

How to Engage Military Veterans in Your Health and Wellness Programming



Since 2013, a unique collaboration between the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and the Coca-Cola Foundation has supported employing veterans as fitness instructors within community recreation facilities. Park and recreation agencies have utilized the skills and fitness expertise of United States military veterans to help improve the health and well-being in 12 communities across the nation. Veterans have been recruited by these agencies to instruct programs ranging from martial arts to yoga that are free or low-cost for participants. The Coca-Cola Foundation's support is enabling participating veterans to develop their leadership skills while providing community members with opportunities to improve their health. The 12 communities hosting Troops for Fitness programs have shared their experiences during the development of this guide to offer advice for other communities wishing to replicate similar initiatives in the future.



Each year, approximately 200,000 U.S. military veterans return to civilian life, but many struggle to find jobs. In a 2014 report on its annual review of unemployment among former members of the armed services, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a 21.4 percent jobless rate for veterans aged 18-24, for example. To help address this high rate of unemployment and provide job opportunities and training, 12 cities hired veterans to teach fitness and nutrition classes that are free or low-cost to the public. The Troops for Fitness program not only helps veterans develop skills and translate their experiences in the military to the civilian world, but also provides underserved communities opportunities to pursue healthier lifestyles. With one remarkable program that is tailored to each community, Troops for Fitness is providing increased access to health and wellness activities while also supporting those who defended our country.

Presented by the Coca Cola Foundation and NRPA, the goal of Troops for Fitness is to engage veterans as fitness as health and wellness instructors in order to expand opportunities for healthy active living within selected communities, while concurrently providing veterans opportunities for employment and career development. Beginning in 2013, four municipalities per year have implemented Troops for Fitness programming in their communities. Year-

one participants included Atlanta, Miami-Dade County, Newark and Sacramento. 2014 saw programming in Boston, Detroit, Honolulu and Los Angeles. In 2015 and 2016, Troops for Fitness is being launched in Washington, D.C., New York City, San Francisco and Seattle.

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Response to the Troops for Fitness program has been extremely positive from both veteran instructors and participants. A grandmother and caregiver in Newark described the program and the positive impact it has had on her family, saying, "The program taught my grandkids discipline, the importance of being active and introduced new alternatives to keep them motivated. The various techniques on different sports and exercises have helped them to have a better attitude and focus on school."

To date 96 veterans have acquired new skills and experience through local Troops for Fitness programming. Troops for Fitness has reached more than 75,000 participants who have increased access to health and wellness opportunities, with many reporting an improvement in their overall health. One participant in Miami said, "Since I have been working out, I have learned to strengthen my arms and legs. I have more energy. The class and the instructors have really been a blessing to me and my health." The program will continue in various capacities through July, 2018.

Park and recreation agencies are a perfect host for programming that offers flexibility for veteran instructors and provides the experience and training that a veteran might need to begin a new career in the health and wellness field. When designing and building a similar program, consider the following five tips from park and recreation agencies that have successfully implemented Troops for Fitness programs:

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1. Connect with Military Veterans in your Community

Why military veterans? Time and time again, we have heard from Troops for Fitness program participants that they are inspired and motivated by their veteran instructors. In return, military veterans bring a new perspective to an activity and put their leadership and teambuilding skills to good use. Increased morale, the discovery of meaningful work and a connection to the community are reasons cited by many veterans as to why they value their work as a Troops for Fitness instructor. "The Troops for Fitness Program has helped me stay in touch with my fellow soldiers. We exercise together and volunteer our time in providing guidance to some of the participants to be fit and active. The program has helped us to reconnect and find a place to get together and support each other in different aspects of our lives," one veteran instructor in Newark commented.



When creating a Troops for Fitness program, many park and recreation agencies observed that they already had existing employees who were military veterans, but were simply unaware of that career history. Those employees are a natural choice when searching for personnel to lead programming. When recruiting is needed, many agencies identify potential instructors through organizations that provide resources specifically for veterans. The United States Veterans Administration is often a great partner, but local military assistance nonprofit groups that, among many other services, provide resources to veterans seeking employment opportunities should also be consulted. These established networks may supply the audience to conduct presentations or engage with potential instructors at community events and special forums, for example.

