







# Engaging Veterans with Disabilities in National and Community Service Initiative

Comprehensive Report November 2011

#### **Introduction:**

In 2010, CNCS launched the Engaging Veterans with Disabilities Initiative to enhance the capacity of national service programs to successfully recruit, engage and support veterans with disabilities as active service members in structured volunteer experiences. It is well known that people gain many benefits from their service opportunities with AmeriCorps. All of the veterans interviewed about their volunteer service experiences shared many positive outcomes. In fact, veterans with disabilities highly recommended that other veterans with disabilities also serve in AmeriCorps. In order to make this a reality, they suggest certain methods to recruit their fellow veterans moving forward.

This report provides in depth analysis of findings from one-on-one interviews with veterans about their experiences as members of AmeriCorps. All intervie-

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wees expressed a passion to help people, including Veterans. Many described how AmeriCorps provides them the opportunity to get back into the workforce— develop additional skill sets, improve their resume, and impress potential employers. Interviewees articulated that service and volun-

that service and volunteerism is a satisfying and structured opportunity to

serve our country in another way, giving back to the community and committing to someone else's well-being, life, happiness, and education. Through Ameri-Corps, these veterans felt a sense of belonging; that they were regaining their identity. AmeriCorps gets them out of their comfort zone; enabling them to

stretch and learn. AmeriCorps promotes change for it members, including veterans with disabilities, while making our country and the world better equipped to meet actual needs of others.

Other veterans and active military personnel, most living with a disability, participated in discussion groups. These discussion groups helped develop recruitment strategies for membership in AmeriCorps of veterans. The groups agreed that certain themes resonated with veterans. Messages that attract veterans to service and volunteer programs like Ameri-Corps include: the importance of service and diversity, their desire to transition (personally and professionally), their feelings of patriotism, their prioritization of benefits, and their search for new opportunities and sense of accomplishment. In order to successfully recruit veterans, all were in agreement that when presenting AmeriCorps as a viable future option and to ensure interest in service, it is important to let them know "what's in it for me". In fact, veterans will want to know this material first and foremost. Veterans are interested in benefits gained by their involvement in the program, living allowance, education award, and how the benefits will compliment rather than disrupt their benefits from military service.

Below, the initiative "Engaging Veterans with Disabilities in National and Community Service" explains the overarching motivation for this research effort. Thereafter follows a brief executive summary of the findings from both the interviews and the discussion groups. The body of the report is an in depth analysis of the interviews and discussion groups. Finally, the report concludes what can be done next in this process.

# The Initiative: Engaging Veterans with Disabilities in National and Community Service

As part of its mission to engage all Americans in service, and as directed by the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) places a high priority on engaging veterans in national community service. Reliable sources place the estimate of veterans with disabilities like traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or mobility challenges at significant levels so it stands to reason that any initiative that seeks to include veterans would also address the needs of veterans with disabilities.

The CNCS Engaging Veterans with Disabilities Initiative's purpose is to enhance the capacity of national service programs to successfully recruit, engage and support veterans with disabilities as active service members in structured volunteer experiences. This Initiative will identify promising practices, products, and delivery strategies -- by working with enlisted Afghanistan and Iraq veterans who have experienced TBI, PTSD and other combat issues -- and will then explore how these strategies and products can be generalized to other groups of veterans. The work will be informed extensively by veterans, including those who are current or former AmeriCorps or other national service volunteers; and products will be made widely available to veterans groups, national service programs, and the disability community so as to guide the practice, policies, and procedures of service programs as they recruit and support veterans with disabilities. In summary, the desired outcomes of this Initiative are twofold --: service programs that have the capacity to create optimal experiences for veterans with disabilities; and veterans, their families and allies who view service as a solution for successful reintegration back into the community.

In addition to the well documented benefits of service to the community itself, connecting veterans to community and volunteer service opportunities can help them successfully transition back to civilian life. Volunteering in a national service program can provide direction and purpose that allow veterans to continue to contribute their skills and expertise to improving their communities and can simultaneously provide the camaraderie and kinship that comes from belonging to a team—an experience that many veterans desire. Further, a period of national service affords veterans the time and freedom to explore career paths while considering their next step in life. In short, a national service experience can enrich the lives, in a variety of ways, of veterans who are re-entering their communities.

Veterans can choose from among many CNCS service opportunities available through its major programs. To name a few, as an AmeriCorps State or National member, a veteran can serve in programs that work in areas such as education, health and the environment; local programs often design service activities for a team of members that serves full or parttime for one year or during the summer. As an AmeriCorps VISTA member, he or she can serve full-time in a nonprofit or religious organization, with a community group, or public agency to create and expand programs that bring low-income people and communities out of poverty. Or, as an AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps) member in a full-time, team-based, residential program, veterans can focus on disaster response, infrastructure improvement, environmental stewardship and conservation, energy conservation, and urban and rural development. For more information on CNCS programs go to www.cncs.gov.

The Corporation is conducting the Engaging Veterans with Disabilities in National and Community Service Initiative through its National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP), housed at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, in partnership with CTAT at Denver Options and the "Operation TBI Freedom" project. For further information regarding NSIP, please contact Paula Sotnik at paula.sotnik@umb.edu or (888) 491-0326.

### **Executive Summary**

# 1:1 Interviews with AmeriCorps Veterans, 2010

The following narrative summarizes seven interviews, conducted during 2010, with veterans who are current AmeriCorps members or alums. Of the seven, five have a disability. When speaking with Veterans to engage them in National and Community Service, the Veterans we spoke with suggested that we stress the following:

- ...national service is a way to be of service to their country in another form and that they'll have the opportunity to mobilize their community to solve its problems—a great way to "give back" and help others.
- ...the stipend and benefits, including the educational benefits and its value. Discuss the relationship to the GI Bill.
- ...appeal to the Veteran's desire to help people, to be a part of a team, and emphasize how the Ameri-Corps experience can help them to readjust to civilian life and culture.
- ...the camaraderie experienced by team members in projects that have a clear goal and mission.
- ...there are many opportunities to develop friendships and relationships

- ...AmeriCorps provides the opportunity to serve while at the same time doing what Veterans like to do -- serve the country and people in their own communities who need their help.
- ...the national service program can provide a sense of belonging, purpose, inclusion, human connection, and helps with self-esteem and identity challenges.
- ...Vet-to-Vet is the best way to promote Ameri-Corps—Vets want to talk to other Vets, peer to peer.
- ...the skill development that typically occurs can be used on resumes and is impressive to potential employers.
- ...there is great satisfaction in being a volunteer and this builds character—life experiences are gained, commitments are made and kept,
- ...it is important to carefully match the veteran's interests with the program goals and activities.

The following is a quote from one of the interviewees, an anonymous veteran who served in AmeriCorps:

"My experience as a volunteer in the AmeriCorps program has given me the will to get out of bed every day. It has given me the education and the knowledge to understand my disability and it gives me a purpose in life. If you don't have a purpose in life, it's hard to get out of bed every morning."

### Colorado Discussion Groups April 6 & 8, 2011

The following brief overview summarizes two, four-hour discussion sessions conducted in April 2011 that included 10 veterans in Denver, CO and 10 active duty soldiers, soon to be veterans, from the Warrior Transition Unit (WTU) at Fort Carson in Colorado Springs, CO.

Each group was asked the same questions and shown the same materials to identify commonalities as well as differences in opinion from each group's responses. During the two sessions, both groups of veterans viewed and discussed a variety of informational recruitment materials related to CNCS programs, including products from http://americorpsweek.gov/index.asp, selected videos from http://www.americorpscontest.org, Vets Corps and materials from http://www.national service.gov/about/serveamerica/veterans.asp.

Both groups indicated strongly they very much appreciated being asked to provide their input, opinions and recommendations on how best to recruit veterans in national service. Common themes emerged from the two discussion groups and the following includes representative samples and quotes:

## Themes and Recommendations to Enhance Recruitment:

- Most talked about how challenging it is to find meaningful work utilizing existing skills obtained in the military. Several veterans described how their newly acquired skills, for the most part, could not be generalized to a civilian job.
  - "...appeal to what will interest a vet with disabilities—present physical and non-physical jobs for them to do and how these positions will re-empower and re-engage them in their lives. Use statistics, numbers, and how AmeriCorps and National Service has helped civilians and military families."
- All were in agreement that when presenting Ameri-Corps to veterans as a viable future option and to ensure interest in service, it is important to let them know "what's in it for me". Veterans are interested in benefits gained by their involvement in the program, living allowance, education award, and how the benefits will compliment rather than disrupt their benefits from military service.
  - "...list the stipend and benefits, including the educational benefits and its value. Discuss the relationship to the GI Bill and do this upfront. Let them know what it is that you want, how long you need them, and what you want from them—what is the commitment? What will AmeriCorps do for me?"
- Patriotic, authentic literature and products produced professionally are very attractive to veterans. The vets were very interested in the team-based, types of positions that AmeriCorps National Civilian Conservation Corps (NCCC) offered, but the veterans in both groups were disappointed to learn about the maximum age of 24 years old for NCCC service.

When speaking with Veterans and Active Duty soldiers from the WTU, many had a number of specific recommendations to enhance recruitment product(s) and strategies that would encourage their future engagement in National and Community Service.

