communities.

The 2014 Farm Bill outlays numerous new programs for supporting military veterans interested in farming (U.S. Farm Bill 2014). For example, the USDA New and Beginning Farmer Program (USDA-NIFA 2014) stipulates that at least 5 percent of the program funds will support military veterans interested in becoming farmers. With the newly targeted interest in veterans, specific information pertinent to working with this population could be valuable to these developing farming programs.

NEED FOR TARGETED VETERAN TRAINING IN AGRICULTURE

In the rural South, the military offers one of the best opportunities for young people to advance economically and educationally; thus, enlistment is exceptionally high. The southern region of the United States has the largest concentration of veterans in the country, with an estimated population of 758,000 veterans living in Arkansas and Missouri, including approximately 69,000 women veterans (NCVAS 2010). In addition, the unemployment rate among young veterans is the highest in the country (more than 30%), when compared with the unemployment rate of nonveterans (approximately 15%) of the same age (NCVAS 2010).

There is a pressing need to help veterans reincorporate themselves into their communities and families. Agriculture offers an excellent opportunity for veterans to use their unique skills, discipline, passion, and sense of service to positively influence their rural communities while creating better prospects for themselves and their families. Furthermore, it has been estimated that one in every five military personnel returning from their participation in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the incidence of PTSD is substantially higher in rural and Latino veterans (Duke, Moore, and Ames 2011; Tarantino 2013). This disorder is a main hurdle in the transition of veterans and their families to civilian life. Farming offers veterans a conciliatory, holistic approach to deal with their PTSD, because it offers a sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, and control, while providing time for contemplation and a basis for networking with other veterans and their families with a focus on farming. In addition, it offers a way for veterans to change social stereotypes commonly associated with some veteran military personnel (e.g., troubled, struggling) into more positive attributes that are usually used in describing small farmers (e.g.,

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hardworking, friendly, generous), which benefits them in their assimilation into their communities.

VETERAN FARMER NEEDS

In January 2013 our program sponsored more than 50 veteran farmers or those considering farming at the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SAWG) Annual Meeting. During a training session we surveyed these veterans for highest priority needs. Survey results showed that 71 percent were currently farming, averaging seven years on the farm with poultry, sheep, goats, and specialty crops listed as their major products. Survey results showed that most of the veteran participants favored one-on-one instruction or hands-on training to gain technical experience for production-related needs. Financial, business, and planning needs; as well as production related needs for specific species; were also considered priorities for participants of the survey (see Figure 1).

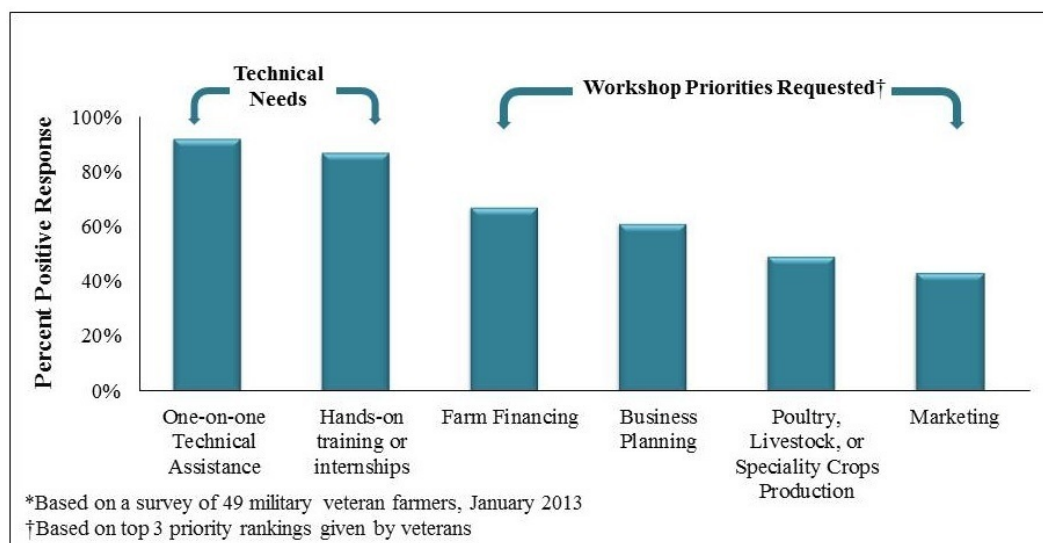


FIGURE 1. SURVEY OF TECHNICAL AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS FOR MILITARY VETERAN FARMERS IN ARKANSAS AND SURROUNDING STATES

