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Re-engaging Service Personnel as Volunteers after Deployment

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The purpose of this document is to help community leaders re-engage military personnel as volunteers upon return to the community from deployment.

Introduction

The reunion experience when Armed Forces personnel return home from deployment is a time of celebration. These men and women desire a return to the lifestyle they left behind in their family, work, and community. This is a process that is unique to each individual, depending on personality, experiences while on deployment, and the support network at home. The family plays a vital supporting role, while friends, co-workers, neighbors, and the entire community serve as an 'extended family' support system. Volunteer organizations to which the service member has belonged can also aid in this process.

A returning service member is coming home to many changes. The children have grown, and they are no longer used to having dad or mom around. If the children are very young, they may have forgotten the parent who was away. The spouse has learned to operate the household as a single parent. The job has been held, but the position may have changed, and there may be changes in personnel. Business relationships and networks must be re-established.

The community has also changed. Someone else is now filling the returning service member's role as a volunteer fireman. Someone else is teaching the Sunday School class or coaching the little league team.

The euphoria of the reunion is quickly replaced with a sense of loss, as the returning service member realizes that family, work, and community managed to function without him/her. At the same time, he/she has to deal with the aftermath of being in war. Successful re-engagement to the family, work, and community life is

critical for a gradual return to normalcy, and it is a complex process that takes time and effort.

Process and Tools

Re-acclimation can take from several months to several years. Some people will want to re-enter life in the community quickly, while others prefer to return gradually. The following four keys aid in limiting the stress typically associated with this transition period and can be useful for community leaders and volunteer supervisors to consider when re-engaging returning service members. These four keys are **Re-engage slowly**, **Communicate**, use **Active listening**, and show **Personal interest**, or **ReCAP**.

Key #1: Re-engage Slowly

Be prepared to re-engage military personnel slowly. Allow people to progress into volunteer roles at their own pace. Provide them with opportunities to serve as episodic (short-term) volunteers before asking them to commit to long-term, time-intensive positions. Episodic volunteering requires only a few hours to complete and has clear beginning and ending times. Examples of good episodic roles include giving a presentation or serving as a greeter. This will allow the service member an opportunity to reconnect with the organization (community) without encroaching on his/her role as spouse and/or parent.

Returning service members who worked directly with a youth audience before deployment need to reconnect with this group slowly. Children deal with absence differently than adults. Youth may feel hurt or angry and not completely understand the reason for the service member's absence. A helpful approach is to plan an informal reunion celebration where the service member presents pictures and discusses the culture, lifestyle, and specifically the children in the country where he or she was deployed.

A returning service member should be allowed to feel needed but may not be ready for extensive volunteer duties. The normal and expected emotions will run the full spectrum of being on top of the world to carrying the full weight of the world. A slow and methodical re-engagement will provide a sense of being needed without over-commitment.

Key #2: Communicate

Practice good communication skills. If the returning military person served in a long-term, time-intensive volunteer role prior to deployment, the volunteer supervisor should arrange for an office visit or take the service member out for a cup of coffee. During this visit, discuss the person's role as a volunteer, both past and future. The questions outlined below will assist in directing the conversation.

General questions to ask:

- How are things going?
- Have you visited with the company you worked for? or What duties will you be assuming?
- When did you return to work? or When will you be returning to work?
- What was the most positive change within your spouse and family?
- What changes have you noticed in the community since deployment?
- Are you interested in returning as a volunteer?
- What volunteer roles/duties are you interested in performing?
- How soon would you like to return as a volunteer?

It is normal for a returning service member to have feelings of insecurity. Let the person know that he/she was missed and is still needed. Re-establishing the person's role as a volunteer in the community should not provide additional stress in the re-acclimation process.

Because of the changes in the service member's life and the experiences of defending the country, likes and dislikes may have changed. Once the person has indicated an interest in returning as a volunteer, be sensitive to his/her preferences when you plan for a return. Let the person know that change is acceptable and the volunteer organization is there to help. Do not force the person into a volunteer position, but provide opportunities to reconnect with the community. This will help boost the service member's confidence and self-worth.

