

Sierra Club Military Outdoors

“Working with the Military Community” - Local Outings and ICO Information Paper

So you want to work with the military community? Great. The purpose of this document is to serve as a simple guide for getting your feet wet in preparing to reach out to and work with your local military community through local outings and ICO. It is by no means a comprehensive guide or official standard operating procedure for outings, rather it is a guide to get you thinking about working with the community, asking the right questions, and getting you moving in the right direction.

Background:

The Sierra Club currently engages the military community on numerous levels. Our national resiliency programs work directly with the Departments of Defense and Veteran Affairs to use the outdoors as a means to address trauma related injuries received during combat operations. This partnership also includes research with the University of Georgetown and UC Berkeley to quantify the physiological and psychological effects of the outdoors. Additionally, we run a series of national events in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management, the Outdoor Adventure Film School, Veterans Expeditions, Blue Star Families and Paradox Sports to showcase outdoor opportunities to the military community in some of the most beautiful places in the country, often in support of larger conservation efforts. These events include a veteran outdoor film school, a backpacking trip with the Navajo and author Doug Peacock on BLM lands, as well as a 10 day mountain traverse in the North Cascades as part of our annual 9111 climb. The last major element of our current work, and arguably the most important, is facilitating the connection of local outings, ICO, and Sierra Club Chapters with the military community. We have launched the Great Lakes Initiative through a pilot project in Ohio, where we are directly engaging the military community and recruiting potential outings and conservation volunteer leadership within the State in order to connect them with local opportunities to get outdoors. Finally, we are also working to develop an open dialogue with the military concerning conservation and the larger issue of climate change.

What is the military community: The military community is composed of active duty service members, veterans, and their families. It also includes, but is not limited to, government agencies such as the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs as well as service organizations such as Sierra Club Military Outdoors and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. In 2013, the active duty military demographics closely mirrored the overall demographics of the United States, especially amongst “Non-Hispanic White or European American” (63.7%), “African Americans” (12.2%), Hispanic or Latino (16.4%), Asian American (4.8%), Native American (0.9%), and Pacific Islander (0.8%), as well as in regards to economic or class backgrounds. While actual service members are predominantly male (84%), the majority of service members are married, in a partnership, or divorced (58.1) as defined by the department of defense. The largest age group consists of 18-40 year age groups, the largest concentration lying in the 22-30 year age group. *Information source: 2013 Defense Manpower Report 2013

Why is this information important? It provides us with an overall view of who service members and veterans are and which programs will be the most effective for and attractive to them.

What are the major groups we can have an immediate impact on by connecting them to the outdoors:

While we are successfully engaged with active duty service members and veterans from all age groups with the most immediate needs (access to the outdoors, challenges of multiple combat deployments, largest numbers) and highest rate of current program success are as follows:

1. Service members in the 18 to 22 age bracket (AVG of 16% across services / Marine Corps 36%). These are the young men and women who make up the rank and file of the military. They are often away from home for the first time, lack immediate access to a personal support network, and are often eager to get out and be active. In this group, a smaller percentage has very young families who are looking to enjoy the outdoors with young children participating. While the vast majority of them are concentrated on military installations, there are also a considerable number dispersed across the country while serving in Reserve and National Guard units.
2. Service members and veterans in the 22-30 age bracket (AVG of 47% across services). This group can be subdivided into three major groups for our purposes. The first group consists of single service members who are in a similar situation to the 18-22 year old age group. A considerable percentage of this group has very young families who are looking to enjoy the outdoors with young children participating. The last group consists of recently separated veterans who are in the midst of transition back to civilian life, often in school, training programs, or beginning new careers. This age range of veterans, the majority having served in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been our largest demographic served through Sierra Club Military Outdoors.
3. Service members and veterans in the 30-40 age bracket (AVG 26% across services / Marine Corps 14%). Active duty service members in this bracket tend to have adapted to military life, but have also been exposed to the most challenges associated with service since 2001. A majority of them have families, and are looking for opportunities for both adventurous outings and family outings. Their children range in age, but a large majority of them are in primary through high school age groups. Additionally, children of these service members are exposed to numerous challenges, and are in great need of outdoor programs. Veterans of this age group are of two types: either having recently separated from the military, or, having previously separated from the military, have transitioned back into civilian life. As with their active duty counterparts, both individual and family based outings are popular with this group. This age range of veterans, the majority having served in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been our second largest demographic served through Sierra Club Military Outdoors.

