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Equine Assisted Therapy for Veterans

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Abstract

Equine-assisted activities and therapy have been proven to be highly effective in assisting veterans with mental health conditions. This project aimed to provide information and resources about these services to Treasure Valley veterans. In order to do this, an in-person open-house was hosted, to connect veterans to equine therapy. By completing this project, it can be asserted that there is a general lack of accessible and affordable services.

Keywords: veterans, mental health, equine therapy

An Introduction to Equine Assisted Therapy for Veterans

In 2018, more than 1.7 million veterans received treatment for mental health conditions through a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs mental health specialty program (U.S. Department of Veterans Services, 2018). While great in number, studies have shown that figure represents only about 23-40% of veterans who have mental health disorders. Traditional methods for the treatment of these conditions often include counseling and medication, however, due to different barriers or side effects, additional primary treatments are needed (Arnon, et. al, 2020). This project aimed to bring awareness to the option of equine-assisted activities and therapy for veterans as well as connect veterans with equine-therapy providers and other resources connected to the industry.

Equine-assisted activities and therapy have been shown to provide many benefits to veterans, including having a positive impact on their mental health (Smith, 2019). As a United States Marine Corps veteran, I have personally benefited from equine therapy. When directing my focus on an intervention-based project, I knew that I wanted other veterans to have access to

equine programs so that they may have a similar, positive experience in addressing mental health concerns.

In order to accomplish this, I planned and hosted an open house-style event where veterans could have hands-on experience with equine therapy. This event was hosted at an equine facility, and allowed attendees to spend time connecting to fellow service members, listen to equine therapy testimonials, and interact directly with horses.

After the in-person event, I was able to conduct additional research through social media “polls” to gain the input of roughly 200 users, all a part of the social media group “Female Marines”. These polls revealed that a large portion of veterans do, in fact, have a general knowledge of equine therapy for veterans, however, identified a lack of local resources and financial concerns as barriers to participating.

Through the implementation of this project, the conclusion that additional resources and opportunities surrounding equine-assisted activities and therapy for veterans are needed, is clear. Additionally, where resources exist, such as here locally in Boise, Idaho, additional promotion and financial assistance is needed to both alert veterans to these resources, and allow access.

Innovative Approach

This program brought many different participants, volunteers, and advocates together. The program was promoted throughout the Boise State University community, as well as the Treasure Valley community, to attract veterans of all different service backgrounds. The event itself attracted service members of combat, non-combat, and other military positions to convene on the shared purpose of exploring equine therapy.

Additionally, in planning for the event, the support of civilian members was helpful in ensuring the event was promoted and successful. It is through the combined efforts of all of the participants and supporters that the open-house attracted six veterans to attend the event, along with two civilian spouses.

Either we continue to only promote the more mainstream approach to help veterans with mental health concerns in the Treasure Valley or provide the information and access to additional treatments. The overall approach of this project was to inform service members and veterans about the mental-health benefits of equine-assisted therapy, as well as connect them directly to resources and an opportunity to experience this form of intervention. This solution to addressing mental health concerns among service members moves beyond “traditional” treatment methods of medication and counseling, and also directly connects participants to opportunities to explore these options within the Treasure Valley.

Emotional Intelligence

The basis of this project stems from my own experience addressing post-service mental health concerns with equine-assisted therapy. After ten years of no longer being on active duty, I only recently sought help and know that I am not alone in my struggles and worries with asking for help.

I have become more aware of how much better I am doing since I started in veteran programs and have enjoyed meeting others who have similar experiences to my own. This new self awareness has allowed me to be more aware of others who may have similar experiences to mine, because I know what it looks like to need help. I also know what it is like to have reservations about trying something new, as I had my own fears before I started equine therapy.

Because there is a wide variety of veterans and no two people have had the same exact experience while serving, my event was promoted to any and all current or former service members who may be interested in exploring equine therapy. By creating an open and safe space for people to join the event, no matter their experience, I was able to attract a wide range of people to attend.

It's hard to be a veteran because you feel so alone at times—like nobody understands you. Being in the service is so much more than just a job, it's a way of life. Veteran groups, in general, are great because they bring people together who can relate to difficult shared experiences.

This project brought together the idea of creating space for veterans, with the proven help that equine therapy has on addressing mental health concerns. While the value this project had on every person who saw the event being promoted, came to the event, or interacted with the social media polls may be unmeasurable, I approached this program with the idea that you never know what someone is going through, and you never know when sharing a resource with someone may make a difference in their lives.

Creative Thinking

This event drew on a creative framework by using personal connections I have in order to reach a wide variety of veterans. Additionally, the location of the event, an equine boarding facility I also employ in my personal life, is not a traditional provider of equine therapy, but was happy to support my program.

Creating an event that pulled on my connections, experience, and testimony, provided a personal reference to make participants more comfortable with exploring something new.

