

Veterans Alliance and the Veteran's Navigator



The Issue

The Kansas City metropolitan area is home to more than 112,000 veterans – representing 1 in 12 of the adult population ages 18 and over. Most veterans are male (92 percent) and 8 percent are female.

While two out of three veterans are age 55 and older, younger veterans, those below age 34, are more likely to have a service-connected disability. Post 9/11 male veterans aged 25 to 29 had a higher unemployment rate in 2016 than their non-veteran counterparts.

Over 1.9 million veterans have served in the post 9/11 wars and the veteran population is expected to increase by 33 percent between 2015 and 2020. It is estimated that 65 to 89 percent of those leaving the military do not have a job to immediately transition into yet expect to find employment easily. The reality of transition is often very different than those expectations.

The military does a good job of providing their enlisted with specific skill sets that are critical to the mission but that often don't translate directly to positions available in the civilian world. Their training is to work in a specific environment and under an "institutional hierarchy" for which there is little to no comparison outside of the armed services. The armed services are primarily made up of enlisted service personnel who are younger and whose typical education level is a high school completion.

The Opportunity

The United Way Veterans Alliance was born out of recognition that more could be done right here in our region to ensure that local veterans get the help they need to successfully transition to civilian life. With the scaling back of Afghanistan and the Gulf Wars, many of this region's nonprofit, business, education and government providers stepped up to expand, refocus or create new programs geared toward returning veterans.

United Way's Veterans Alliance convenes representatives from more than 100 organizations to share information on existing services that benefit veterans, to identify gaps in services, and to develop a more comprehensive integrated network of response to veteran needs.

Why it matters

Transitioning from military to civilian life is difficult for many reasons. It is a time of significant changes that may include moving across the country, re-connecting with family and friends and represents a drastic change in their day-to day living environment. The military transition programs have been undergoing improvements in recent years. However the timing of the program is at the end of a soldier's service period when they are typically quite distracted by other concerns.

Studies show that commissioned officers and those with a bachelor's degree have an easier time re-adjusting after military service yet the majority of those leaving the military have a high school degree. Veterans and employers have both been challenged by not having a common language with which to discuss military experience in the context of transferable job skills and training. Veterans report feeling a disconnect with employers who they deem are dismissive of their military experience or insensitive to the specific needs and concerns of veterans. This is frustrating at best and, at worst, means that individual is passed over in favor of someone else.

Employment is just one area that veterans struggle with during the transition. Veterans report similar disconnecting experiences returning to school and also with family and friends.

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The Approach

One of the primary concerns expressed by veterans is that they are not accessing the information they need to get connected to services. Many have expressed not only having limited information on how to access government services, but were even more unaware of the growing number of services available through this region's nonprofit organizations.

The United Way 2-1-1 call center, available 24/7 for free, confidential information on community resources, took action to develop specific new resources designed exclusively to meet the needs of our area's veterans for information and links to resources. Called the United Way 2-1-1 Veteran Database, this effort stays current through ongoing collaboration with the United Way Veterans Alliance.

The Veteran's Navigator: To ensure ongoing listening to the needs of this region's veterans, United Way of Greater Kansas City created a new position called the United Way 2-1-1 Veteran's Navigator. In addition to fielding calls, the Veteran's Navigator actively researches community programs and services to address veterans' needs and barriers. The goal is to maintain the most extensive information about veterans' programs and services specific to the Kansas City metropolitan area.

Our Partners

The United Way Veterans Alliance maintains a growing, active membership of over 100 organizations – from the Veterans Administration and the network of veteran-specific public services in both Kansas and Missouri to area businesses committed to hiring veterans and nonprofit partners connecting to serve veterans in new ways.

Focus on Results

Veterans who contact United Way 2-1-1 are directed to the Veteran's Navigator, who works one-on-one with them to address each individual's concerns. Together, the veteran caller and the navigator will research services and programs to identify and prioritize needs. They then work together to contact organizations and service providers. The navigator provides each veteran with a connection to identified contacts and will follow up to ensure their needs are addressed. In 2016 the United Way 2-1-1 call center and Veteran's Navigator responded to more than 2,500 calls from area veterans directing them to services and providing advocacy.

End Result

All veterans in the region have a one-stop resource to help them maneuver not only the complex systems of veterans services, but also to connect to this region's community-based supports.