The veterans we spoke with indicated the following:

- When developing videos, use actual Ameri-Corps members who are also veterans and show them actively involved in their mission. The two groups discouraged interview type of videos in which veterans were just talking about their service activities.
- They would also like to see diversity represented (Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, etc.,) to reflect all those who join the armed forces. Show them doing authentic work with a voice-over explaining what is happening.
- PowerPoint information needs to be veteran specific, direct and to the point—less content is more.
- Materials need to be patriotic, with patriotic colors, flags, with pictures of vets. Describe how they can get in contact with AmeriCorps to apply for positions and what the educational requirements are needed to join.
- Ensure that veterans with disabilities are recruited —TBI, PTSD, and other combat/noncombat issues. Keep this in mind with better sound quality, lighting, color selection, backgrounds, fonts and timing. Materials need to be presented in a way that accommodates different levels of understanding and experience.
- Vet-to-Vet is the best way to promote Ameri-Corps—Vets want to talk to other Vets, peer to peer. Develop materials that will help vets recruit vets.
- Use pictures and videos showing Army, Navy, Air force, Marines—vets from all divisions of armed services.
- Products need to show how AmeriCorps provides help to vets transitioning and present and overall package.
- Integrate social media (Face book, Twitter, etc.).
- Showing AmeriCorps members in real service activities was more meaningful than a whole lot of words on a slide.
- Ask vets for their willingness to participate in

service; let them know they are needed and that their community needs help. This will appeal to vets with disabilities who we wish to engage in National and Community Service.

Have Commissioners come in and speak specifically about their state to make presentation relevant to them.

The information gained from the twenty veteran and active duty soldiers provided valuable and authentic information for guiding future recruitment products and strategies.

### **Full Report on Veteran's Interviews:**

The following narrative summarizes seven interviews, conducted during 2010, with veterans who are current AmeriCorps members or alums. Of the seven, five have a disability .Of the five, one did not disclose the nature of his/her disability, one had a "traumatic disability" that he/she did not want to discuss, one has post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) and physical

disabilities unrelated to the military, one has a head trauma as a result of being in the military, and one has PTSD that has not been officially diagnosed along with a disability that has been diagnosed through the Veterans Administration. Below are questions asked of vets and their responses paraphrased.

# Why AmeriCorps and what difference did it make in my life?

- Opportunity to help people.
- Opportunity to help me get back into the workforce.
- Wanted to do something more substantial with my life.
- Criteria to get degree and then get a job.
- Was unemployable due to my disability and they {AmeriCorps] paid down some of my student loans.
- Wanted to do something that required more of my skills and input and something interactive.
- Liked the year commitment and it was structured.
- Another opportunity to serve my country—this time state-side.
- Used AmeriCorps money to go back to school.
- What attracted me was my passion to help Veterans.
- Gives me a sense of purpose—a good motivator.
- · Volunteering and helping people is very satisfying.
- My assignment was a place of refuge for me and I loved it.
- I helped people help people.
- I was a volunteer promoting volunteerism.
- This program helped me with my own recovery.

- My experience with AmeriCorps was very positive (all).
- AmeriCorps is a great place to serve, meet people and go different places.
- Gives me opportunity.
- Definitely not in this for the money—it's not a substantial amount.
- Developed many skills—interpersonal communication skills, management skills, managing volunteer skills, interviewing skills, orienting volunteer skills, etc.
- This was one of the best times in my life serving in AmeriCorps—one of the greatest things I've ever done!
- People who are looking to serve their country find other ways to give back.
- I'm a rescuer and help people and can do it again after my military career.
- Being in AmeriCorps means a great deal to employers—it shows determination, that you stick with things, that you're reliable, have a go get it attitude, enthusiasm, that you see a job through, and that you are willing to get in the mix and get your hands dirty.
- Liked the flexibility AmeriCorps offered.

#### What Service Means to the Me:

- I like serving.
- Giving.
- Military Service.
- In AmeriCorps service is connecting to one human to another and it's about making a positive impact for that reason—to connect to somebody.
- Helping others and giving back.
- A willingness to work towards goals that may not be your own, committing to someone else's well-being, education, life, or happiness.

#### What I like about what I am doing with volunteering and service:

- I enjoy seeing the faces of the vets when I can get things done for them that no one else could. That's why I'm a good asset for this team.
- Go in these areas and help the underserved help them to serve themselves—that's the goal—the icing on the cake.
- I'd love to be involved in doing what you are doing—like Volunteer Management
- The biggest thing for me is seeing my humanitarian side and identity come back.
- I liked that it gets me out of my comfort zone and

- puts me in situations where I have to stretch—I get to learn a lot.
- I just really think it takes a lot to make the world we want to live in and AmeriCorps is a way that devotes resources to help people make change and our country and the world stronger and better off and meet actual needs.
- I like making it better and I enjoy the folks I get involved with—enjoyable to see others energy and excitement.

#### Were my expectations met?

- Yes the program met my expectations.
- The program gave me a new lease on life.
- It helped me realize and develop my potential.
- AmeriCorps brought my best qualities out.
- Yes, it made a difference.

# Suggestions to get other Veterans to reach Veterans and get them involved in AmeriCorps/National and Community Service:

- The best way to get them reengaged is via other Vets who share their stories with them. The best way to do it is to get Vets who are serving and have a disability to go out there and promote Ameri-Corps.
- I would ask them if they really want to serve their country rather than TAKE lives, GIVE life. We now have a service attitude of giving rather than just defending.
- The older Vets are more settled in their ways, more traditional, retired, etc. Find older Vets and marry them up with younger Vets—a mentoring program.
- The new Vets from Afghanistan and Iraq—concern of homeless Vets and homeless Vets with families
- that can't find jobs. Income (stipend) would attract them—income to help them stay above water. Housing is an issue...getting money, housing and skills are the main concerns. Here at the VA there is housing. If you could marry up with the VA and if they have housing ability in addition to the VISTA experience (they are doing this for me right now.) Develop a relationship with the Veterans Homeless Program.
- I would pitch it to them as an identity needs based venture to meet underlying needs—the needs of identity, to feel included, to feel that human connection. For a lot of soldiers, they are receiving disability and housing payments. For employment,

- their needs aren't being met from an identity inclusion point of view. They've had to make decisions from an adrenaline induced environment, think on their feet and move from one place to another. It's not just another desk job—it's meaningful, gets you out into the field.
- The group you are talking about may be jaded. Focus on the fact that there are other ways to serve and people here in their own country need their help. They are a tough audience, disillusioned with what they have seen overseas, and feeling that they are not making a difference.
- There is an out processing for Vets to reacclimatize you to civilian life, culture, language, and usage of GI bill. Including information on transition to AmeriCorps at this point would be great—you'd have a sitting audience waiting for this. I would say to appeal to their wanting to help people, to being part of a team.
- Wellness Recovery Action Plan is an excellent tool we use nationwide (WRAP) developed by Mary Ellen Copeland. You identify things you do every day and create a crisis plan before the crisis happens. We're taking that concept and developing a pre-deployment program to try and prevent families from falling apart. Educate them before they go, they know what to expect. The best key to helping Vets is to educate them regarding their disability and let them know they are not alone.
- Let the vets know the education value alone is worth it...opportunity to enhance that....the aspect of meet other people and socialize and get out of that rut....it's a great opportunity... To serve and do what you like doing. So many opportunities within AmeriCorps and volunteerism. The more you decide to give to your country, it's an opportunity to do this and mobilize your community. This is the second year in Champagne, Urbana, IL for this program. Built a playground in September and we had over 300 plus people to build this and we did it in under 6 hours—all National Service People mobilized for this one cause (Red Cross, Univ. of Illinois Volunteers, and AmeriCorps units, etc.)

- Not doing much but looking for a job—1, 2, 3 at a time...Through the VA. Every Vet who comes back has to go through a re-acclimation process and then is sent back into the community. They are told about benefits. If we could tap into that and the VA—that would be the best way.
- When vets are just coming back they are bombarded for several days about what they can do. I would get involved after they are back a few months to talk about AmeriCorps. Set up a booth and get connected with someone who runs that program 3 months out. An attractive option to integrate back into society. Or, you can go the Vocational rehabilitation route where they get help to get back into school or jobs—they get assessed, a job coach, etc. They never offered AmeriCorps volunteer experience as an option. Work with someone who does Voc. Rehab. With the military.
- Through reserve units because a lot of people will do four years of active duty and have two years of reserve time left. Maybe through Veterans' groups websites. Appealing to them through retiree organizations, including state AARP's and those from the military industrial businesses, like Boeing—their newsletters and employee associations. Also colleges and schools.
- I think appealing toward a sense of camaraderie with team projects that has a clear goal and mission and sharing the friendship and relationships in that kind of environment.
- Peer to Peer—if you can get some other folks involved in program to reach out—this is the most powerful way. More powerful than radio, TV, flyers, magazines, etc. Vets want to talk to other Vets.
- TAPS—it is a week-long required training that I had to take a year before I left the Coast Guard.
  We learn about resumes and discuss what's next.
  This would be a good place for you to get this information to Vets. Each military service has their own acronym for it. This would be the perfect opportunity to introduce them to service via AmeriCorps.

### My Two Minute Elevator Pitch about AmeriCorps:

- My experience as a volunteer in the AmeriCorps program has given me the will to get out of bed every day. It's giving me the education and the knowledge to understand my mental illness and it's keeping me—it gives me a purpose in life. If you don't have a purpose in life, it's hard to get out of bed every morning.
- Being able to look beyond yourself and see the need of others. If I can bring you up, I'm already "up".
- Gives purpose and helped me get back on my feet. I'd say, "You're unemployed now—I'm in a program that's helpful to me. It provides student repayment or you can put your stipend away and save for college later. I'd explain skills and satisfaction out of doing volunteerism—a character builder. You can gain life experience which is big when looking for a job. There is a bonus at the end when you complete service and gain points for Federal Job Preference above everyone else (one year after you finish the

program.)"

