

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE, A COLUMN DEDICATED TO RECOGNIZING SUCCESSFUL “BRIDGES” BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS, REPORTS ON RESEARCH WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

RETURNING VETERANS CONTINUE SERVICE STATESIDE

“Having meaningful connections with the community as well as volunteering appears to help veterans reintegrate back into civil society,” concludes CIRCLE’s recent fact sheet on volunteering among young veterans. It is a sentiment echoed by organizations that interface regularly with young veterans. What these organizations do differs, but their outlook is similar: they support young veterans’ healthy transition to civilian life. This article focuses on just a few of the many organizations that are connecting returning service members to volunteer opportunities.

★ SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES

Roughly 20% of Swords to Plowshares’ constituents are “current era” veterans. The vision of Swords to Plowshares is that “all veterans will have access to the care and services they need to rebuild their lives.”¹ Colleen Corliss, a staff member at Swords to Plowshares, finds that it is the current era veterans who are most likely to need vocational training or employment help. Her organization’s new green jobs program does just this.

“Swords to Solar Panels,” as one newspaper described it, is a program of Swords to Plowshares that started in the summer of 2009 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.² It is a “green jobs program” that partners with local community colleges in the San Francisco Bay area, including San Jose Community College, Diablo Valley Community College, and Laney College. Participants learn how to install solar panels and weatherize homes. Corliss said that it’s not intended to be just a job but rather a career path. The program has already graduated a cohort of young veterans and plans to have three cohorts go through the six week program this spring. Civic-mindedness is not relegated only to the green jobs program, however. According to Corliss, “[Swords to Plowshares] also runs supportive housing programs for nearly 200 veterans, a group of whom volunteer their time to support community activities and organizations as part of their comprehensive treatment program.”

THE MISSION CONTINUES

Similar to Swords to Plowshares, The Mission Continues is trying to connect young veterans with the skills they need. “[Veterans] gain leadership skills in the military,” Lyndsey Hodges of The Mission Continues explains, “they come back and they are lost because the skills don’t always translate [to civilian life].” This is why The Mission Continues has started a fellowship program for wounded and disabled veterans.

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“The Mission Continues was built on the belief that our returning wounded should be recognized not only for the sacrifices they have made, but for everything they have left to give,” writes Kenneth Harbaugh, Executive Director and co-founder of The Mission Continues.³ Each fellowship lasts at least 14 weeks and is usually a full-time commitment. The Mission Continues staff works with each interested veteran to fit a fellowship to what the veterans needs. Hodges says that some fellowships do lead to jobs or to new networks for the veterans.

Right now the program has about eight fellows, but has funded a total of 48 in its tenure, and is in the process of growing. “So many [veterans] want to continue their service,” says Hodges. This is why at The Mission Continues they are trying to “reshape the conversation” about how veterans are treated when they return from war.

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STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

Student Veterans of America has over 200 chapters across the country, whose membership ranges “from five to a couple hundred,” says Brian Hawthorne, the group’s Legislative Director. Hawthorne is an undergraduate at George Washington University, where he also runs the campus chapter. The group started, he says, when some student veterans began outreach efforts and realized that many others shared their concerns and experiences.

Hawthorne believes strongly in the potential of education. He believes that “schools can be a solution to a lot of the problems facing veterans.” At the same time, he says that “you have to be able to succeed in school-- it’s not just going to school.” He finds that campus chapters often form as a result of a local concern like a particular school policy where “GI Bill benefits are not being taken seriously” or where veterans are having “trouble with getting paid.”

Chapters are encouraged to get involved with their local communities, speak with local leaders, and volunteer at local Veterans Affairs hospitals. Hawthorne finds these activities are not just meant to encourage student veterans to “be a part of the process” but also to help others “recognize the barriers to re-integration into a community.”

In addition, on a national level Hawthorne coordinates legislative work in which they “try and improve benefits for veterans...making sure [the] new GI Bill is what it’s supposed to be [and is] equitably implemented.” Student Veterans of America runs a national conference that sets future priorities and chooses national leadership.

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IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) just concluded their 5th annual Storm the Hill event in Washington, D.C.⁴ The event brings together a selected group of young veterans from across the country who applied and where chosen to participate. Hundreds of veterans applied for the 2010 event.

In addition to meetings on Capitol Hill, at the White House and with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the group conducts trainings on such topics as public speaking and how to work with Congress. IAVA has a detailed legislative agenda for 2010.⁵ Past legislative priorities included: passing a new GI Bill, support for traumatic brain injury screening, and setting priorities for how Veterans Affairs hospitals receive funds.

Applicants to Storm the Hill come from a handful of sources, including IAVA’s online network called Community of Veterans.⁶ The site describes itself as “the first and only online social network exclusively for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.” ★

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/>
- 2 <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/ebx/swords-to-solar-panels/Content?oid=1547627>
- 3 http://www.missioncontinues.org/About/About_Us
- 4 More information about the event can be found at <http://www.stormthehill.org/>
- 5 This legislative agenda can be found at: <http://iava.org/iava-in-washington/legislative-agenda>
- 6 <http://iava.org/form>