ARMED TO FARM PROGRAM

Our Armed to Farm Program includes workshops, internships, and online course materials. Armed to Farm trainings involve hands-on focused workshops (e.g., Armed to Farm Boot Camps) targeting small and mid-sized poultry, livestock, vegetable, and specialty crop veteran farmers. These workshops provide intensive training focused on financial planning, business planning, marketing strategies, and

farm diversification. Armed to Farm Boot Camps provide classroom instruction, on-farm projects, and hands-on training at university and ARS, USDA research farms. Workshops also include field visits to working farms focused on poultry, livestock, or specialty crop operations. On these visits, workshop participants learn farm management practices, potential pitfalls of certain enterprises, sources of revenue, and marketing strategies. We have found these on-farm portions of the course to be crucial in demonstrating the fundamentals covered in the classroom and stimulating discussion/problem solving among participants.

Beyond the Armed to Farm workshops we provide special webinars as well as an online course for beginning farmers linked to the FVC and National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT). The course is targeted to veterans but available to anyone interested in farming, and continues to be accessible without cost (<https://attra.ncat.org/uofa/>). This course has also been translated into Spanish; with approximately 1.1 million Hispanic U.S. Armed Forces veterans (NCVAS 2010), they and their families interested in farming can benefit from this program as well (<https://attra.ncat.org/espanol/uofa/>). Data from users of our online farmer educational program have shown that participants are interested in and utilizing

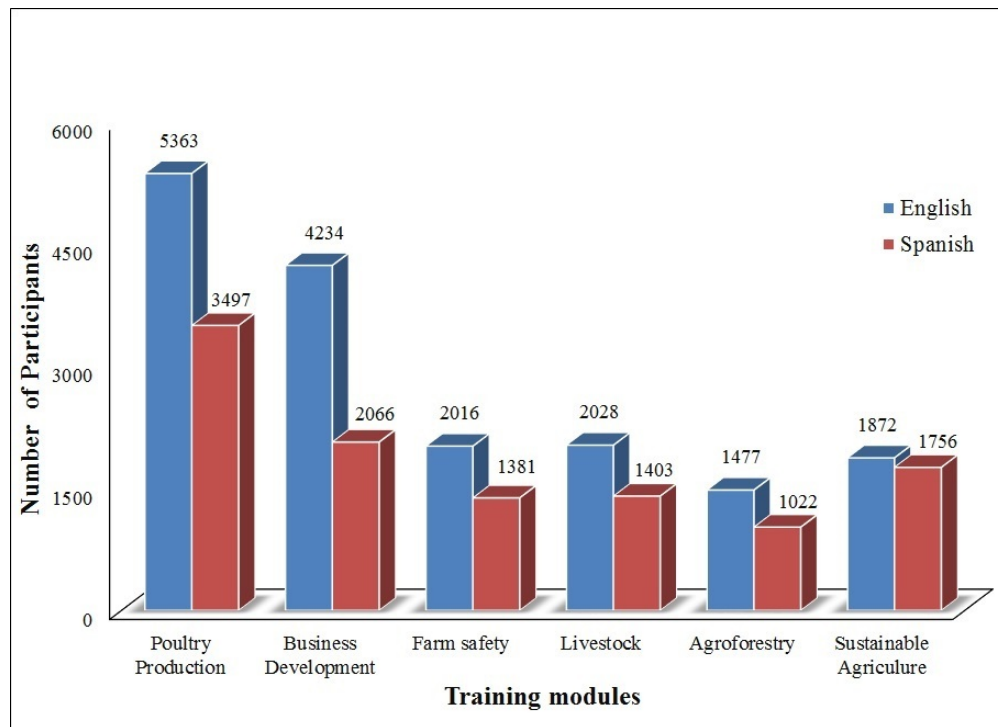


FIGURE 2. TRAINING MODULES ACCESSED FOR ONLINE FARM EDUCATION THROUGH MAY 2014

many of our training modules, with poultry production and business development having the largest number of students. Training modules on sustainable production, small ruminant, agroforestry, and specialty crops are also in high demand.