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• I would tell them that I ditched everything to join AmeriCorps because it changed my life—a way to give back, I can see change, I can meet people, receive tremendous feedback and gratification if I organize a volunteer event of 20 or 150 people show up and I know that everything I did makes things better and I knew that every day. I could know that everything

I did make a difference and I can see it every day—emphasize this. Now I work for an energy watch program and do free home energy audits and teach them about energy efficiency and find ways to save \$ and save the planet. This is a paid position. I think it helped me get this position by being in AmeriCorps.

- I would say it's one of the most rewarding things I have chosen to do---work in a field I haven't worked in before and a life I would not have had if I had not been with AmeriCorps...relationships developed while serving together—friendships developed. Worked with kids for first time and they will always be impacted by what I did (AmeriCorps Direct with Nortra Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps.)
- I would say if you want to get involved, if you want to help people, change lives, AmeriCorps is for you.
- You are a Veteran, you've seen the battles, the people, how their lives and homes have been destroyed....Now, show how you can build instead of destroying—something they didn't tell you about—this is the ultimate service.
- I do this quite often and approach it this way:
- \*Why are you not working? This is a way for you to earn income and keep your head above water.
- \* I explain about student loans.
- \* I let them know the satisfaction, sense of purpose, and skill building
- \* Doing VISTA/AmeriCorps is good for your resume.
- You're interacting with an intense crowd, men's men—can't pitch it as heartfelt, touchy feely thing. Through the AmeriCorps experience, connect it to their job in the military, their interests and not about emotions.
- I have recommended AmeriCorps and talk about how meaningful it is, the insights, and the educational opportunity (the ED award at the end of service.) They can use it for vocational training and the Noels courses (National Outdoor Leadership School that costs \$3000—kayaking, backpacking, horseback riding, repelling—spend time outside and working with a team.)
- I would say it's a chance to give back and help others. If you want to help others and give back, this is a perfect opportunity. If you're doing this for the money—not a lot here. If you're doing it to help veterans you're in the right place and this is for you.

### What do we need to know that we do not already know?

- You have to climb Mt. Everest to do this—you are not going to crack these Vets...I don't need to do this, I have my paycheck and my pension...get them to see that there is more to life than smoking cigarettes, drinking, and hanging out with their friends and going to lots of medical appointments. You need advocates to go out there and publicize this thing. It's kind of like a politician—we have to convince them it's worth their while. That's what I get from these Vets. The Iraq and Afghanistan vets are younger and less apt to reach out for help and more apt to want to have a purpose in life. I ran a women's group—women were raped at Desert Storm—have to find the passionate people to sell your program—I'd do it in heartbeat.
- We have an epidemic in our community concerning drugs and an economy of vets who could help community go in direction that is beneficial, clean up the areas that are distasteful to people, we will make a better AmeriCorps and nation.
- You need to understand the kind of environment
   Vets are coming from—they're very hard workers...
   need a clear view of what is being presented to them
   (features and benefits) –what opportunities and
   what the program can do for them.
- I think it's very important that the timing is very important when presenting about AmeriCorps. People need to know this is an option for them. They are a very service oriented people—pitch it to them in a way they can identify with it.
- There are a lot of different reasons people join the military—get \$ for school, get out of a bad situation, or a true desire to serve their country. You need to appeal to all three of those aspects. If in inner city in LA--Market AmeriCorps as a way to get you out of a bad situation, etc. \$ For college—AmeriCorps offers \$ for college and looks great on resume for service. Desire to serve country as mine was at 19 and still today—that's always with a person...you served your country overseas and we still need your help here.
- The website itself is a bombardment of information

- and a lot of people get turned off because it's so daunting—so much text, so many links, and people feel it's futile if they're looking for something. Needs to be more inviting. Also, I usually find people hear about AmeriCorps from others who have been in AmeriCorps vs. any kind of advertising (commercials—is there legislation or funding that prohibits this?)
- I would say that AmeriCorps can do more training events, even if just a day long pep rally.
- My biggest concern if targeting disabled Vets—it
  will be a hard sell if they can't get an income waiver
  from disability check AND receive income from
  VISTA.
- Need to increase living allowance.
- Being placed at a site that matches their interests is the most pivotal point.
- It took me 4-5 months to figure out who I was, where I was, and what I was supposed to be doing.
- Training received was a shot-gun approach and ineffective.
- It took me 6 months to figure out what Ameri-Corps was, what the benefits are, and what I was supposed to be doing.
- Be clear how being in AmeriCorps affects disability income.
- I wasn't sure how everything worked and how it would be similar and different than my Military experience—wanted to understand overall structure of AmeriCorps.
- I had to do my own exploring to understand Ameri-Corps, benefits, etc. My knowledge was self-taught.
- It was confusing—I had to do most of the research myself—how the stipend worked, how the student loan payment worked, how interest on the student loan worked (you have to apply separately and this was not made clear.)
- The money part is not the attraction of the job at AmeriCorps.

- Office politics were present where I worked and this was not attractive to me.
- Have a pamphlet that lays out all the benefits in layman's terms.
- The 1-800 number and the AmeriCorps information on the internet—most of the time people aren't sure how to answer some of the questions—there were inconsistencies in both.
- Another problem—people have the misconception that you can apply for food stamps and that's not the case AFTER you join AmeriCorps. People

- need to know to apply for food stamps before their service.
- My supervisor talked down to us, "dumbing" it down and meetings were not constructive.
- Could be more Veterans focused—Have an Ameri-Corps Veterans' group, an Alumni blog, and a Vet group who can reflect together on their experiences.
- Wish AmeriCorps pushed more towards people coming out of high school.
- Wish I knew more about Vet Corps.

# Full Report on Veterans' Discussion Groups: Identifying Best Practices for Recruiting Veterans for CNCS Programs and Supporting Veterans in Service

#### Overview:

The two focus groups comprised of veterans met in April of 2011, in Denver, Colorado. These groups offered opinions, descriptions, advice and insight on the best way to reach out to other veterans regarding opportunities within AmeriCorps. Recurrent themes occurred in both focus groups' discussions. The veterans also expressed very specific attitudes towards certain material. The veterans and active military personnel (but soon to be veterans) offered their candid opinions about other veterans' likes and dislikes based on their own personal experiences. They had very concrete opinions about effective communication and marketing methods. From these discussion, further questions emerged a well as distinct understanding of veteran's communication preferences.

#### TWO FOCUS GROUPS

The two different focus groups were fairly similar based on demographics, locations, and networks. Both groups were fairly diverse representing many ethnicities and age ranges. The April 6th group included veterans from the Army, Air Force, Reserves, National Guard, Navy, and Marine Corps; unlike the April 8th group whose members were all enlisted in the Army (and most had served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan). Nearly every member of the April 6th

group was injured in the line of duty. All of the members in the April 8th group were injured in the line of duty. In both groups, many veterans were parents and a few were grandparents too.

April 6th Discussion Group: Veteran demographics, with participant ages ranging from 20s – 50s, include:

- 1 African-American female
- 1 Asian-Pacific female
- 1 Caucasian female
- 1 Hispanic male
- 1 Cuban/Italian male
- 5 Caucasian males

April 8th discussion Group: Active duty and soon to be veteran demographics, with participant ages ranging from 20s – 40s, include:

- 2 Hispanic males
- 1 Cuban male
- 2 African-American males
- 5 Caucasian males

These two groups were parts of two networks that seemed to have some casual overlap. The April 6th group was connected through a Care Coordinator at the Operation TBI Freedom. The April 6th group met in the Denver Options Community Room. Denver

Options an organization working to nurture the unique and individual talents of people who experience developmental delays and disabilities<sup>1</sup>. The April 8th group members were within the Warriors in Transition Unit, also known as the "Wounded Warriors" program, stationed on the Fort Carson Army Base.

## UNDERSTANDING THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS:

The veterans' self-descriptions give context to their recommendations and opinions. For example, the reason a veteran joined the military may indicate their motivation to serve as a member in AmeriCorps. The veterans listed a variety of reasons for joining the military including<sup>2</sup>:

- Dreams/Identity: "fighter and it was a good fit", "to go to Med. School", "fell in love with the uniform", "certain after other civilian jobs did not work out", "always wanted to be a Marine", "to get away", and "needed direction and discipline in my life";
- Service as a family tradition: "wanted to make dad proud", "make uncle proud", "duty", and "call to service";
- Financial Obligations: "support wife/family", "difficulty finding a job", "help my son, financial issues", and "help pay for school"

Also, understanding the emotional response veterans have towards their military service gives insight to how they might respond to other service opportunities. When asked what came to mind when they thought of serving, their answers<sup>3</sup> included these words and phrases:

- Proud (multiple times) and honorable;
- Patriotic, "love the flag and what it stands for", "putting your country first";
- "Sense of duty", fulfilled, fulfilling and "doing the right things that need to be done";
- Empowered and self-respect;
- Service, unconditional, "selfless act" and commitment;
- Positive and humility;
- Camaraderie, "being part of something bigger than myself";
- Enjoyed helping guys;

- Place where I belonged;
- "Changed by what I was going through", and confused.

Finally, the veterans within these focus groups expressed what their own personal goals were at the time of these discussions. Knowing what they were hoping to accomplish gives insight into what they will listen for among the various AmeriCorps' service aspects. The veterans stated that they wanted to help other veterans, encourage other veterans, and advocate for other veterans. These veterans were working towards recovering mind and body from their injuries. Of note, this was a prominent goal for all discussion group members.

