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VOICES
FROM THE FIELD

The Mission Continues

A Case Study of the Well After Service Model

By Oliver Gould, Aaron Scheinberg, MBA, MPA/ID and
Monica Matthieu, L.C.S.W., Ph.D.

Foreword by Phillip Carter



Center for a
New American
Security

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Cover Image

Photo courtesy of The Mission Continues

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FOREWORD

BY PHILLIP CARTER

Nearly 2.7 million men and women have deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan and other theaters of war since 9/11. These veterans represent the largest combat cohort since Vietnam. Although they are a part of us, they too often stand apart from us, because of this population's relative size, its geographic dispersion and the insularity of the military and veteran community. America salutes its veterans and thanks them for their service, but society does not share the same connections with its veterans as it did one, two or three generations ago.

The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) launched its Military, Veterans and Society research program in 2010 to focus on issues facing the veteran and military community, including the post-9/11 generation of veterans. In 2012, Dr. Margaret C. Harrell and Nancy Berglass published an important study of veteran wellness titled "Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities," which articulated a model for how public, private and nonprofit organizations could align their work with a comprehensive, holistic vision of wellness. This paper generated important discussions within the public sector about how the Defense Department and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) could more holistically improve the wellness of veterans, service members and military family members. The paper also catalyzed a number of private and nonprofit organizations to think about how they too could promote wellness as a normative goal for veterans coming home from war and service to communities across America.

In our research following this paper, we identified a number of emerging veterans organizations that focused on community activity as a means to achieve wellness. These include Team Red, White and Blue (RWB), a fitness-focused organization;

Team Rubicon, a disaster-relief organization that deploys veterans at home and abroad in the wake of major catastrophes; and The Mission Continues, a service-oriented organization focused on veterans' transition and reintegration; and many others, too. As part of their work, each organization also collected data on how that work affected their veterans' wellness, both to measure their effectiveness and to refine their work.

Because of its data-driven approach to veteran service and wellness and its existing body of published research through its partnership with Washington University in St. Louis, I asked The Mission Continues to collaborate with CNAS on a case study that would illustrate the application of the veteran wellness model in the field. The paper that follows is the result of that collaboration, building on the research conducted by Washington University in St. Louis researchers such as Dr. Monica Matthieu and The Mission Continues staff members Aaron Scheinberg and Oliver Gould. We, as CNAS, have two goals in publishing this case study: to show the application of our veteran wellness model in practice and to show the value of outcomes measurement and data analysis in serving veterans.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) published a paper articulating a new model of veteran wellness. This model promoted a normative goal for the public, private and nonprofit sectors to attain in their service toward veteran reintegration.¹ The CNAS model for veteran wellness contained four dimensions – purpose, material needs, health and social/personal relationships – which were broken out into two subdomains, physical and psychological well-being. Since the emergence of this model, organizations within the veteran community have focused on furthering this definition of wellness.

This paper presents a case study of The Mission Continues, a national nonprofit organization, and its work supporting veterans through its Fellowship Program. In addition to its work, The Mission Continues has partnered with the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis Brown School of Social Work for a multiyear impact evaluation of the organization's work, focusing on one of its core programs. This evaluation is continuing to assess the Fellowship Program's performance against the four dimensions of veteran wellness presented in CNAS' 2012 report. This case study describes the work of The Mission Continues, looks at how that work relates to the CNAS wellness model for veterans and presents survey data regarding how well participants in The Mission Continues have performed with respect to core components of wellness. We conclude with several observations and recommendations based on this case study and the data gathered regarding The Mission Continues and veteran wellness.

II. BACKGROUND ON THE MISSION CONTINUES

In 2007, former Navy SEAL Eric Greitens founded The Mission Continues to give veterans an opportunity to continue their service at home in a way that would support their reintegration and enable them to become leaders in civilian life. The program was originally open only to wounded or disabled veterans, and it connected veterans with nonprofit and community-based organizations in the cities and towns where they live. In 2010, based on an increasing recognition that many veterans who were not wounded or disabled were nevertheless struggling with the transition to civilian life, The Mission Continues broadened its program eligibility to include all veterans who served in the U.S. military after Sept. 11, 2001.

A core belief of The Mission Continues is that veterans should continue to serve as assets to their communities after they leave the service. This message resonated with the service-oriented post-9/11 generation and catalyzed program growth over subsequent years. The organization's Fellowship Program quickly expanded to award more than 300 fellowships in 40 states in 2012. National recognition and funding followed, including strategic investments from major philanthropic foundations and significant media attention.

During this period of rapid growth, The Mission Continues collected extensive data on the Fellowship Program's impact on veterans' employment, well-being and service to their communities. Based on initial positive results and increased demand for its services, in 2013 The Mission Continues launched its second initiative, Service Platoons, which brought together teams of veterans to help solve community challenges at the local level. The first five platoons, led by alumni of the Fellowship Program, focused on designing and implementing solutions for community challenges such as homelessness, youth mentorship,

hunger and nutrition, and the environment. The Service Platoons grew even more quickly than the Fellowship Program, with more than 2,000 veterans signing up in the first year alone.