The Detroit Recreation Department works with the city's Veterans and Military Task Force, which meets with more than 60 veterans' organizations quarterly. "We've made them a satellite recruitment mechanism for us," said a Troops for Fitness program coordinator.

In Los Angeles, Troops for Fitness coordinators promote their program at job fairs hosted by the Veterans Administration Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System. Miami's Department of Veterans Affairs



works closely with Troops for Fitness administrators and promotes the program on its blog. The Boston Parks and Recreation Department has had the opportunity to connect with the Mayor's Office of Veteran's Services as well as the New England Center for Homeless Veterans in its recruitment efforts. In each of these scenarios, networking with like-minded local contacts was the start of great collaborations across multiple agencies.

Social media and online networking capabilities can also provide a valuable platform for marketing and advertising employment opportunities. Job boards and job fairs are also excellent venues to engage with veterans seeking employment. A notice that can be easily shared among the veteran community will often yield great results. Word-of-mouth referrals from other veterans are perhaps one of the best ways to reach this pool of job candidates and the talent that they have to offer.



Veterans who are new to the fitness industry can be excellent candidates to serve as program instructors. "The Troops for Fitness program provides a good starting point for veterans who want to get a foothold in the fitness industry," said one Marine Corps veteran and fitness instructor in Los Angeles. Many recreation departments train veterans to lead classes and assist them in pursuing fitness certifications. Plus, Troops for Fitness instructors often work part-time, so they are available to teach at other facilities for added income or to complete their education. By offering flexibility that is rare in many industries, such as job return guarantees and short-term instruction assignments, military veterans are an excellent source of talent, bringing unique skills and capabilities.

Park and recreation agencies can take steps or arrange assistance needed for veterans to create their own business entity.

Registering as a business or other applications, for example, may be needed or may be helpful for an individual who is self-employed. Ideally, the Troops for Fitness program will put veterans on a path to create a sustainable business that provides a steady form of income long after the program has ended.

2. Design and Implement a Successful Program

Veterans often serve as Troops for Fitness instructors because they're eager to share their knowledge, and most cities shape their classes based on the veterans' expertise and match classes to the skills and passion of the veteran instructors. In Hawaii, one Air Force veteran teaches a special form of Tai Chi designed to ease the symptoms of arthritis, improve balance and prevent falls.

From Boston to Honolulu, Troops for Fitness programs drive attendance by incorporating new, popular activities such as Zumba and stand-up paddle boarding. In Atlanta, program organizers recently contacted an instructor for the LaBlast fitness program. "There are only about three people in the state of Georgia certified in that, so I'm very interested to learn more about it," said a program coordinator with the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation.

Classes should cater to participants' wants and needs. When one instructor teaches yoga at her Atlanta studio, she shares the philosophical aspects of the discipline. However, her Troops for Fitness students are more interested in simply getting exercise, so she focuses their classes on movement and breathing, rather than on meditation.

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Members of the general public also have more preexisting injuries and physical challenges. “A lot of people have ailments, and I’m constantly modifying exercises for lower back issues,” said a Troops for Fitness instructor in Boston. “It’s important to ask new participants to point out any issues before they begin to exercise.”

While all veterans are familiar with group physical training, they don’t necessarily know how to conduct a class for the public and might need some form of training in order to effectively and confidently lead classes. In Detroit, the National Exercise Training Association (NETA) taught Troops for Fitness veterans how to lead from the front of a large group and engage particular audiences, such as youth. Similarly the Cooper Institute was engaged by the nonprofit OneVet OneVoice in San Francisco to certify interested veterans as personal trainers, further enhancing their skills and offering a professional accreditation that can help advance their careers.

A Sampling of Classes Offered:

Water Aerobics, Yoga, Stretching, Meditation LaBlast, Boot Camp, Dancercise, Strength Training, Zumba, Nutrition, Senior Fit, Ballet, Walk and Talk, Tai Chi, Boot Camp, Golf, Gardening, Snowshoeing, Walking and Running groups, Weight Training, Martial Arts, Roller Blading, Hip Hop Aerobics, Resistance Band Training, Swimming, Stand up Paddle Boarding, Self Defense

3. Reaching your Audience — Promoting Troops for Fitness

Many Troops for Fitness programs use cost-efficient marketing tools. Colorful, patriotic flyers that are distributed at recreation centers and other public facilities will get the word out to patrons who already frequent the facility. “In the recreation centers, people look in specific spots for activities going on, so having very attractive flyers has served us best,” said a program coordinator in Atlanta. In Los Angeles, flyers promoting classes include a photo of the instructor and their name and rank to recognize and celebrate their military service.