One veteran explained that he was hoping to, "get off the couch and help other veterans". His focus group members expanded upon that phrase saying that they want to make veterans aware there are so many programs and benefits, show other vets how to advocate for themselves, and be other veterans' advocates. One veteran wanted to inspire his fellow veterans to keep struggling forward. He stated, "You [want] to tell [other veterans with medical complications, 'Hey, don't quit. There are some other options. When it looks at its worst, there's still, you know, things you can do to keep fighting.' Because, you know, we all have the same fighting spirit. You've just got to refocus it sometimes" (MATT S., 4.6.11, p. 50).

Another veteran explained that he was recovering from a severe traumatic brain injury. He explained that when he was injured, one of his roles in the military was to be an interpreter. He said, "when I first got injured, I couldn't talk, and so I went through some pretty intense speech therapy and everything else that goes with cognitive rehab, and now I'm able to speak. But there's a lot of people out there, a lot of guys that have brain injuries that can't articulate the words or think of them fast enough. So that's one of my goals, is to continue speaking for those who can't. (JUSTIN M., 4.6.11, p. 52)

<sup>1.</sup> http://disabilitymessage.com/disability/content/denver-options-services-and-veterans

<sup>2.</sup> Various service members' quotes, on 4.6.11 see page 33-34 and on 4.8.11 see page 82-8

<sup>3.</sup> Various service members' quotes, on 4.6.11 see page 35-36 and on 4.8.11 see page 84-85

One final example of the goals these veterans share is that around recovery. These veterans are trying to grapple with new challenges in their lives. Their families are also adjusting as well. Of course that that this is not always a perfectly smooth process. As one veteran explained, "I'm trying to transition back into ... like a lot of other people, civilian life. And having a family as well, they're trying to understand.... Like with PTSD, they don't really understand, and I kind of get frustrated with that." (MATT O., 4.6.11, p. 51). These veterans need lots of different supports to reach their goals.

#### **VETERANS DESCRIBING VETERANS:**

The veterans spent a fair amount of time within the two discussion groups describing general attributes of the veteran population, including demographics, experience, attitudes and communication styles. These men and women felt confident that certain attitudes were prevalent among nearly all veterans. In fact, they felt so confident, that they were willing to generalize these attitudes to the whole population. These are the opinions of twenty veterans, and we acknowledge that there will be both exceptions and inaccuracies to these generalizations. Yet, sharing these candid opinions may improve future recruitment efforts of these veterans.

The NCCC service program is most similar to their military experience.

First, let us briefly touch on veterans' demographics and experience. Veterans tend to be older. One veteran explained, "a lot of times you're going to be older than 24 when you get done with your enlistment. [MATT B.:A lot of them don't join before they're

24.] A lot of them serve for six years. Well, guess what? You get to do two years in the inactive reserves. And so you're going to be close to making that window" of AmeriCorps Service before twenty-four years old, (JUSTIN M., 4.6.11, p.109-110).

Moreover, the veterans are quite confident that their military experience was far more intense, rigorous and robust than their peers experienced in the civilian sector. These veterans are confident that their exposure to pressure, discipline and danger far exceeds that of their civilian counter-parts. One veteran tried to explain the difference between military experience and civilian experience in this manner, "You go into the military, say, for avionics, a field that a civilian would take 15 years of schooling to get into. You get a sixmonth crash course, and you're operating military aircraft in a combat zone. But it's not possible for the regular civilian because they didn't go through the basic training, the boot camp, the order and discipline" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p. 108 -109). Because veterans have experience with team-work, emergency response and deployment AmeriCorps' NCCC service opportunity was very attractive to the members of these focus groups. The NCCC service program is most similar to their military experience. One veteran explained that "Veterans are interested in NCCC "simply because of the way that it's set up" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p. 108 -109).

The veterans generalized certain opinions about government, family, civilians, volunteerism/service, leadership/adventure, disability issues, travel, technology, and recruitment to the whole veteran population.

#### Government

Just because these veterans and soon to be veterans love their country, does not mean that they adore their government. In fact, these veterans were distrustful; one said, "If, [AmeriCorps] is a government program, I think skepticism is built in" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p.115). The veterans were also frustrated with government. For example, one veteran said, "[Something that is] government funded [seems negative b/c] "you get so jaded on our side of the coin because we don't -- our voice doesn't get heard" (TAMARA C., 4.6.11, p.143). Another veteran explained, "From what I experience with all the veterans I work with, they're interested in helping other veterans, not necessarily the government. And a good portion of them are... not exactly happy with everything that's going on in the government, but they're very adamant about helping their fellow veterans. So instead of making

[marketing AmeriCorps as] a government thing... make it more a community of veterans that are getting together to help veterans and/or the citizens of the country they have protected" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p.75).

#### **Family**

Most veterans have established families. Veterans "may want to stay local because of family obligations" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p. 133). In fact the veterans asked to search for volunteer opportunities by location only. A veteran asked, "Can you pull up your search results based specifically on states, and not actions?" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p. 133).

#### Civilians

Due to their experiences and discipline, sometimes these veterans have difficulty comfortably interacting with their civilian counterparts. One veteran explained it in this manner, "[Organizers] told me there was going to be more vets here. That's why I'm here, because there's more vets. I go to school, but I'm always sitting by myself. I don't mingle with students. I mean, as a PTSD veteran, I don't see us exactly as the same thing. I think that our discipline is different than the civilians. And when I see these kids, I'm like, 'Oh, I don't want to mingle with kids.' I stay away from kids when I'm in school" (JOSE S., 4.6.11, p. 71).

#### Volunteerism/Service

These veterans were clear that they had already served their country during their military career. In order to be recruited as a volunteer, or to be approached for a new service opportunity, these veterans wanted their prior service to be respected and admired. For example, one veteran states, "as a military service member, I want to hear -- I want to hear that you need me. 'You served your country, and now that you're not serving your country, your country still needs you, and this is the way you're going to help. Because if you join this organization, you're going to give back to Service members" (VIC B., 4.6.11, p.143).

#### Leadership/Adventure

These veterans already have leadership and adventure in abundance. Marketing to them with the message

that "AmeriCorps members learn new skills, acquire qualities of leadership, and gain a sense of satisfaction from taking on responsibilities that directly affect peoples' lives" may be ineffectual. For example, one veteran stated, "Leadership traits come with being in the military" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p. 110). Another soldier said, "You can delete the adventure part from [the slide summarizing benefits of AmeriCorps experience]" (MR. R., 4/8/11, p. 80).

#### Disability Issues

Veterans who have newly acquired disabilities may feel discouraged or they may have a more positive attitude regarding their disability. It depends on where the veteran is in their particular recovery. Here are a few of their experiences and abilities:

- "I was with speech pathologists and [other rehabilitation providers]. And even today it's real frustrating because you -- you know, the words are there, and they're clear in your head, but they don't come out clear. And for me, I was a linguist in the Air Force as well as I was counterdrug; so I was translating from the ground to the DEA in real-time. And there's no way -- they're never going to return me to that type of duty. I'll be out and everything. But it was real frustrating to lose that ability. You know, just the fact that I can talk and be mostly understood and cognitive is cool, you know, so I can appreciate that. (MATTS., 4.6.11, p.54)
- "I've had two strokes, a heart attack, and seven surgeries. I can't do anything on [that] list. I I have trouble doing seventh-grade math with my youngest daughter, okay, so you probably don't want me tutoring your kids. Because of my injuries, I can't be outside for very long in warm weather. I mean, the list of things that I'm not allowed to do far outweighs the things that I can do. So when you go to present this to veterans, especially disabled vets, if you do something at the VA or something, it might be helpful to have a slide of things that maybe aren't so physically demanding or ….a different array of things that you might be able to do" (JULIET M., 4.6.11, p.81).

<sup>4.</sup> http://www.americorps.gov/for\_individuals/choose/state\_national.asp

What is readily apparent is that the veterans want to be engaged in a conversation about their abilities, and not just their disabilities. These veterans want to move forward. One veteran said, "I think [asking for feedback] makes a huge difference for all the disabled vets out there. I think they're kind of tired of hearing doctors telling them how they're feeling rather than asking them. So I think that by asking the actual veteran themselves, hey, we're trying to figure this out and we want to work with you, that is very positive" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p.143). Also, in order to make service more accessible to veterans, an effective method may be to make recruitment protocol generally more accessible. One veteran suggested, "Why don't you just say, [AmeriCorps has] individually tailored [service opportunities] ... [It can] customize jobs to your abilities" (JUSTIN M., 4.6.11, p.83).

#### Technology

These veterans are comfortable with social networking. One said, "I think that you should [use] Facebook and Twitter and all the different social media mix into your network. And that way you'd also draw attention because [veterans] are familiar with those brands and know that, hey, this isn't the old stuff" (MATT B. 4.6.11, p.115).

#### Recruitment

Veterans like the idea of being recruited in person. Perhaps, this is because they are familiar with the role of a recruitment officer. One veteran expressed interest "in meeting with someone in person: Is there a local building chapter that you can walk into and discuss with an actual person" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p.132). They also like the concept of meeting with a person in a position of authority. Someone suggested, "Maybe have the founder of the organization come out and say, "We're looking for veterans. We need veterans to join our ranks because you have the skills, you have the know-how, and you have the ability to adapt to the environments that we're going to put you in," and really tailor it towards that and actually draw the map" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p.62).

#### Importance of service and diversity

Some the veterans chose military careers because they

were drawn to service. In their discussion, veterans' desire indicated that their desire to serve others had not diminished. In her response to one of the videos shown, one veteran spoke about the positive message of helping vets and building community. She also felt a desire to share her skills with others. She said, "Just

What is readily apparent is that the veterans want to be engaged in a conversation about their abilities, and not just their disabilities.

being trained as a military person, we get maximum learning in minimum time, and to be able to impart that to a community alongside another brother or sister who is like-trained is a pretty dynamic thing....we help each other, and then we take that help and we invest it in our community, and that's the big, huge deal" (Ms. Johnson, 4.6.11, p. 93).