Today, the organization offers two core programs:

The Fellowship Program

For 26 weeks, Mission Continues fellows volunteer for 20 hours a week at a nonprofit organization of their choice, while also completing a curriculum designed to assist them with reintegration and the pursuit of continued education or employment. Fellows have served at more than 600 nonprofits, including the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Equest Therapeutic Horsemanship, Growing Washington and The Humane Society. The Mission Continues fellows have contributed more than \$11 million worth of services since 2007 to these organizations. Similar to those who serve in AmeriCorps civic service programs,⁶ the fellows receive a living stipend and additional leadership training to prepare them for their civilian service.

The Service Platoon Program

Mission Continues Service Platoons are teams of 30 to 60 veterans of all generations and often also include active and reserve service members. Platoons work together to address specific problems in their community, ranging from hunger among inner-city youth in the nation's capital to veteran homelessness in Phoenix.

To date, The Mission Continues has awarded 1,105 fellowships and operated 30 platoons, with a geographic footprint that includes 49 states and touches 650 other nonprofit or civic-focused groups. Going forward, the organization plans to award at least 400 fellowships per year and have 135 platoons operating in 50 major cities across the country by the end of 2016.

III. WELL-BEING AND SERVICE

This section presents the results of an impact evaluation of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program. The program supports veteran reintegration across all four dimensions of well-being described in the CNAS Veteran Wellness Model, with a specific focus on purpose and social relationships. The program accomplishes this by redeploying veterans into community service. This service opportunity provides them with a renewed sense of purpose in life, a stronger social network, professional development support and the broader health benefits of serving others by volunteering.

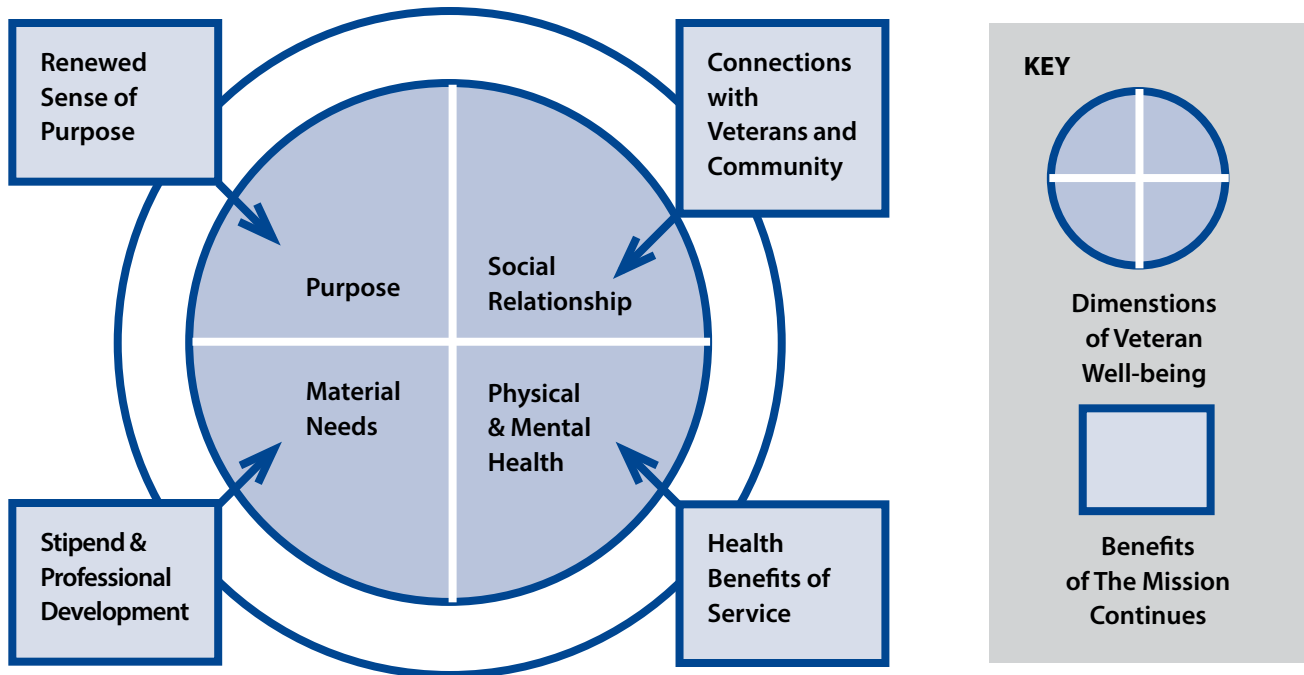
Renewed Sense of Purpose

Many veterans place a high priority on finding a renewed sense of purpose in civilian life,⁷ and while employment and education are necessary to an extent, they are not always sufficient.⁸ For many post-9/11 veterans, service is core to their identity and the way they define purpose in their lives.⁹ The main feature of the Fellowship Program is to provide a minimum of 520 hours of structured volunteer service over six months at a nonprofit organization of the veteran's choice. Veterans select their own issue focus (e.g., housing assistance, youth mentorship, environmental conservation, etc.) and set their own service goals, which lets them use their goal-setting skill set in a civilian environment. Participants also complete monthly leadership development assignments that challenge them to reflect on their direction and progress and set future-oriented professional goals. This combination of structured service, professional development and goal-setting helps veterans identify and sustain a renewed sense of purpose in civilian life.