Establish a reasonable timeline acceptable to both parties. This timeline becomes the tool for future contact and follow-up. Address specific or unique training needs required for the volunteer position.

If the service member wants to discuss the deployment experience, use the questions below to guide the conversation. Good friends can ask more direct questions than others, so exercise good judgment.

Specific questions to ask when appropriate:

- Tell me about the country where you were deployed.
Focus on the culture, dress, attitudes, and religious practices. Other areas to focus on could be the types of jobs performed by local citizens, closeness of the family unit, norms and expectations.
- Tell me about the people with whom you served.
Focus on where they are from, what jobs they performed, and how the troops related with the local culture.
- What types of duties did you perform?
Focus on their specific duties and how they made a positive difference.

Questions to avoid:

- **Do not ask** personal questions unless the service member addresses them first!
- **Do not ask** "Did you feel supported?"
- **Do not ask** "Did you shoot anybody?"
- **Do not ask** "Did you have fun?"

During this informal visit, it is a good idea to discuss the following issues:

- Any changes that have occurred during the service member's absence.
- Who assumed the service member's duties while he/she was gone.
- The goals of the organization.
- The accomplishments of the organization.
- How you and the organization missed the person.
- Encourage the service member to re-engage as a volunteer at his/her own pace.

Key #3: Use Active Listening

Practice active listening skills. Listening is a crucial component of communication and a critical tool for re-engagement. Some returning service members will need to discuss their experiences more than others. Asking the open-ended questions listed under the second key and not interrupting while the person is answering are good active listening skills. Another active listening skill is paraphrasing. In a paraphrase, the listener summarizes the comments without adding new information. The purpose is to clarify important information and avoid misunderstandings.

Good paraphrasing lead-in statements are:

- I'm confused; let me try to state what I heard you say.
- You said so much, let me see if I got it all.
- Let me see if I've got it straight.
- Did I hear you say . . . ?

The three main physical attributes of active listening are eye contact, posture and gesture. To maintain good eye contact, squarely face the person. Relaxing your posture and not crossing your arms open the body, thus promoting good communication. Facial and body gestures communicate your sincerity and interest to the person.

Key #4: Show Personal Interest

Personal interest from civilians is normal. Individuals left behind have a need to know if any good came from this war. However, practice good judgment by not placing returning service members in a position of defending their deployment duty. If they are openly sharing their experiences, it is acceptable to ask questions such as these:

- Why do you believe the United States is involved in this overseas mission?
- How are the local people reacting to the United States being in their country?
- What are the positive reasons for the United States being there?
- Help me make sense of why the United States is there?

The goal of visiting with a returning service member is to help him/her re-engage as a volunteer and adjust to life in the community. Such questions are acceptable, but not as the primary focus of the visit.

Conclusion

Returning home from deployment creates both excitement and a sense of anxiousness. The returning service member may look the same as when he/she left, but you should realize he/she is dealing with unique emotional issues. Once the excitement of returning home wanes, the adjustment process begins. To assist the returning military person in preparation for future volunteer roles, a personal visit from someone in the organization is advised. The most appropriate person may be the previous volunteer supervisor.

The following guidelines are recommended:

- Make contact within four to six weeks of the service member's return.
- Take the service member out for a cup of coffee or soda or invite him/her into the office.
- Practice good communication and active listening skills.
- Have a list of questions ready to discuss the person's return as a volunteer.
- Establish a plan and timeframe for re-engagement as a volunteer.
- Encourage the person to serve initially as an episodic volunteer.
- Be willing to alter the volunteer position as needed.
- Express sincere personal interest in the deployment experience.

Prior to deployment these service members held important roles in the communities, and with careful planning and effort they can return to this normal lifestyle. Their service to the country is invaluable and the same can be said of their roles as volunteers. Reconnecting with the community is vital if they are to become valuable and contributing community members and leaders again. Employing the components of **ReCAP** will assist in helping them with this transition.

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