Veterans also value diversity. They consider the military to be very diverse. "The military has Hispanics, Asians, Indians. You know, it's diverse" (MR. B., 4.8.11, p.36). In fact, upon seeing a video clip of veterans serving, the focus group immediately focused on a lack of ethnic diversity of the people in the video. They recommended that if a video were created to recruit veterans, diversity should be a priority. "You want something that's appealing to all audiences" (MR. B., 4.8.11, p.36). The veterans also value the different skills and contributions of many people. They suggested making a video that shows, "diversity and fields that they provide services in and diversity of people" (MR. D., 4/8/11, p. 37).

Desire to transition (personally and professionally)
The veterans repeatedly mentioned the appeal of finding a venue to transition from military life to civilian life. Their comments either indicated that the veterans were looking to transition into new employment options and/or they were searching to transition somehow in their own personal lives.

The veterans spoke about the difficulties they had in leaving the military and finding employment in the civilian sector. It was apparent that some veterans were discouraged by the many obstacles they faced in finding employment. They also seemed to struggle with the return home, as if home was now a foreign land. In fact one veteran used the phrase "so when we try to assimilate back into the civilian sector," which is a phrase often used in regards to adapting or adjusting to foreign customs (TAMARA C.., 4.6.11, p. 44).

Another barrier that veterans face when transitioning from military to civilian life has to do with difficulties transferring their skills to the civilian work setting. One veteran spoke about the common situation in which veterans lacked appropriate certification valued in the civilian sector. He said, "[The military] promises 'Oh, you're going to have a lot of good working skills and everything', but there's not a single military certification that translates into a civilian. So you might have been a truck driver for 20 years in the military. You [don't] have a CDL<sup>5</sup> when you get out; so you can't get a job" (MATT S.., 4.6.11, p. 40). The veterans expressed frustration with the military, stating that there was disconnection between what they are trained and certified to do and the needs of the civilian job market. One veteran said, "So when you leave the military, for however long you served, we are taught or we're ingrained to think that our job skills are going to translate into the civilian sector. So we're thinking all my experience counts for something. And it's a real hard reality to realize that, [the civilian sector will] say, "Thanks, but no thanks." (TAMARA C., 4.6.11, p. 44). Another veteran gave this example, "I have a lot of experience in the medical field, but I have no certifications. What I learned in the military, I could be a paramedic and even more than that... when I was in Iraq, I had a whole platoon by myself. There was no doctor, nothing. If I couldn't contact the doctor on the radio, I was the doctor, so I had to assist them and do things that a doctor would do. So where's the certification for that? Could I do that in a hospital here? Well, hell, no, I can't do that" (JOSE S., 4.6.11, p. 46-47).

It is important to note that not all veterans have difficulty transitioning their military experience to the civilian workforce. Each veteran has a different experience in the military; thus each veteran has a different experience when searching for a job. One veteran summarized the differences as, "You can be in a more laid-back unit. You can be in a hard-core unit and they'll give you the opportunity to go out there and get your training. But it just depends where you're stationed." (JOSE S., 4.6.11, p. 46-47).

In general, Veterans' are seeking assistance in their transition to from a military career to a civilian career. According to one veteran, "If it was me, I [would] give somebody a one- to two-minute presentation on [career transition] instead of 30 seconds ... say, "AmeriCorps provides help in transitioning by doing this, that, and the other," and while it's saying that, it's showing the different things that it does helping veterans transition here. And as it's running, it's showing Air Force, Army, a Navy guy in uniforms, and the next day you see him as an engineer. Have this uniform, and the next day you see him as an electrician" (MR. D., 4/8/11, p. 37).

Some veterans have larger obstacles than certification and training when faced with transitioning to civilian life. These veterans are searching for a personal transformation for a myriad of reasons. These veterans are looking for a "bridge" One veteran agreed that AmeriCorps could be that link between civilian and military. He said, "I think you should focus Ameri-Corps [as] the "bridge" (MR. O, 4/8/11, p.71). He explained that AmeriCorps should express itself as a veteran's "bridge from the military side of the house to the civilian side of the house. Let us be that steppingstone. Let us be your bridge so we can get you that way and feel comfortable as you transform a little bit" (MR. O, 4/8/11, p.71). Other veterans found the analogy of AmeriCorps service to be effective. They said, "I think the stepping-stone quote [This will be a stepping-stone. This will be a stepping-stone to gain another job by having AmeriCorps on my resume. It means a great deal to employers. It shows determination; it shows

<sup>5.</sup> Commercial Diver License, issued by states, military personal only exempted while active or in the reserves. Veterans would need to pay for the licensing fee. http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration-licensing/cdl/cdl.htm

that you stick with things, that you're reliable, that you have a go-get-it type of attitude, enthusiasm, that you see a job get your hands dirty] was good. Even though it's incomplete because you want to know what skills you're going to acquire while you're using Ameri-Corps as a stepping-stone. But I do recommend that you use that quote. (MR. B., 4/8/11, p. 71-72)

Veterans tried to find the words to describe what they were trying to transition away from in the military sector. One veteran said, "I'm not sure how to explain it, but I've seen the problem with the guys who have gotten out in the civilian workforce...the way we talk to [our colleagues] is harsh compared to what they're accustomed to, and you can't talk that way. So a lot of times we get somewhat of a supervisory position because of our management skills" (MR. D., 4/8/11, p.86-87). This veteran decided that the way to best characterize this issue is that sometimes veterans need assistance developing their "people skills" or "Interpersonal skills in the civilian-setting" (MR. D., 4/8/11, p.86-87). Another veteran expanded on these comments by saying, "Yeah, because our interpersonal skills for the setting we're used to are fine and dandy. It works here. But {their military style] is not going to work out there, because you put somebody in minor shock and crying in the corner" (MR. D., 4/8/11, p. 87).

In general, the veterans are looking to improve their communication skills. One veteran mentioned improving his public speaking skills (MR. G., 4/8/11, p. 88). Another mentioned that he would like to work on his flexibility and adaptability. As he explained it as "knowing when not to speak; that's the problem I've been running into. Being in the military, usually if it's wrong -- if it was wrong yesterday, it's still wrong today. And me going into the civilian sector, they -- I guess that's why I come back in the military. (MR. G., 4/8/11, p. 88).

# Search for new opportunities and sense of accomplishment

Finally, veterans in the discussion group were searching for new opportunities. The opportunity to once again have a purpose, goal or mission resonated deeply with these veterans. One veteran who was disabled said that volunteering would "open up the opportunities, but it also open up opportunities to the

right people. Like right now I'm disabled, so there's a lot of things I can't really do. [But] once you have a purpose to get out of bed, get off the couch and whatnot, it's a whole different story" (MATT O., 4.6.11, p. 139). Another veteran said that finding out about AmeriCorps service opportunities made him think that, "this does looks like something that I want to get involved with, and I'm looking forward to utilizing the massive amount of time that I now have on my hands, so I think this is good." (MATT S., 4.6.11, p. 138). Lastly, one veteran stated that serving in AmeriCorps "is something that would be desirable specifically because a lot of the people that get injured overseas, they're taken to a Warrior Transition Unit, and they feel that their mission has not been completed, but they're unable to go back. And this is going to be a way for them to then transition to a mix of civilian and military and complete that mission for their country here" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p.127)

#### COMMUNICATING WITH VETERANS DURING OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT: WORDS/LANGUAGE, AUDIO, COLORS, VISUALS AND ORDER OF INFORMATION

The veterans in these two focus groups had distinct opinions what communication techniques and/or style they prefer. The veterans recommended that they receive new information through traditional routes with which they are familiar such as: care coordinators, in person conversations, and messages delivered in concise and logical presentations. They also suggested a certain personality to share new information, ideally an "enthusiastic veteran serving in AmeriCorps".

In regards to the specifics of marketing to veterans', they had some clear, specific and strong opinions regarding the best ways to engage them. They wanted CNCS program to describe the CNCS programs they are eligible to participate in, and tell them how we apply to take part in service. But, they want this information presented to them in a succinct and focused fashion. They want to know how they can help with the mission of the program, what exactly they will be committing to, and what they will get in return for their service. For example, they suggested using patriotic themes and colors in the recruitment presentations and materials, and utilizing their peers' experiences in service as a way to engage them, be-

cause they have a high level trust and camaraderie with each other. They also communicated clearly that they want to know what the pay and benefits are up front, and how the pay and benefits might impact their military and other government benefits. These and more examples are illustrated below.

One established communication route for veterans is through their interaction with their "care coordinator". The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policy encourages continuity of care coordination. The VA providers are asked to maintain treatment with patients for 90-days and provide at least two contacts in the 2nd and 3rd months of care<sup>6</sup>. The VA suggests that one way to increase the clinical impact of continuing care contacts might be to use required contacts to follow-up with patients regarding their experiences in self-help groups. One veteran suggested their care coordinator ought to know of the benefit of volunteer opportunities such as AmeriCorps. For example, he said "I would say it's a great opportunity for those that are being discharged before their contract is over, especially if they're able to get hooked in through their care coordinators or hooked in through an individual saying, 'This would be great for you. Let's take a look at this opportunity.' And it's in addition to their current benefits. Assuming it doesn't impede on what they're getting, I think it would be a very good opportunity for a lot of the people that I work with" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p.135-136).