Connections with Veterans and Community

Many veterans prioritize social relationships with other veterans for support and camaraderie after leaving the military.¹⁰ At the same time, veterans must also develop connections with their families

FIGURE 1 – IMPACT OF SERVICE ON WELLNESS



and the community as a whole in order to reintegrate and to pursue their post-military goals.¹¹ The Fellowship Program is structured to connect veterans with each other for mutual support while simultaneously strengthening each individual’s relationships with family and community. The program starts with a three-day intensive orientation where participants are offered the opportunity to network and to form mutually supportive connections with 70 to 80 other veterans in their fellowship cohort. These connections are sustained beyond orientation through regular Mission Continues events for program participants and alumni, which have recently expanded to include more than 2,500 veterans participating in The Mission Continues Service Platoons as well. Also during the Fellowship Program, service at a nonprofit organization provides another opportunity for veterans to form positive relationships with a diverse range of individuals, from nonprofit leadership and staff

to the beneficiaries of the organization’s services to civic and business leaders in the community. All of these connections serve to bolster the veteran’s reintegration.

Stipend and Professional Development

Basic resources such as housing, employment, financial management, legal services and daily basic needs and services are essential for veterans’ reintegration, health and well-being. The Fellowship Program provides a cost-of-living stipend that helps veterans provide for their material needs while serving 20 hours per week. This stipend is based on the modest AmeriCorps living stipend and varies based on the local cost of living. The stipend supplements existing resources and, for some, provides a temporary financial boost that allows veterans to focus their energies on service in the community as they continue to explore and to advance their career options and life goals.

Health Benefits of Service

Military service can have significant effects on health, including long-term pain, disability, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues. In particular, mental health challenges (while sometimes exaggerated in the media¹²) are a significant issue for some within this generation of veterans.¹³ While the Fellowship Program is not a direct health intervention, volunteer service has well-documented beneficial effects on health and wellness.¹⁴ In addition to physical health benefits,¹⁵ service can improve psychosocial indicators such as sense of purpose and life satisfaction, which have been shown to predict improvements in mental health outcomes over the long term.¹⁶ The Fellowship Program is designed to improve sense of purpose and life satisfaction by engaging veterans in a rewarding service experience, supplementing more direct clinical interventions and therapies that can help those with serious mental health challenges.

IV. PROGRAM RESULTS

Between 2010 and 2014, The Mission Continues partnered with researchers from the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis to complete a comprehensive evaluation of personal, professional, social and health impacts of intensive community service on post-9/11 veterans.¹⁷ The study used self-administered surveys before and after veterans participated in the Fellowship Program to assess health and psychosocial outcomes, program satisfaction, professional development, and family and community impact. Participants' demographics, satisfaction and perceived impacts of the program on their life and future goals were also collected. Outcome measures from the Post-Deployment Health Readiness Assessment (PDHRA) (DD Form 2900, January 2008), a widely used and standardized screening questionnaire, were used to assess the veterans' state of health and wellness. Screening questions selected from the PDHRA measured self-rated health, physical and emotional health status, PTSD and depressive symptoms. All questions were assessed for the past month. The results are presented here, with results broken down using the components of the veteran wellness model.

Participant Characteristics

To control for sample bias, we offered no incentive to participate in Web-based surveys. A total of 414 veterans (99 percent of participants) completed the pre-program survey, which included questions focused on demographics and military experience, as well as baseline questions for each of the study outcome measures. In this study, these 414 participants' responses are used to describe the overall demographics and military history of participants in the Fellowship Program. Forty-six percent of these participants had completed the Fellowship Program at the December 31, 2012, cutoff date for post-program responses. This was a normal consequence of the program's operations, as many of these veterans started the program in late July or

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY STATUS

Sample characteristics of veterans beginning The Mission Continues Fellowship Program (N=414).

DEMOGRAPHICS		FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Age	18-21 years old	1	0.2
	22-25 years old	40	9.7
	26-30 years old	165	40.0
	31-35 years old	99	24.0
	36-40 years old	33	8.0
	41-45 years old	42	10.2
	46-50 years old	26	6.3
	50-55 years old	7	1.7
Gender	Male	272	67.0
	Female	134	33.0
Race	White/ Caucasian	207	50.7
	Black/African American	105	25.7
	Asian/ Pacific Islander	16	3.9
	Native American/Alaskan	6	1.5
	Multi-racial/Bi-racial	33	8.1
	Other race	41	10
Ethnicity	No, not of Hispanic or Latino Origin	319	77.8
	Yes, of Hispanic or Latino Origin	91	22.2
Marital Status	Married	173	42.1
	Divorced	112	27.3
	Single, Never Been Married	124	30.2
	Widowed	2	0.5
Children	No, do not have children	190	46.1
	Yes, have children	222	53.9

Source: The Mission Continues and Center for Social Development, Washington University in St. Louis. Note on tables: results may not add to 100 percent due to variance in response rates per individual question.

early October of that year and had yet to complete their six months of service. As a result, responses from the 192 participants who completed post-program surveys at the cutoff date are used to describe program outcomes in the following section.