Additional Considerations:

1. Common Issues associated with service members and their families:

- Children and Spouses: frequent deployments, high divorce rates, lack of access to outdoor opportunities, parental combat injuries, long and inconsistent work days, frequent moves, limited access to support networks, military kid transitions (vets), loss of parents
- Service Members: frequent deployments, long and unexpected work days, limited family time, access to outdoor activities, low incomes (lower enlisted), combat injuries, frequent moves, high divorce rates
- Veterans: combat injuries, multistage transitions, reeducation, high unemployment rates, access to outdoor activities, high divorce rates, high suicide rates, isolation

2. Realities:

- Most service members are average Americans doing normal jobs under harsh circumstances as a form of service before returning to civilian life, only a select few have experienced extraordinary trauma or hardships.
- The vast majority of veterans have not suffered combat wounds or combat and sexual assault related trauma. For those that have, mental and physical wounds create special requirements and considerations. The Department of Veterans Affairs are an excellent resource for finding more information on these topics.
- The majority of service members and veterans are not actively engaged in the outdoors, let alone outdoor experts. Providing them access to the outdoors is a very similar challenge to associated with getting the rest of Americans outside.
- The military community does not need a handout, they need empowerment to learn how to safely explore, enjoy, and protect.
- Veterans and service members sometimes want to recreate with their own, other times that's the last thing they want. We have enjoyed significant success in recruiting the military community through events directly targeting them. These events serve as a bridge for them to become part of the larger outdoor community.
- The military community is a diverse population with a multitude of backgrounds and experiences, political and religious views.
- Leaders in the military community provide an amazing resource for leadership, mentorship, and support for both the outdoor and conservation communities. Veterans and service members with leadership experience, especially in extraordinary circumstances, are a premium and should be recruited as they bring experiences and abilities beyond that of the average person in their peer group.

How to reach out to the military community:

The military community is a group of people centered on a shared experience or location just like any other community. The easiest way to gain access and trust is to engage them through their existing community and professional networks.

1. Start small: Our Ohio pilot of the Great Lakes Initiative is an excellent example for generating support in the veteran community. Begin with small events and recruit participants through word of mouth from local veteran contacts, social media, and, most importantly, reach out to

military community organizations and form partnerships with them to directly engage their members with your program. These events, specifically targeting the military community, should provide for both the introduction to your group as well as for participants to gain simple and easy access to the outdoors. Examples include day hikes, skills classes, rock gym classes, interpretive events. As you gain momentum, you can develop leaders from within the military community to help you recruit participants and even lead future events, increasing in number and scale. Plan keystone events that will serve as attractive rewards for active participants as well as advertisement and exciting outreach for those considering your program.

2. While much of the military community will enjoy outings with their peers, be proactive in opening up all of the available opportunities in your group as many members will want to move beyond their existing peer groups. Most importantly, ask your participants what they need and want.
3. Key Veteran Organizations to facilitate community engagement: Local state and federal Veterans Affairs hospitals and administration, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America groups, regional Wounded Warrior Project staff, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, college and university veteran liaisons, local veteran service agencies.
4. Key Active Duty Organizations to facilitate community engagement: Moral Welfare and Recreation Offices, Installation Community and Family Services, local units, Blue Star Families, National Military Family Association, DoD schools, warrior transition hospitals
5. Partner with existing outdoor organizations serving the military community. Recommended Organizations Include: Project Healing Waters, Team River Runner, Veterans Expeditions, Paradox Sports, Warrior Hike, Wounded Warrior Project health and wellness program, Team Red White and Blue, Team Rubicon
6. ICO groups have two options to immediately serve the military community:
 - Reach out and serve their local community through existing ICO groups
 - Establish a new agency in partnership with a local military community organization specifically created to serve that community
7. Contact Sierra Club Military Outdoors for potential partners in that community. Chances are we are affiliated with an individual or organization in the area, or we can help facilitate a connection to a new partnership.