KEY COMPONENTS FOR WORKSHOPS AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CUSTOMIZED FOR VETERANS IN ARMED TO FARM PROGRAM

Several components have been key to the success of the Armed to Farm Program and may be beneficial to others developing programs for veterans. These include: 1) the inclusion of a veteran mentor; 2) the inclusion of spouses and family members; 3) internships; 4) hands-on training (with limited numbers of participants per program); and 5) targeted program selection (including reduced costs for programs and sponsorships of veterans).

Inclusion of a Veteran Mentor

Of lessons learned in our development of this program, we believe military veteran mentorship is essential to a successful program. Mentors in our program are responsible for guiding and cultivating the intellect of the participants as learners, as described by other educators (Merriam 1983). Their unique personal experience of the military is a crucial component of the mentor's role. All of our mentors are transparent with their own journey and personal adjustments they had made transitioning from active duty military to successful veteran farmers. This transparency and empathy are imperative to the success of the program because it ensures participants feel comfortable and accepted and allows for free discussion of failures as well as successes. For our programs, coauthor Terrell Spencer serves as the overall mentor. He owns and operates a pastured poultry farm and has expertise in organic and sustainably raised poultry. He is an army combat veteran of OIF. His history of service in the military enables him to connect and network with veterans interested in or currently farming, as well as the organizations that support these veterans. Along with his farming expertise and ability to educate program participants in technical aspects of developing a profitable farming enterprise, his transparency in strategizing his transition from active military to veteran status has been equally beneficial. His directness and honesty in how farming has benefitted him personally and professionally are very effective. His shared military background allows for a level of authenticity and trust that instantly connects with veterans in our program. His partnership with FVC is also very valuable because veterans learn about specialty programs and grants to support their farms.

As outlined by Mincemoyer and Thomson (1998), initiation of the mentor relationship and the information being shared is imperative to the success and comfort level of participants. Therefore, one key element in development of the mentor relationship is ensuring the participants are given the opportunity to engage one-on-one with veteran mentors and other program participants. In the evenings and/or during some farm visits or voluntary workshop programs, the veteran mentor took the lead in the programming or informal discussions. This opportunity allowed the participants to interact with the veteran mentors and their families and to discuss their experiences and difficulties with those who had been deployed and shared other aspects unique to military life. Although we did not formally provide counseling, we believe this would be helpful to many veterans in the program. Our veteran mentor arranged the availability of a therapist who would be available for consultation without cost if our participants so desired. Interestingly, none of our participants took advantage of this opportunity but several noted they appreciated the offer and some planned on seeking out counseling when they returned home. What became apparent to our team was that, although numerous programs are available to veterans for counseling, it took the honesty and openness of fellow veterans to make this idea palatable for some of them.

Participation and Inclusion of Spouses and Family Members

Our workshops range from 30-50 individuals, incorporating veterans and their families. Our team intentionally keeps the number of workshop participants low, as this is important for focused learning, access to hands-on participation by all students, and the nature of the “Boot Camp” (which includes 24 hour/day engagement). This is feasible based on students being housed in a college dormitory or having access to camping on farms where the programs are held, with meals and evening activities integrated into the programs. Involving spouses in the workshops is another key component for working with veterans. This was true from the farming/business side as often both partners were involved in the farm. This participation allows for all couples, whether involved in the farming or not, to evaluate their goals and mutually decide whether to pursue practices and strategies learned through the workshops and training materials. We receive multiple requests to include children in our workshop programs and, although we did not originally plan to include children, we have accommodated a few families with preteen and teenage children. We find the inclusion of children to be seamless in our workshops as many of these kids are actively involved in their family farm, and with the smaller groups and informal settings the entire family could participate in the program.