Veterans participating in the Fellowship Program are highly diverse, with women and minorities both overrepresented (as compared with their representation in the veteran population). Above, Table 1 shows the age, gender, race, ethnicity and family situation of program participants. Notably, 33 percent of veterans in the program were women, compared with 14 percent of the current active-duty military.¹⁸ Forty-nine percent self-identified as members of a minority group, compared with 36 percent of the military today. Forty-two percent were married, and 64 percent were between 26 and 35 years old.

Program participants generally reflected the post-9/11 generation in their military history, although a far higher percentage had a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability rating compared with the overall post-9/11 veteran population. Seventy-five percent of participants reported having a VA disability rating, 48 percent had a rating of 30 percent or higher, and an additional 11 percent of participants were awaiting a disability rating when they started the program. Table 2 shows participants' military background and VA rating:

Purpose

The majority of participants in the Fellowship Program were enrolled in school or employed when they started the program.¹⁹ These veterans reported that the program had a significant impact on their sense of purpose and professional development. The program helped them sustain a role of service in their community, transfer military skills to civilian employment, advance their careers and obtain employment, they said.

Seventy-five percent of participants reported having a VA disability rating, 48 percent had a rating of 30 percent or higher, and an additional 11 percent of participants were awaiting a disability rating when they started the program.

Specifically, 90 percent of veterans who completed the Fellowship Program reported that their experience helped them sustain a role of service in their community, and 85 percent said it helped them become leaders in their community. Ninety-five percent stated that the Fellowship Program helped them make a contribution to their community, 87 percent reported that they felt like part of their community and 94 percent believe they made a difference in the life of at least one person. Given the well-documented connection between regular civic service and overall sense of purpose,²⁰ these results show that the Fellowship Program is effective in engaging veterans in meaningful civic service that supports their sense of purpose after leaving the military.

Beyond the immediate sense of accomplishment gained through service, early results demonstrate that the Fellowship Program may also be effective in helping veterans transition to meaningful careers. Ninety percent of veterans who completed the Fellowship Program reported that their service experience improved their chances of finding a job, and more than 80 percent reported that the experience encouraged them to make a career change.

TABLE 2: PARTICIPANT MILITARY HISTORY

Military history of veterans beginning The Mission Continues Fellowship Program (N=414).

ITEM		FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Branch of Service (check all that apply)*	Army	222	53.6
	Navy	78	18.8
	Air Force	36	8.7
	Marines	74	17.9
	Coast Guard	6	1.4
Rank	Commissioned Officer	29	7.2
	Warrant Officer	0	0
	Enlisted	371	92.8
Overseas Deployment (check all that apply)	No	88	21.3
	Yes, OEF	80	19.3
	Yes, OIF	167	40.3
	Yes, Both	90	21.7
	Yes, Other	38	9.2
Number of Deployments since 9/11/01	None	76	18.9
	One	152	37.8
	Two	100	24.9
	Three	47	11.7
	Four	19	4.7
	Five	3	0.7
	Six+	5	1.2
VA Disability Rating	No Rating	59	14.3
	Application Pending	45	10.9
	0%	12	2.9
	10%	25	6.0
	20%	22	5.3
	30%	30	7.2
	40%	32	7.7
	50%	22	5.3
	70%	27	6.5
	80%	25	6.0
	90%	23	5.6
100%	41	9.9	

Source: The Mission Continues and Center for Social Development, Washington University in St. Louis. *Note: some respondents served in more than one branch of service, resulting in a higher frequency than the total sample size.

Seventy-four percent of participants transferred military skills to civilian employment, an essential step in reintegration for this generation of veterans.²¹ Additionally, 69 percent furthered their education and 61 percent obtained employment.

The results of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program evaluation suggest that civic service experiences can instill veterans with a renewed sense of purpose that supports their overall well-being. Furthermore, the results suggest that the skills, experience and connections gained through service can also help veterans find meaningful employment that will enable them to sustain a sense of purpose and advance their career goals over the long term.

Social Relationships

Participation in the Fellowship Program had a far-reaching and positive impact on veterans' social relationships. The program helped veterans become more connected with their communities, form relationships with supervisors and co-workers and strengthen their relationships with their families.

In post-program surveys, 91 percent of participants reported feeling that they have the ability to make a difference in their communities, 73 percent often discuss and think about how political and social issues affect their communities, 88 percent are aware of what can be done to meet the important needs of their communities, and 91 percent try to make a positive difference in their communities. Overall, 78 percent of veterans participating in the Fellowship Program reported having a strong attachment to their communities afterward.²²

Beyond forming a strong connection with the community as a whole, participants established relationships with their supervisors and co-workers at the nonprofit organizations where they served. Eighty-two percent of participants reported that they were satisfied with these relationships, and supervisors reported an even higher level of

satisfaction at 92 percent. In post-program surveys of supervisors who worked with program participants, 77 percent described them as performing better than nonveteran volunteers, with more than 50 percent describing their veteran volunteer as more likely to be “a strong leader,” “disciplined” and “willing to work together.” These results indicate that veterans engaged in civic service are not only forming social relationships in a professional setting, they are establishing the value of veterans' character and experience in the eyes of their civilian co-workers and supervisors.

The social benefits of service extended to participants' families as well.