“The internet and social media have been effective and inexpensive marketing channels,” said a Troops for Fitness program coordinator in Detroit. The recreation department shares class information through social media and all promotional literature includes a call to action to “like” the program on Facebook and follow it on Twitter and Instagram. Also, a staff member updates and monitors social media accounts and websites to ensure information is fresh and accurate.



A kick-off event can bring a lot of energy to a new program and announce it in a public way. In Seattle, the Troops for Fitness program was officially launched in conjunction with a neighborhood festival in a park. A veteran instructor led participants in an obstacle course and the large gathering was a perfect place to let the community know about Troops for Fitness, the programming that would be offered and where to find more information about future classes.

Troops for Fitness instructors are perfect ambassadors to introduce the program to new audiences. Many of the classes and associated equipment are portable and therefore perfect additions to a community fair or event. In Miami, instructors gained permission to operate a “pop-up” gym on a city sidewalk, exposing the program to participants who may not know it exists in their community.



4. Evaluate and Assess the Program

Regular communication with instructors is important to not only track and collect participation numbers, but also evaluate the overall program offerings and determine which classes are popular and most in-demand. Instructors who are engaged with participants and collect direct feedback can also be incredibly helpful. Which programs resonate with your participants? Does the time or location need to be adjusted? Some park and recreation agencies have administered very short surveys to participants to seek their input on which aspects were positive, what challenges they faced and any recommendations on how to improve each particular class.

Other instructors could visit classes and activities to observe and offer constructive feedback. Similar to "job shadowing," it can be very beneficial for instructors to collaborate on what they have seen work well and drive successful attendance and active participation. Documenting your own best practices and taking note of any feedback received can inform future programs and ensure that they are equally or perhaps even more successful.

Measuring the impact on individual Troops for Fitness participants can also provide useful insight into the program's efficacy.

Do participants have better balance or stamina? One program assesses individual achievements every four months, such as the number of arm curls that can be done in 30 seconds. The true measure of success might be illustrated in the improved health and well-being of the program's participants.



5. Funding and Sustaining Troops for Fitness

Under the Troops for Fitness pilot program, Coca-Cola granted 12 cities funds to implement the initiative over two- and three-year periods. When funding is in place, developing a sustainability plan to continue the program beyond the secured financial support is critical. Successful plans have included involving stakeholders from the community that can help identify potential donors or available grants and perform fundraising activities for the program. Other agencies have found the Troops for Fitness program to be so valuable to the community that they are taking measures to integrate the program into their existing department budget and creating positions specifically for veteran instructors.



Some park and recreation agencies are exploring revenue-sharing programs to make Troops for Fitness sustainable for the future. In revenue-sharing models instructors would charge relatively low fees for classes and receive a percentage of the revenue, while the park and recreation agency would also retain a percentage. Instructors would charge \$25 to \$35 for a 10-week session, for example, and retain 70 percent of the revenue, while the recreation department might collect 30 percent.



For park and recreation departments that do not have mechanisms in place to charge for programming or offer programming at no cost as a standard practice, other options include seeking grants, partnerships or sponsorships from corporations and foundations. Health insurers, for example, might have an interest in providing fitness resources to the community. An individual donor or small business might be interested in sponsoring or “adopting” a particular class or theme of classes, for example. Telling the stories of the senior who has better balance or the child who is significantly more active because of their participation in the Troops for Fitness program can be very compelling to potential donors.



The program has motivated participants to follow the lead of powerful role models and successfully helped military veterans build skills and find new careers serving as community leaders through fitness.

Park and recreation agencies are a driving force at the center of improving health and wellness in communities. Through the Troops for Fitness program, new opportunities for physical activity and wellness are being created in unique ways that inspire people to be engaged. The program has motivated participants to follow the lead of powerful role models and successfully helped military veterans build skills and find new careers serving as community leaders through fitness.