Both focus groups suggested an "Enthusiastic Ameri-Corps Alum and Veteran" as the ideal spokesperson. The veterans made these suggestions:

• Individuals presenting to a group is much more powerful<sup>7</sup> but a video may work if "you could have someone who's very *enthusiastic* <sup>8</sup> [providing the voice over]" for a video showing vets performing various service.(MR. O, 4/8/11, p.72)

- Have an AmeriCorps vet present<sup>9</sup> as in: "somebody with experience in the military and can correlate -- who's done the job and can bridge the gap between AmeriCorps and the questions we might have." (VIC B., 4.6.11, p. 142)
- But you need to have the vets /You have to have a vets<sup>10</sup>

Both focus groups were also very clear that facts and figures persuade veterans as well. For example the veterans stated:

- Soldiers want details, period. (MR.M., 4/8/11, p. 66)
- Add: statistics, numbers, percentages of certain aspects of military, civilian, community, whatever else. (MR. O., 4/8/11, p.38)
- On these forms [about who benefits from Ameri-Corps programs], include "statistics when it comes to benefits from having better schools. Put a statistic in there, better graduation rates or better acceptance, or whatever. Safer streets. Safer streets from what? Drug-free zones, stuff like that, more affordable housing, move-in rates etc. (MR. B., 4/8/11, p. 64). The impact of what is going on. (MR. B., 4/8/11, p. 64)
- Every year they add to it. They build on a foundation to try to get better and better each time. [looking for logical progression] (MR. O., 4/8/11, p.40)
- "If you can just show a little bit of how a branch is open, what falls under what, it would help... like an organizational chart or a tree<sup>11</sup>. So you can actually see where Vet Corps falls under. (MR. B.,4/8/11, p. 55)

Both of the focus groups were adamant that presentations needed to be less convoluted and presented with clear language.

• A lot of these guys that come into these units have some kind of combat- or noncombat-related injury that may have affected their cognitive skills, so it

<sup>6.</sup> United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2011) "Using the 3-Step Referral Method to Meet the Continuity of Care Performance Measures" On the Internet http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/providers/sud/selfhelp/continuity\_measures.asp (Accessed on November 2, 2011)

<sup>7.</sup> JUSTIN M., 4.6.11, p.141

<sup>8.</sup> MATT B., 4.6.11, p.141 and MR. O., 4/8/11, p.72

<sup>9.</sup> AUDIENCE, 4.6.11, p.141

<sup>10.</sup> MR. R, 4/8/11, p. 72

<sup>11.</sup> Ms. Sotnik, 4/8/11, p.55

needs to be brought down a level where it's more – and I'm not saying kindergarten level, but to an understandable level (MR. O., 4/8/11, p. 63)

I think you could avoid confusion with [description of NCCC] if you just change it to "full-time commitment for 10 months of service." x A good term that you could use in there is if it was "waiver-able" or "un-waiver-able", because if [age-limit] could be waived, then it may draw more people's attention (MR. O., 4/8/11, p. 60).

#### Feelings of patriotism

The veterans stated that a patriotic theme resonated with the veterans. One veteran commented on the marketing materials for AmeriCorps and said, "If [the information] is for all veterans, I would say more of a patriotic type of a theme" (MR. D., 4/8/11, P. 32). Another veteran explained, "They should have flags in the background, more toughness, you know, to the background, not circles, straight angles" (MR. B., 4/8/11, P. 32).

#### Prioritization of benefits

The veterans were explicit in the importance of benefits. They wanted to know what they could expect in return for their service. One veteran said, "The subset of people that you're going after, at least from the veterans' side, really want to hear [about benefits, allowances, loan repayments]. They really want to hear people say, "Yes, you know what? I can do this." The living allowance, something that's around 13,000, that's a huge amount if you're a single guy and your apartment is only \$200 a month. That's a huge amount. Because VHA is 1,300 a month. So there's a lot that you're offering here. Healthcare is huge. All of these things are huge, and I think you need to really hone in more...." (VIC B., 4.6.11, p.129).

The veterans are also clear that many other groups approach them about other opportunities. One veteran explained, "People want to know, especially if you present this to the Wounded Warrior groups [about benefits and payment]. Everybody else [is coming to] the VA presenting how to get your benefits; Social Security is coming in on how to file for benefits; colleges are coming in or states are coming in telling you how can you get grants and free money to go to

school. You need to present an overall packet that, while you go to school, while you're getting Social Security, you can also do this and get this money and still continue to serve. It needs to be part of the overall package of what veterans get" (VIC B, 4.6.11, p.89-90).

Another veteran was very candid stating that, "for us, we want meat and potatoes. We want to know what AmeriCorps is going to do for me. That grabs attention from soldiers when you say, 'AmeriCorps is going to give you [fill in the blank] and you can go out and use that towards a new home' or," something along those lines (MR. O., 4/8/11, p. 45). He went on to explain further stating, "You have to grasp them, and [the slide about what vets gain from volunteering] is going to grasp them: What you can do for them. They're not here to see a slide show on what [Ameri-Corps does], but what [Ameri-Corps) can do for them" (MR. O., 4/8/11, p.66).

#### Useful Information

One of the first suggestions made by the veterans in response to a recruitment advertisement video for AmeriCorps, was that they thought it was important to have contact information somewhere in the advertisement. For example Matt B. said the "There's no, "Contact so and so." Not that you couldn't get that information on, say, the website if you were inclined to go and search for the website, but it went fairly quickly and had minor amounts of actual information." (April 6, p.59) Juliet M. stated "It would need contact information: a Web site, a phone number . . ., and Matt O. said "I totally agree. Like he said [referring to Matt B.], you may be interested in learning more, but like he said, I wouldn't even give it another thought. You've got to make it easy for me." (April 6, p.60-61) They said that if they were interested in the program after watching the commercial, having the contact information might push them from passive observers of the ad to people who have the information needed to follow-up and perhaps engage further.

They want to know what the commitment will be and what they will get in return. In response to the opening slides of a recruitment presentation, which are very focused on numbers and accomplishments of CNCS programs, but not on the very specific about

the programs themselves Vic B. said, "After six slides, or whatever, I'm bored. I have no idea what you guys want, I have no idea what AmeriCorps is, and I don't know what my commitment to you is going to be. I

They are saying give us information about the mission of the program, how they will contribute to that mission and what they will get in return for their service in a clear and succinct manner.

don't know, am I giving up two years of my life? Do I have to go somewhere? Do I have to travel abroad? Is this something I'm doing just part-time? I have no clue yet on what my commitment is. Mat O. adds "What is the commitment?" Vic B. continues, "Tell me you need me for a year, and I'm going to give you this and I'm going to give you that, and in return, you're going to give me that. I mean, in this day and age and our economy, to go out looking for jobs, you have a great opportunity to get people involved, especially vets, and I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing for you." (April 6, p.72)

This advice is clear. They are saying give us information about the mission of the program, how they will contribute to that mission and what they will get in return for their service in a clear and succinct manner.

#### Order of Information:

When asked what language they would use if they were to redesign the video the veterans seemed to think it told them a lot of information about how many people were already serving, and how great the program was, but didn't tell them that more volunteers were needed, so it left them thinking "so what?"

For example, Matt B. stated "I would say you should have a place in there saying, "right now, like we just told you, we already have like 500,000 people doing this, so just join the bandwagon." And what I got from the commercial, instead of saying, "We're missing your assistance. There's a place here waiting for you" -- and that's not what that ad said. It was more

boasting on how successful they already are." Vic B. said "I want to hear that you need me. "You served your country, and now that you're not serving your country, your country still needs you, and this is the way you're going to help, because if you join this organization, you're going to give back to Service members." (April 6, p.61)

#### Visuals:

Another piece of advice the veterans provided during the discussions was to use less text in marketing and presentation materials, use more engaging visuals and voice over (in videos) and storytelling (in person). For example instead of presenting the history and accomplishments of community service programs with multiple PowerPoint slides filled with words and numbers without direct connection to the audiences interests, as if to say "look how great this program is and how much it's accomplished," they suggested using a series of photographs representing different milestones in CNCS program history and then using a short oral presentation of the history, so as to not lose their attention with too much written information that is to broadly presented. One veteran (Justin M.) put it succinctly when he said about this information in a Power Point presentation "You have to have more details, not more words, but clarity."

On a more positive note, when Ms. Cohen from Denver Options provided a verbal summary of statements and used slides to present comments made by the veterans currently serving in CNCS programs, during the one-on-one interviews, Matt. B said, "I thought that was excellent. I wasn't looking at the slide at all, but the stories that you told, that you were able to speak from your own experience, was much better than me reading." (April 6, p.119) Justin M. said in response to the same veterans' stories about service, "That would be the biggest selling point right there." (April 6, p.119)

Along the same line of thought regarding using wordy materials vs. more pictorial and oral presentation the veterans responded to closed captioning this way: Justin M. said that "As far as the captions, I would say don't include them because vets that have a hearing disability have probably already been fitted

with the proper technical gear to help, you know, get the message across. Like myself, I have a hard time reading. I've got programs that read to me. So just like me, I'm sure they have programs, if it's on the Internet or if it's on TV. They're already going to have that caption." Matt B. added, "You're trying to read it instead of paying attention to what's going on." And Ms Thompson said, "Right. And if you ever try to read closed captioning when you're sitting in a restaurant that's really loud and they have it on the TV, you don't -- you miss all the visual on the TV because you're busy reading it. (April 6, p.97) They very much want more visual and auditory, and less text.