Creating a face-to-face event allowed participating veterans to connect with one another, beyond

just within the framework of the event, in a safe, outdoor location. This seems especially relevant in 2021, when in-person opportunities have been limited.

My approach to this program was unique because the intent was not to sell a specific service, but rather, connect participants to the aspect of the therapy, without being self-promoting. Traditionally, equine therapy, along with many other mental health treatment options, are costly.

By providing a not-for-profit event, I attempted to reach the veterans who may not have any other way of accessing this type of program. I also worked towards reaching veterans who may have previously hesitated to seek traditional help but would be interested in a less threatening treatment option.

Your Innovative Solution

For this project, I created an event where veterans from across the Treasure Valley were able to connect to equine therapy resources, as well as experience equine therapy themselves. This event required me to organize multiple partners, including an equine facility, an equine therapy provider, and Boise State University staff members who assisted with campus-wide promotion. These partnerships allowed me to connect my event participants to multiple resources, as well as promote equine therapy services across the community.

I also created social media polls that reached over 200 veterans, spanning across the country. These polls aimed to determine whether or not the lack of knowledge about equine therapy was a local, or wide-spread issue. The results allowed me to conclude, veterans across the nation are either unaware of this type of therapy, or unable to access it.

Results

I was able to identify a specific need in my community, which is to inform others of the option and need for additional ways to improve the mental health of veterans. In all, I had six veterans attend my event. I also had others who could not make it but reached out to me and connected so that they may be informed of any future events I might have. Of those that attended, I've stayed in contact with four.

One soldier who attended stated, "This event was an awesome way to make connections with people that have similar interests, values, and goals as me. It came at a time in my life where I really needed to make that connection. I walked away feeling excited and motivated to have new friends and more ways to connect to people and horses! The doors have been opened up for even greater possibilities because of this event! Thank you Nicole!!!"

The event also featured two business owners who provide equine therapy to veterans. I was able to introduce their services to the event attendees through social media posts, prior to meeting in person. Through this interaction, the business owners were given the potential to gain new clients or volunteers in their programs.

The final and most surprising person that benefited was one of my speakers, Heather Miner, who is a former counselor and director of an equine veteran program. She reached out to me after the event and had this to say, "Seeing and hearing you talk about the impact I had in your life reminds me that I have a lot of knowledge and experience, and compassion to give to others. And it reminds me that my work has made a difference in someone's life, which is a driving force for almost everything I choose to do with myself." I am hopeful that Heather will be involved again with helping veterans in the future, and continue to inspire veterans, like myself.

Veterans who attended my event were provided with different avenues for access, and the people who provide these services will gain new clients or volunteers. Additionally, the post by Boise State's Instagram accounts promoting the event remains on their various profiles, which can be continued to be accessed by those who are interested. There is no way of truly knowing how many people will continue to see this information and may do their own research on the subject. Whether that is a veteran or someone who could start their own program, the possibilities are endless.

Different Approaches

While I am happy with the results my project had, if I were to approach things differently, I would conduct more research ahead of my event. Conducting my social media polls ahead of time may have allowed me to address the barriers to accessing the program more sufficiently.

Upon learning about the wide-spread difficulties veterans face in accessing equine therapy, I would also provide a more structured event that included time for individualized therapeutic sessions for all participants, based on their specific needs. This structure could have provided more specific help and care to attendees, and potentially lead them to experience the direct effects equine therapy can have, more quickly.

Ideally, I would have loved a larger turnout of people who showed up to my event. The main purpose of this project was to raise awareness, so the more people who attended, meant that goal could have been reached quicker.

Based on the amount of the social media interaction and promotion, I did expect more attendees. I also assumed the attendees would almost all be veterans who had little to no idea equine therapy is a viable option for addressing mental health conditions. This is why it came as

a surprise to have a mix of both veterans and civilian spouses attending the event, with many already being aware of equine therapy, but feeling like it was typically inaccessible.

Conclusion

The Equine Assisted Therapy for Veterans action capstone project, focused on helping veterans by informing them of the positive impact equine therapy can have on their lives. What I learned from this project is that a surprising number of veterans do, in fact, have an awareness of equine programs, but are unable to access them.

One hundred percent of my event's attendees said they would be interested in continuing to participate in equine therapy, but their reasoning for not being involved previously included a lack of direction for those interested, as well as the costs associated. Ultimately, I learned that while the VA does recognize that many veterans enjoy and benefit from equine-assisted therapy and activities, they do not provide access to these services themselves and do not offer financial assistance for those interested in exploring these options.

When considering all who may have or continue to benefit from my capstone project, I personally may have benefited the most by being given the opportunity to have an impact on others. The skills acquired during these past few weeks include event organizing, survey conducting, raising awareness, resource acquisition, and community discourse. I now also have a clearer sense of purpose in my community and a possible career path. I've learned a lot about myself these past few years at Boise State. I've overcome challenges that I can use my experiences to help others. After all, who better to understand veterans than a veteran?

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