Forty-five percent of participants reported better relationships or communication with their families after the program, and 65 percent brought new resources, information and skills back to their families. Forty-eight percent of participants stated that their family members had become involved in volunteering, while 42 percent said family members became more socially active. Thirty-one percent also reported that their participation in the Fellowship Program lessened their families' concerns about them. These results suggest that engaging veterans in civic service may represent an unexplored strategy to help veterans strengthen their relationships with family members – a hopeful possibility given that 48 percent of post-9/11 veterans report experiencing strains in family relations since leaving the military.²³

Material Needs

Service opportunities such as the Fellowship Program are not a direct solution for veterans who are struggling with basic needs for materials and services. The program does provide a modest cost-of-living stipend, and certain results documented in this report show that the stipend had beneficial effects. For example, 65 percent of participants reported that they earned extra money to contribute to their families. However, the main research

TABLE 3: PHYSICAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Survey responses of alumni completing The Mission Continues Fellowship Program (N=192).

		FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Self-rated Health Status	Excellent	33	18.0
	Very Good	51	27.9
	Good	61	33.3
	Fair	31	16.9
	Poor	7	3.8
Post-Fellowship Health – Current Health Rating	Much better now than before the fellowship	25	13.6
	Somewhat better now than before the fellowship	49	26.6
	About the same as before the fellowship	101	54.9
	Much worse now than before the fellowship	9	4.9
Physical Health Problems Impact on Life	Not difficult at all	87	47.5
	Somewhat difficult	76	41.5
	Very difficult	14	7.7
	Extremely difficult	6	3.3
Emotional Problems Impact on Life	Not difficult at all	65	35.7
	Somewhat difficult	92	50.5
	Very difficult	17	9.3
	Extremely difficult	8	4.4
Depression Screen	Screen negative for Depression	148	81.32
	Screen positive for Depression	24	13.19
PTSD Screen	Screen negative for PTSD	87	47.28
	Screen positive for PTSD	97	52.72

Source: The Mission Continues and Center for Social Development, Washington University in St. Louis.

question related to material needs was whether the significant time commitment required for the Fellowship Program could have unintended negative consequences for participants. To account for this, post-program surveys included a series of questions designed to measure potentially detrimental effects of service.

Overall, veterans participating in the program did have to cope with the substantial time commitment and associated stress of serving 20 hours per week in addition to their other commitments. Thirteen percent of participants reported that the fellowship did not allow them enough time to do other things they wanted or needed to do. Twenty-three percent agreed that the program was stressful, compared with 43 percent who disagreed with the same statement. However, participants generally rejected the idea that participating in the program was a waste of time, with 93 percent strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with that statement.

The living stipend and program design were successful in giving veterans the flexibility to engage in civic service without making major sacrifices in other areas of their lives. While some consequences were reported, overall, these only occurred for a small number of participants.

Health

The Fellowship Program showed a generally positive impact on health. While the program does not include direct health interventions, the health benefits of civic service are well-documented. Knowing this, the research team gathered data across a range of health and psychosocial outcomes. Below, Table 3 shows these results.

The program resulted in little change in PTSD symptoms, with 55 percent of participants screening positive for PTSD before the program and 53 percent screening positive afterward. However, the program had a more significant impact on depression. Twenty-seven percent of participants screened

positive for depression at the beginning of the program, while 13 percent did so after completion.²⁴ Service had been shown to reduce depression in older adults in the past,²⁵ and veterans' results through the Fellowship Program suggest that veterans can benefit as well.

With regard to overall health status in the past month, approximately 73 percent of participants rated their health as excellent, very good or good before the fellowship, with 79 percent providing the same rating afterward. These subjective health ratings before and after the program are, by and large, lower than those reported by the general population.²⁶ This means that veterans perceive their health as being poorer than does the average individual their age. However, after completing the program, 40 percent rated their health status as somewhat better or much better than it was before the fellowship.

These initial physical and mental health outcomes may indicate that veterans benefit from participating in civic service, regaining connections and finding a renewed sense of purpose. However, more research is needed to investigate the specific mechanism by which service may reduce depression and improve overall health specifically in the military and veteran populations. While the initial results are positive, civic service opportunities should still be seen as a supplement to direct health care and counseling for veterans with physical or mental health issues.

Veteran Perspectives

In addition to assessing health, family and social relationships, participants were asked an open-ended survey question about what they accomplished after completing the Fellowship Program. The research team categorized and coded their responses, providing deeper insight into the well-being benefits of service for veterans in transition:

PURPOSE

“I have achieved getting back into a work environment, managing employees and building my confidence around others, all through volunteering. I can use a lot of these new skills when applying for a job and now I have over six months of work experience.”

“I have been able to put good use of the skills that I thought were lost due to a traumatic brain injury 2 years ago. I have found that I still have the ability to lead and organize and work under extreme pressure and be successful. I have realized that I do have a lot to offer not only my community, but employers as well.”

“I have achieved clear insight into my future career plan and even changed educational goals. I enjoyed using certain skills that I acquired while active duty, which reminded me that I would like to continue [to] employ these skills in my future career.”

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

“The program helped me get back into the civilian community and in dealing with non-military people, and for the first time in a very long time, I was appreciated for my skills, my work ethic, and my resourcefulness.”