In addition, to less text in presentation materials, the veterans suggest using patriotic colors and themes. For example the veterans response to being asked about the colors on some green and white slides said the following "If it's for all veterans, I would say more of a patriotic type of thing." (Mr. D, April 8, p.105). Mr. O stated that "The patriotic theme will work for the military guys," and that "red, white and blue colors" would work in the slides. (April 8, p. 104)" Mr. B. said that ". . . they should have flags in the background, more toughness, you know, to the background, not circles, straight angles." (April 8, p. 105)

In regards to their suggestions for improvement of another recruitment video for Vet Corps the veterans said they wanted to see the Vet Corps members in action, and they enjoyed the parts that expressed information about building community.

Matt B. stated, "What I'd like to see more of is watching them actually performing the task that they say they're doing rather than just sitting like that on a couch talking about it. That's what they're trying to get away from in the WTU is sitting on a couch, and so now in AmeriCorps, they're sitting on a couch. Adding to that, Justin M. stated, "Also, when they're having the speakers talk, they need to be a little more animated. I got distracted looking at that white wall, and I couldn't hear a thing they were saying." Juliet M. added, "So maybe, piggybacking off of that, showing them doing what it is that they do with their overvoice [voice over] saying what it is that they like about what they do."

Ms. Johnson provided more supportive advice for the video, "There was [were] some gems in a few of those interviews. There were some wonderful things said about community, about helping vets, and about each one teaching one. Because everybody brings to life and intelligence, and if we can pass that on to one another, then our community is healthier because of it, smarter, wiser, more capable because of it." (April 6, p.73)

Another area that was briefly touched upon by one veteran was diversity. Mr. B. stated that he would like to see more diversity in the recruitment materials because "The military has Hispanics, Asians, Indians. You know, it's diverse. You want something that's appealing to all audiences." (April 8, p.36) In marketing, it's important to know who you are marketing to, and represent them in those materials.

So in summary, they like the use of veterans in marketing materials, because they can connect with and relate to other veterans, but they want to see them in action. They also enjoyed hearing about the positive impact on the community and what the veterans felt they gained from the experience.

#### Concise Language:

As stated previously, transition from military to civilian life came up, when the discussion turned to benefits that could be gained through service. Mr. D. stated that some of the information was too vague in the presentation, and that he would want more detail. He wanted the presentation to say "This is how we can help you transition into civilian life or a steady career with us, a long-term career." And he wanted to know "how can I do this [service] and still maintain my standard of living as I transition out?" (April 8, p.112) One of the Social Workers who sat in on the group, due to her involvement with veterans transitioning from military to civilian life piggy-backed on this theme expressing concern about how veterans might live on the funds provided for service. She stated, "I think that one of -- I mean, I get the whole concept of AmeriCorps. But when I see the veterans, when I see these guys, one of the biggest issues is really transitioning from here to there and what financially that's going to look like, because they have

families. Being in the position that I am or being somebody that would be transitioning out of the military with a family would be real difficult for me to sort of accept AmeriCorps because of -- you know, it's at poverty level. And how am I going to take care of my family? Getting skills is great, but your family has to also be, you know, somewhat comfortable -not having luxuries, but having the basics and not struggling so much. And I'm surprised that nobody has kind of mentioned that financial piece, because it's a real issue. It's a real issue for people." (April 8, p.123) AmeriCorps may not be the best fit for military veterans with families to support at this time, but if it can be, then that information should be presented right up front to these veterans, so these men and women who want to serve know what compensation is available to them; and perhaps the level of financial compensation for veterans with families is something that could be addressed through changes in policy in the future.

#### Message:

Another area of much discussion and suggestion from the veterans was to tell the focus group facilitators that CNCS should focus marketing on how taking part in service can be helpful in transitioning to civilian life. Mr. D. suggests that recruiters use language that says, "AmeriCorps provides help in transitioning by doing this, that, and the other, and while it's saying that, it's showing the different things that it does helping veterans transition here." (Mr. D, April 8, pg.37) Mr. In the same conversation Mr. B asked, "Have you ever seen that Army commercial where they have people, like, "Can a lawyer be a watercraft engineer" and stuff like that? And in response to an affirmative remark from one of the facilitators, he said "Something sort of like that where you can see the transformation." (April 8, p. 37-38) In response, to listening to veterans stories of their service in Ameri-Corps another discussion group veteran said, "I think you should focus AmeriCorps on -- you know, use the word "bridge." We're your bridge from the military side of the house to the civilian side of the house. Let us be that stepping-stone. (Mr. O, April 8, p. 71) In the other focus group, Vic B. said that he would like "to see how I could transition from the military to

your organization." And what value the skills and his service in the military would have for CNCS programs. (April 6, p.78) Matt B. stated that some soldiers who are injured and become disabled during their service, "feel that their mission has not been completed, but they are unable to go back. And this [Americorps service] is going to be a way for them to transition to a mix of civilian and military and complete the mission here." (April 6, p.127) All of these statements could be utilized by CNCS, state and local programs to create recruitment advertisements, videos and presentations that illustrate

To potential veteran recruits, how they can use service as a transition to civilian life.

After hearing about the impact of CNCS service on SSI, SSDI and VA benefits, Matt B. said "There's going to be a huge population that are going to be interested. If you think about the two populations of

veterans, the veterans that didn't incur any injuries either overseas or not overseas, and then the one's that did. The ones that did are going to be on Social Security Disability, they are going to be on VA disability, which doesn't matter as far as this is concerned. But the people that are not on those things are getting a full-time job . . . So this would be more tailored for vet-

"I want someone to hire me because I have a damned ability. I don't care what disabilities I do have. It's what I do have, not what I don't have."

erans that have been disabled during service to their country. I think it . . . would be desirable specifically because a lot of people that get injured overseas, they're taken to the Wounded Warrior unit, and they feel that their mission has not been completed . . . this is going to be a way for them to . . . transition to a mix of civilian and military and complete their mission for their country here." (April 6, p.126-127)

In addition, Vic B. stated "People want to know

[about how their disability and veterans benefits will be impacted], especially if you present this to the Wounded Warrior groups. Everybody else -- the VA is coming in presenting how to get your benefits; Social Security is coming in on how to file for benefits; colleges are coming in or states are coming in telling you how you can get grants and free money to go to school. You need to present an overall packet that, while you go to school, while you're getting Social Security, you can also do this and get this money and still continue to serve. It needs to be part of the overall package of what veterans get. (April 6, p.89) The veterans in the focus group essentially say that this information about benefits needs to be clearly stated up front, especially in "transition meetings" because it will be an incentive for veterans with disabilities to serve.

When the discussion turned to talk about CNCS wanting to be inclusive of veterans with disabilities, Mr. R. told a story about being recruited for jobs because he had achieved medals due to his injuries overseas. He expressed some very clear, strong negative feelings about being recruited because he has a disability. He stated, "I want someone to hire me because I have a damned ability. I don't care what disabilities I do have. It's what I do have, not what I don't have." (April 8, p.114) This feeling is something to be aware of in some veterans. Like most people, they want you to hire them because of what they bring to the table, not because they are a show piece or because of someone's pity.

#### Pay and Benefits

Again an important underlying theme that comes through a reading of the focus group discussions is "tell us what we are going to get out of serving, especially about the pay and benefits." For example, Mr. O states, "We want to know what Americorps is going to do for me. That grabs attention from soldiers when you say, AmeriCorps is going to give you \$2,000 and you can go out and use that towards a new home, or you know, things like that."

During a discussion about where information about

the benefits that come with service should be located in a recruitment presentation, the veterans were strongly in support of putting that information front and center. Mr. G said that information about the educational award, help with student loans and the stipend should come first in the presentation. Mr. W wanted this information within the first 15 minutes of the presentation, and Mr. R said this information should be on one of the first slides. (April 8, p. 78) They want the benefits first. Matt M. stated that, "They should start off, to begin with, the benefits: the 10 month contract, the 10 months service, full-time and part-time opportunities." And Vic B. added that the veterans, "They really want to hear people say, "Yes, you know what?" I can do this. The living allowance, something that's around 13,000, that's a huge amount if you're a single guy and your apartment is only \$200 a month, That's a huge amount."

Another important benefit a veteran might gain from AmeriCorps service is vocational skill building and civilian work experience that may translate to full-time jobs or careers in the civilian workforce. Mr. R stated that especially for veterans with disabilities it is important that information about "training" and "hands-on training" needs to be on the CNCS website and they need to ensure that an offer for training be an important part of outreach and recruitment of veterans.

When asked what skills they thought they needed to develop in addition to the skills they developed in the military, the veterans gave a number of interesting answers, mostly related to human relations, which could be translated into recruitment and marketing materials for skills they could learn from AmeriCorps service. (April 8, p. 117) Vic B. said, "Customer relationship skills, people skills" (April 6, p. 41) Mr. M. and Mr. R both said that "patience" was a skill they wished to develop. (April 8, p.86-87) Mr. R added "compassion". Mr. D said, "Interpersonal skills in the civilian setting," because the military is more about action not verbal communication. Mr. G. added, "Public speaking."

COMMENTS ON PROGRAMMATIC

#### STRUCTURES AND BENEFITS POLICIES:

The veterans asked many questions about Ameri-Corps programmatic structures and the potential impact of AmeriCorps service on their benefits. The veterans were concerned about program restrictions, how a living allowance is distributed, and the impact on their Social Security benefits. It is clear that it is highly unlikely that a Veteran will choose to serve in AmeriCorps if to do so would negatively impact the benefits that veteran is presently receiving.

The AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps)<sup>12</sup> program, a full-time, team-based residential program for men and women age 18–24, received a great deal of attention in both discussion groups. The veterans focused on the age restrictions for NCCC. One veteran asked, "Why is this program only restricted to 18- to 24-year-olds? ... The job here -- fighting disasters, environment, living within a small community or a small team or a small unit -- this is exactly what a lot of Service members do. Why can't this be opened up to be more -- we already have the skill set coming to you to be able to do this. Is there room to open this up to older, more experienced vets?" (VIC B., 4.6.11. p.104-105).