Internships

The utilization of mentors carries over into the next key component of our program, which is the ability to provide internships for selected veterans. Mentors from our program are also involved in small-farm agriculture production and therefore can open their operations for internships with the program. Our mentors give the interns vital experience that will help them become successful farmers. The mentors are a support system for the interns, helping and teaching them daily in close proximity, and building trust and respect as previously described (Abell et al. 1995). This aspect of the internship improves the ability of experience and knowledge to be exchanged between mentor and intern. Internship experience and knowledge cannot be duplicated in the classroom or online, and is an invaluable resource and important aspect of our program. Upon completion of their internships our interns felt better prepared and energized when the time comes for their own involvement with small-scale farming and agriculture production. Post-internship evaluations reinforced the value of this component in our program; hence it will continue to be one we grow and enhance in the future. From the mentor perspective one lesson learned was that veterans did better in these programs when they were paired or in groups. Isolation on single farms with a non-veteran mentor did not always lead to productive participation. Also, as in any other learning environments, interns made mistakes that cost the farmer mentors profits, so incorporating some sort of way to repay farmers for these “learning experiences” would have been valuable.

Hands-on Training

Hands-on training was identified by our veteran participants as a unique and useful component offered in our workshops. Highly skilled experts are incorporated into the workshops and assigned to pass along their experience and skills to participants with hands-on training. People often learn best by doing, and when hands-on training follows formal training, it usually picks up where the basic, formal training stopped (Sisson 2009). Giving the workshop participants hands-on training under realistic conditions allows participants to practice and perfect skills they will later use on their own farms. Additionally, we utilize team-based learning because of its similarity with military training strategies. Workshop participants are more comfortable and willing to participate in activities conducted in a team environment rather than independently. An example of a team-based hands-on exercise is the building of poultry hoop structures. Poultry production provides an excellent resource for farmers because of the versatility, low start-up costs, ease of expansion, and ability to use marginal land. As more consumers are interested in products obtained using alternative, humane, and environmentally-friendly

production systems, farmers that address these concerns are more likely to fetch better prices in the market (e.g., free-range, cage-free, pastured, organic systems, or integrated production systems) and improve farm viability. Therefore a popular hands-on training session for us is the construction of hoop houses that are low cost and easily adaptable to many farm enterprises. Similar to other hands-on successes (Davis, Kull, and Nelson 2012), we expect hoop house construction activities to translate into positive management changes that may increase profitability and sustainability for veterans involved in poultry production.



FIGURE 3. VETERANS WORK WITH MENTOR TO BUILD A POULTRY HOOP HOUSE AS PART OF AN ARMED TO FARM WORKSHOP

Targeted Program Selection

Although we purposely keep costs low and provided assistance to attend our programs, many of our participants acknowledged the training was extremely valuable and worth the full costs if these had been assessed. Through experience, we determined that a competitive selection process is helpful as it allowed us to target participants with a specific interest in farming. By requiring an application that details what the veteran wants to learn from the training programs, we can determine which applicants are serious about potential farming opportunities and might be open to a free/reduced-cost on-farm experience. This also allows us to customize programs to the needs of the group. Some of our programs focus on veterans interested in considering farming, whereas others offer specialized training for those already farming but in need of tools to enhance productivity and sustainability of their enterprises.

CONCLUSION

This paper summarizes some challenges, opportunities, and successful strategies we have found working with OIF and OEF veteran farmers. Agriculture offers an excellent opportunity for veterans to use their unique skills, discipline, passion, and sense of service to positively influence their rural communities, while creating better prospects for themselves and their families. Our use of the key components described continues to allow us to provide service to military veterans through the introduction to and education regarding small-farm production and agricultural opportunities and our hope is that our experiences will help others as they work with the veteran community.

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Margo Hale is the Southeast Regional Office Director of NCAT and Livestock Specialist. The National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) is a national nongovernmental organization that supports sustainable agriculture in the country. She provides information and other technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, educational agents, educators, and others involved in sustainable agriculture in the United States through one-on-one technical assistance, workshops, and information posted on their website. She has been actively engaged in the Armed to Farm training programs. (Email: margoh@ncat.org)

Terrell Spencer is an Iraq Veteran involved with the Farmer Veteran Coalition and the veteran mentor for our program. Spencer owns Across the Creek Farm in West Fork, Arkansas, producing 10,000 broiler chickens and 60,000 eggs/year. (Email: acrossthecreekfarm@gmail.com)

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