“I gained a sense of camaraderie and a support network that was lacking since getting out of the military. This consisted of not only friends but also networking contacts.”

“I have expanded my professional network giving me more confidence to seek employment in my own community. I have also gotten more established in my community giving me more sense of belonging, and less desire to leave the area.”

“I learned that I was still a capable leader. My services are very much needed in my family, on my job, and in my community.”

HEALTH

“Before the Fellowship, I was lost and depressed and these issues were not only affecting me, but they were also having an effect on those around me. That has all changed and now I feel rejuvenated and motivated with a renewed sense of confidence. I am moving forward again in life and this is something that I have not done in years.”

“I felt worthless and suicidal. Now I know that I have a purpose in life. I am more confident and outgoing. I have friends now. Friends that I met through [The Mission Continues]. They can relate to me.”

OVERALL WELL-BEING

“I have gotten a new start in life and I feel I have gotten my life back. I’ve had some major successes and challenges, but I feel that they have made me a stronger person and give me a new role and purpose. I will always be thankful for the opportunity to be a Fellow. I feel that I have grown as a person and have a greater view on the world and my community. I never had an opportunity to be a leader in my community and I have that now.”

“Through my Fellowship I have started building a new identity for myself. All of my adult life was spent serving in the military and that defined who I was. I have [stepped] up as a community leader and showed the value of serving others, influencing them to want to make changes themselves. I sought treatment for my own problems and have taken control of my life again. I am focused.”

These veterans’ comments exemplify what successful reintegration should look like in the post-9/11 generation. These men and women are finding new purpose and meaning in civilian life, building new social relationships and improving their health. Beyond these dimensions of well-being, they are forming new identities and making sense of the life-changing experience of serving in the military in wartime. As they become increasingly healthy,

fulfilled and motivated, they are also answering the profoundly personal question of who they will be in civilian life.

The Well After Service framework acknowledges that veteran reintegration is a complex and personal process that may transcend isolated measures such as employment or access to health care.²⁷ While further research is needed, initial results from The Mission Continues study suggest that civic service can have a significant impact on veterans' overall well-being beyond the measures associated with specific dimensions of wellness. In short, the benefits of service can be greater than the sum of their parts.

Limitations

We used a non-experimental evaluation design instead of a randomized controlled trial to determine the impact of this program on the health and well-being of all veterans participating in the program. Given the fluidity of the program design, selection bias and attrition of participants, and a need for time to build the internal data architecture, impact evaluation was an appropriate methodology to demonstrate feasibility, acceptability and satisfaction with the Fellowship Program. Future studies with more rigorous designs will seek to establish the program's efficacy, effectiveness and long-term outcomes for veterans, their families and their communities.

V. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The data gathered by The Mission Continues suggests that service-oriented programs can have a positive effect on veteran wellness. This aligns with the body of literature that suggests the importance of purpose and meaning generally for wellness, particularly while going through difficult periods of life such as the transition from military to civilian life, or homecoming from war. In addition, the positive results gleaned from The Mission Continues study suggest there is particular value to the model developed by this organization that focuses on community service, community integration and the development of community among veterans, all as means to promote veteran wellness.

Although The Mission Continues organization has succeeded in its growth goals, it remains just one organization amid a “sea of goodwill” that includes some 41,123 registered nonprofit organizations focused on the military and veteran community.²⁸ The Mission Continues cannot – and arguably should not – serve every veteran who could benefit from its approach. Consequently, we outline below a number of ideas for this wellness-centric approach to be scaled, replicated and institutionalized by others within the veteran community in order to reproduce some of the positive effects achieved by The Mission Continues.

Encourage Community Service as Part of Veteran Support Networks

Supported by the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, more communities across the country are forming coordinated networks to serve veterans.²⁹ These initiatives bring together previously fragmented public and private veteran-serving groups. These networking initiatives should be encouraged to include community service programs in their strategic plans for supporting veteran long-term reintegration and to incorporate established veteran-facing nonprofit organizations that focus

on well-being, such as The Mission Continues, Team Rubicon and Team Red, White and Blue, into these networks of support.

The initial results presented here also indicate that the benefits of structured civic service opportunities are concentrated in the purpose and social relationship dimensions of well-being. Community service programs may not address serious health issues or unmet material needs on their own. However, in the context of a network of support these programs can supplement more intensive health interventions and community services that offer material support while also addressing the purpose and social dimensions of well-being that are often overlooked by traditional service providers and government agencies. Communities can integrate civic service opportunities into their networks of support in three specific ways:

- Community networks should include engaging veterans in service as a component of their strategic plans with specific veteran-volunteerism goals. Networks should strive not only to meet veterans' needs for health and psychosocial services, but also to engage veterans in setting goals for change that meet their own needs and those of the larger community.
- The heart of a community network is the system of referrals and collaboration that connects veterans with needed resources. Communities should incorporate nonprofit organizations that directly support purpose and social relationships into their referral systems as a resource for supporting veterans' overall well-being. One community network, NYC4RVETS, is already adopting this approach by integrating The Mission Continues and Team Red, White and Blue into its network managed by a technology provider, Unite Us.³⁰
- Participating organizations in community networks should view the veterans they serve as a potential volunteer resource and engage them accordingly. Whenever possible, these

organizations should incorporate the veterans they support into existing volunteerism initiatives, empower them to lead days of service and action and even create new volunteer opportunities if resources allow.

These networks of support can include collaborations between providers and government agencies, as is the case for NYC4RVETS, or can be incorporated into existing veterans-facing groups, such as business affinity groups. More businesses and corporations are recognizing the need to create or enhance their veteran networking or affinity groups.³¹ These groups could increase their community presence and reach by including community service as part of their community development programs.

Additionally, veterans could play a much greater role in organizations' corporate social responsibility or community engagement programs. This would help the veterans showcase their leadership skills and feel a renewed connection to service, while creating a more engaged employee for the organization.

By incorporating purpose and social-focused programs into their veteran-focused networks, communities can provide truly comprehensive support for veteran reintegration.

Integrate Services Focused on Well-Being Into Military and Veteran Programs

Given the benefits of community service for veterans, the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs should work to partner and to create expanded opportunities to serve in communities where military members and their families live. The habit of community service and engagement should be encouraged long before a military member transitions out to civilian life and becomes a veteran.

- Integrate well-being-focused nonprofit organizations that serve veterans into the Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

or other support programs, such as the Morale, Wellness and Recreation (MWR) programs, offered on all military bases.

- One frequently cited issue with these programs is that veterans do not recognize or take note of the resources presented because the period immediately after separation from the military is often characterized by optimism and time spent with family, and newly separated veterans only realize they need resources much later. Recently separated veterans may only access a job-training program when they realize they need to improve their job skills, but they may join a recreational or well-being-focused group of veterans (e.g., a Team RWB chapter or a Mission Continues Service Platoon) simply for the intrinsic benefit of being part of the group. Veterans who are part of such groups may have increased access to additional resources due to the connections, networking and expertise of the groups' leaders (especially so if they are connected with a well-structured community network of support).
- National Guard, Reserve and active-duty unit commanders should strive to develop or expand community service programs, working in partnership with existing nonprofits around their bases. Certain days of training can be set aside throughout the year to bring military skills to a volunteer setting. This would create the dual benefit of building deeper community relationships while instilling the benefits of service to future veterans.
- VA counselors should be educated on the benefits of community service and the wellness model. As VA counselors are often at the frontline of veteran reintegration, they can be an advocate and guide to a more holistic approach to seeking health and wellness services and referrals. Counselors should have increased knowledge and access to veterans organizations that include volunteering and civic service as part of their core mission.

VI. CONCLUSION

The veteran wellness model offers a more comprehensive, holistic framework for thinking about homecoming from service and war. In addition to focusing on the basic material and physical needs of veterans, the wellness model calls attention to deeper psychological, social, emotional and community needs, too. This model is important both for describing the full span of veteran wellness and for its linkage of these components to each other.

For many veterans, improved purpose and social relationships are essential reintegration outcomes in their own right. This case study shows how the community-focused and service-oriented approach adopted by The Mission Continues in its Fellowship Program can improve these outcomes for participants. Those outcomes have obvious and significant importance for the veterans whose lives have been improved by their experience in this program. These outcomes also have a tangible and important value for society, alongside traditional outcomes in this space such as health and income. The veterans who emerge strengthened and more well after participation in The Mission Continues become assets and leaders for their community.

During the past 13 years of war, a new generation of veteran organizations has emerged with programs focused on improving these dimensions of well-being through community and wellness-focused activities that differentiate them from existing, traditional veterans service organizations (VSOs).³² However, as a general rule, these organizations have focused on what they do for veterans and their communities, not the ways in which they promote veteran wellness. This case study shows how, in addition to the important benefits these organizations provide, they can also serve as a model for promoting veteran wellness in a systemic and effective manner.

The potential benefits from directly addressing purpose and social relationships during reintegration are enormous. While programs like The Mission Continues fellowships may have a beneficial impact on veterans' health and material needs,³³ they are no substitute for high-quality health care at VA or direct community-based assistance with basic needs such as housing and nutrition. At the same time, health care providers and social services agencies are rarely equipped to empower veterans to build the renewed sense of purpose and social relationships that support successful reintegration. Combining both approaches has the potential to strengthen community networks and offer truly comprehensive support for veterans' well-being.

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APPENDIX A: EFFECTS OF MILITARY SERVICE AND BENEFITS OF CONTINUED SERVICE

DIMENSION OF WELL-BEING	EFFECT OF MILITARY SERVICE	HOW SERVICE HELPS
Purpose	Adapting to civilian society anew as a changed person is a process. Its duration neither precludes nor portends wellness. Rather, the extent to which one is able to function sufficiently throughout that process, while adapting and becoming increasingly well, is part of a veteran’s “new normal.”	The intense community service experience of the Fellowship Program provides a renewed sense of purpose, addressing some of the most common psychological challenges associated with the transition – feeling disconnected, misunderstood or lacking in direction.
Satisfaction of Material Needs	The fulfillment of material needs can be a barrier to wellness for some veterans, especially for those who did not experience adulthood in civilian society before joining the military. The ability to find resources for housing, employment, financial management, legal services and even daily material goods is a major component of both psychological and physical well-being for many veterans.	In addition to short-term material support, the Fellowship Program expands veterans’ professional networks, improves their job skills and helps them translate military skills to a civilian context, helping them transition to fulfilling careers that also support their material needs.
Mental and Physical Health	Adjustments are needed for what may be long-term consequences of injuries and pain; the presence of infirmity does not always indicate an absence of wellness.	Engaging in community service has direct psychological benefits, including increased self-efficacy, self-worth and life satisfaction, all of which contribute to improved mental health and reduced depression.
Social and Personal Relationships	Relationships and networks – particularly with other veterans – may be equally important to, or even supersede, the role of family, nonveteran friends and spirituality in a veteran’s life, especially during times when a veteran experiences emotional difficulty related to service. This indicates neither a lack of well-being nor a demotion of friends, family or faith-based relationships but, rather, elevates the importance and value of social networks among veterans.	When properly structured, service connects participants with a beneficial network of other veterans while simultaneously strengthening their relationships with their families and their communities as a whole.

APPENDIX B: BEST PRACTICES FOR THE MISSION CONTINUES

The Mission Continues approach to community-based veteran reintegration illustrates many of the best practices identified by the Well After Service working group. The Mission Continues emphasizes veterans' ability to take responsibility for their own reintegration and empowers them through support, encouragement and mentorship. The philosophy behind this approach is inherently strengths-based, focusing on veterans' identity as problem-solvers, volunteers and leaders. With respect to the specific best practices for those that address and serve veterans, we offer The Mission Continues as a case study:

Credible

The Mission Continues is a veteran-driven organization. In 2014, 11 of its 13 board members are veterans. A significant majority of the leadership and program staff are post-9/11 veterans as well, with more than half of the current program staff alumni of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program, giving them first-hand experience in both military service and continued service to their communities. The Mission Continues has gathered support and endorsement from several prominent veterans, including retired Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and retired General Stanley McChrystal. Additionally, The Mission Continues partners with existing community-based and civic organizations to offer the service focus of the fellows' six months.

Data-Driven

The Mission Continues uses data to make nearly every strategic decision and to consistently improve programs. Survey, program and fellow data are collected at regular intervals and stored using the cloud-based customer relationship management (CRM) system Salesforce, and are visualized for

staff through an interactive dashboard created by Palantir. Data collected across the entire logic-model are also analyzed by external consultants, such as Monitor Deloitte, Washington University and [DataKind](#), to provide program design and evaluation planning recommendations. In addition, needs assessments are conducted in each city where the platoons are focused to specifically tailor outreach and marketing services that are designed to support recruitment and sustained involvement of veterans in their community-level platoon activities.

Community-Focused

Community is at the core of The Mission Continues programs. Fellows have worked with over 600 well-established nonprofit organizations around the country and play a part in bringing together business, government and political leaders through their service initiatives. Among organizations where fellows have served, 88 percent report that their fellow was successful in addressing an unmet community need, while 92 percent state that the veteran who served with them made a positive impact on the community as a whole*

Culturally Competent

Elements of military culture are integrated throughout The Mission Continues programs. The Mission Continues logo is based on the unit patches used across all branches of the armed forces, and program participants receive their own patches to symbolize their membership in a new "unit" of veterans continuing their service. Military concepts are incorporated throughout the program experience and organizational culture, with a careful balance between referencing shared military experience and encouraging veterans to develop new civilian experiences.

* Host Organization Survey Results, 2013. Internal data collection from The Mission Continues.

Outcome-Focused

The Mission Continues maintains an outcome focus through ongoing external evaluation by researchers affiliated with the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis and a strong internal research and evaluation team. The research and evaluation team consistently gathers data and shares results with all stakeholders in The Mission Continues programs – including veterans, nonprofit leaders and community members.

Wellness-Oriented

The Mission Continues programs are strengths-based by design, with a focus on recognizing and addressing the interconnected values, goals and motivations for each veteran. Veterans can focus their service on professional, social, health or family-related goals. The Mission Continues staff facilitates veterans' access to and attainment of their overarching goal of continued service after their military career. Ultimately the goal for each veteran is to achieve well-being and successful reintegration; how they define it is up to the veteran.

Connected

The Mission Continues connects with other service providers in each of its target cities where platoons and many fellowships are offered, with program staff maintaining referral relationships with local vet centers, VA hospitals and VSOs. These existing relationships often can provide program participants with a direct linkage at the local level to health care, benefits support, vocational rehabilitation and other government programs. In New York, The Mission Continues is working with Accenture, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, the technology company Unite US and a coalition of more than 30 other service providers to pilot a networked referral system for veterans' services across the city.

Inclusive

The Mission Continues takes a cross-sector approach at every level. Locally, program staff

establish working relationships with the nonprofits where veterans serve, as well as the local VA hospitals, vet centers, military bases, VSOs, universities and businesses. At the regional level, regional directors maintain collaborative relationships with public, private and nonprofit organizations that are focused on serving, recruiting or supporting veterans in the region. Nationally, The Mission Continues is connected with leading research institutions, such as the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University; Fortune 500 companies, such as Goldman Sachs and Target; other national VSOs, including the American Legion and the Wounded Warrior Project; and policy leaders at the VA, the Department of Defense and the White House.

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