The veterans sought clarification as to how benefits varied by AmeriCorps programs. For example, service members that serve in NCCC will get an education award, plus they will live on campus<sup>13</sup> however, the same benefits are not available for a state AmeriCorps service member (for example). The veterans might appreciate a one page handout with each service programs' benefits clearly defined. Also, the education award posed some confusion as well. The veterans were told that the education award ranges from \$4,725 to \$5,550, and it allows for the AmeriCorps

award for the education apprenticeship and on-the-job training at institutions that accept the GI bill. So the education award is not really necessarily used for a degree program. You can use it for apprenticeship and training programs<sup>14</sup>. It was unclear how these veteran groups felt about this information.

The veterans are not unfamiliar with the concept of a living allowance, a benefit offered through some of the AmeriCorps programs. Military personnel receive a "COLA", which is a cost of living allowance. <sup>15</sup> In fact, one veteran received this information quite positively. He stated "The [CO] living allowance, something that's around \$13,000, that's a huge amount if you're a single guy and your apartment is only \$200 a month. That's a huge amount. Because VHA<sup>16</sup> is \$1,300 a month" (VIC B., 4.6.11, p.129). Where VHA stands for Veteran's Health Administration.

Where confusion arises is whether this living allowance would disrupt the VA disability insurance or the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). There are two types of disability insurance benefits awarded under VA life insurance policies; these are: 1) waiver of premiums due to total disability and 2) Total Disability Income Provision (TDIP) payments. Most VA Insurance policies contain a waiver a premiums provision in the event that the insured becomes totally disabled.<sup>17</sup> A TDIP rider provides for monthly payments to be paid to an insured starting on the first day of the seventh month of his or her continued total disability. Payments continue as long as the total disability continues. 18 Veterans being recruited would want to know that these benefits would not be harmed by enlisting as a service member with AmeriCorp.

The consensus among the veterans seems to be that

<sup>12.</sup> http://www.americorps.gov/about/programs/nccc.asp

<sup>13. (</sup>PAULA, 4.6.11. p.128)

<sup>14. (</sup>as described by Paula, 4.6.11, p.128)

<sup>15. (</sup>MATT B., 4.6.11, p. 123)

<sup>16.</sup> Where VHA stands for Veteran's Health Administration. http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/division\_flsh.asp?dnum=1

<sup>17.</sup> VA Disability Insurance Benefits (2011) United States Department of Veterans Affairs. On the Internet at www.insurance.va.gov/gli/claims/disab.htm (Accessed on November 2, 2011)

<sup>18.</sup> VA Disability Insurance Benefits (2011) United States Department of Veterans Affairs. On the Internet at www.insurance.va.gov/gli/claims/disab.htm (Accessed on November 2, 2011)

the AmeriCorps living allowance acts as an augmentation<sup>19</sup>, as in it makes their total income larger. However, serious concern arises when the issue of SSDI benefits is involved. As one veteran explained, "It's not so much the VA. It's the SSDI" (TAMARA C., 4.6.11, p.125). In 2008 the H.R. 6081, the Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief Tax Act of 2008 ("the HEART Act")20 was passed into law. "The HEART Act contains a provision we have been seeking that excludes AmeriCorps benefits from being counted as income for purposes of eligibility for Supplemental Security Income (SSI). This extends the long-time AmeriCorps VISTA income disregard for SSI to all AmeriCorps positions. An SSI recipient who enrolls in AmeriCorps will no longer risk the loss of SSI benefits or eligibility as a result of participating in AmeriCorps. While the law does not extend to Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), it removes a significant barrier to participation for SSI recipients.<sup>21</sup> (Paula, 4.6.11, p.125-126). The discussion among the veterans continued. One veteran concluded that, "So the Supplemental Security Income is not affected necessarily, but the disability income is?" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p. 126). The facilitator mentioned that in some situations, "there are creative ways that some states have addressed that. So you can accept a little less than the 'standard going amount', so that it won't be impacted" (as described by Paula, 4.6.11, p.126). The veterans commented enthusiastically, "So you can accept less from AmeriCorps to the point where you're at that level where it won't be impacted?" (MATT B., 4.6.11, p. 126-127). Finally, the April 6th discussion group focused on

whether the AmeriCorps benefit was a student loan deferment versus student loan repayment. In fact, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 ("CCRAA")<sup>22</sup> created two new federal programs: a new Public Service Loan Forgiveness program and a new Income-Based Repayment plan (IBR) for the repayment of federal loans<sup>23</sup>. The Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program offers forgiveness for outstanding Federal Direct loans for those individuals who make 120 qualifying payments after October 1, 2007, while working full-time in a "public service job" as defined in the Act<sup>24</sup>. The new Income-Based Repayment plan helps to make repaying education loans more affordable for low-income borrowers, such as an AmeriCorps member living on a stipend<sup>25</sup>. IBR will became available in July, 2009. On October 23, 2008, the Department of Education published a final rule that details the implementation of the Act<sup>26</sup>. It is important to note that the final rule recognizes full time AmeriCorps service as equivalent to a public service job. So, to answer one veteran's question, "Deferment and repayment?<sup>27</sup>" The answer seems to be yes to both. However, further clarification is needed.

Because the impact of AmeriCorps service on a veteran's benefits is a hyper-critical issue, it seems necessary to clearly define how these different benefits may interact either negatively or positively. This is of the utmost importance to the veterans.

<sup>19. (</sup>TAMARA C., 4.6.11, p.125)

<sup>20.</sup> AmeriCorps. (2008) "New Law Makes AmeriCorps More Accessible to SSI Recipients" Corporation for National and Community Service: Official Statement. Office of CEO. June 18. On the Internet:

http://www.americorps.gov/about/newsroom/statements\_detail.asp?tbl\_pr\_id=1095 (Accessed on November 2, 2011)

<sup>21.</sup> AmeriCorps. (2008) "New Law Makes AmeriCorps More Accessible to SSI Recipients" Corporation for National and Community Service: Official Statement. Office of CEO. June 18. On the Internet:

http://www.americorps.gov/about/newsroom/statements\_detail.asp?tbl\_pr\_id=1095 (Accessed on November 2, 2011)

<sup>22.</sup> http://www.americorps.gov/for\_individuals/benefits/ccraa.asp

<sup>23.</sup> http://www.americorps.gov/for\_individuals/benefits/ccraa.asp

<sup>24.</sup> http://www.americorps.gov/for\_individuals/benefits/ccraa.asp

<sup>25.</sup> http://www.americorps.gov/for\_individuals/benefits/ccraa.asp

<sup>26.</sup> http://www.americorps.gov/for\_individuals/benefits/ccraa.asp

<sup>27. (</sup>MATT B, 4.6.11, p. 128).

# Future Questions to ask in Order to Reveal Best Practices for Recruiting, Retaining and Supporting Veterans in Service

As presented previously in this report, the veterans had many suggestions about the marketing strategies, information which should be provided to them in advertising and presentation, and in what format they materials should be presented, but those areas seemed like minor issues in comparison to their concerns about how they would take care of themselves and their families during and after service.

The two major concerns of the veterans expressed during the presentations and discussions were 1) will I be able to keep myself financially afloat if I participate in this program, and 2) will this service really provide me with the skills and civilian job experience I need in order to transition into civilian employment after I complete my service. In order to recruit, retain, and support veterans and their families it will be important to explore CNCS policies and procedures in relation to the lives of veterans.

Questions we should be asking of ourselves might be: How can we support veterans in their service in a financially viable manner, and will service as it is constructed really translate into financially viable jobs for these veterans after they participate?

One possible way to discover the answers to these questions would be to ask veterans what specific supports they would need in order to serve. Some of this was asked during the focus groups, but only in the context of "what would engage you in service", not really "what would help to retain and support you during and after service." A needs assessment that could answer the question about retaining and supporting a transition to civilian work and life could be accomplished by conducting a literature review of research that has been completed previously, which focuses on veterans transitions into civilian life. This literature review could be utilized to create high quality research questionnaires and tools in order to conduct more one-on-one interviews and focus groups with veterans focusing on the questions related to what they need in order to accomplish their employment goals.

#### **Conclusion:**

As seen in this report the "The Engaging Veterans with Disabilities Initiative" has enlisted Afghanistan and Iraq veterans who have experienced TBI, PTSD and other combat issues, some of whom are currently participating in CNCS service, to explore how service can be successfully marketed to veterans and current outreach and recruitment strategies and products may potentially be generalized to all veterans.

The extensive analysis of one-on-one interviews and discussion group transcripts in this report exposes and highlights important information about who the veterans are as potential recruits for service, how they view current marketing materials, how they view the

government, what aspects of service concerns and interests them most, and most importantly the best ways to communicate with them in order to engage them quickly, induce them to participate, and retain them in service for the full term of their service. Our hope is that the information presented in this report will enhance the capacity of CNCS programs to recruit veterans as volunteers and create optimal service experiences for those with and without disabilities; their families and allies who view service as a solution for successful reintegration back into the community.

The National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP) (www.serviceandinclusion.org) is a training and technical assistance provider on disability inclusion, under a cooperative agreement from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). Discussion Groups were co-facilitated by Paula Sotnik, Director, NSIP, and Joanne E. Cohen, Organizational Consultant, CTAT at Denver Options and liaison to NSIP.



The Corporation for National and Community Service is conducting the Engaging Veterans with Disabilities in National and Community Service Initiative through its National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP), housed at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, in partnership with CTAT at Denver Options and the "Operation TBI Freedom" project.

Upon request, this material will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities.