Veteran Recruitment to Team River Runner (TRR)

TRR’s mission is to help guide veterans on their path to recovery through paddlesports. One of the key challenges for a local chapter, especially a newly formed one, is finding veteran participants. Here are some proven methods to seeking out veterans and introducing them to paddling.

The Recruiting Veteran

The best recruiting tool for your program is a veteran. Once a veteran has a good time in your program it can be very helpful because they will spread the word to others. Veterans generally know and trust other veterans. They understand the Veterans Affair system, and are often involved with other veteran organizations or adaptive sports. If the veteran believes in you and the service your program provides, they can be enthusiastic recruiters for your program through word of mouth.

Veteran Affairs Hospitals (VA)

The local VA hospital or clinic is definitely an important place to approach. There are two points of contact in the hospital that may help you: Volunteer Services and the Recreational Therapist Department. The Volunteer services department should direct you to the RT department. You can then introduce yourself and explain that you are the chapter coordinator for a local chapter of a national nonprofit.

When dealing with the Recreational Therapist Department, realize that they have a busy workload. Emphasize that you/TRR are not there to increase their workload, but that you’re a free force multiplier that can help them achieve wellness for their patients. Regardless of who you talk to, they will most likely push the decision to utilize your program to their boss for approval. It can take a while to gain approval. Be patient but persistent! Find out if they have a pool on the grounds and explore the possibility of using it. The key is to get the therapists to refer patients to your program. Some therapists are extremely helpful to our programs. Offer to give a presentation to the whole department and all veterans that are available. The VA is the number one source of veterans to our program.

Military Bases

If there is a military base nearby, this may present an opportunity. The base likely has a Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) department that offers recreational activities for service members and their families. They may also have a pool to use near your chapter. Some bases have Warrior Transition Battalions or Units. These have healing service members assigned to them that are in a medical limbo status, waiting on health care, and for the service to decide if they are fit for duty. Several TRR chapters service these units. I would suggest setting up a meeting with the battalion leader to get information about your chapter to these veterans. Sometimes a base will have career or activity fairs, keep your eye out for an opportunity to host a table at one of these events.

Universities

Another key place to find veterans is local colleges and universities. Most all have a Veterans Affairs office and/or veterans’ group/club on campus. The office’s primary purpose is to provide financial support to veterans on campus. Some of our chapters have their entire program on campus, using their pool. Even if the campus doesn’t have a pool, try to influence the office to refer the program to veterans on campus. Offer to come in and give a presentation and have the office recruit veterans to the presentation.
Veteran Service Organizations (VSO)

Most all towns have a variety of veteran service organizations to include, the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). These organizations usually have age-mature members but some younger veterans are starting to join them. It is worthwhile to solicit them, and encourage involvement with your program. Some of our chapters, while not actually gaining participants wanting to boat, enjoy financial and moral support from these organizations.

County and City Recreation Departments

Some areas have county and/or city recreation departments that target helping veterans. They offer softball, bowling and other sports. These departments are worth talking to and advertising your program. You can offer a free demo day of paddling for the department. There may be some policies to navigate but it has been done successfully.

Adaptive Sports Nonprofit Programs

There are a variety of adaptive sports programs across the country; to include biking, archery, horseback riding, fishing, skiing and many more. Some of the programs are small and local, while others like Healing Waters, Heroes on the Water, Horses for Heroes, Ride 2 Recovery, and Team Red White & Blue are national programs. All of these are great programs and also potential sources for veterans for your program. TRR never wants to be in competition with any program but completely supportive, complementary and collaborative. One way to help is to offer a demo day of free paddling for their participants.

Facebook/Social Media/MeetUp

While the most of recruiting requires face to face interaction, Facebook can be a great asset to spread the word about your chapter and recruit veterans. Following the guidelines from TRR about establishing your local chapter page and encouraging friends and relatives to spread the word about your program.

Other uses of Social Media (Twitter; Instagram; etc) are also great ways to increase visibility. Find someone young to guide you through the maze of available Social media Resources!!

Additionally, some Chapters are having success setting up a local MeetUp page. TRR National will help with this cost if need-a great way to PR your events and get real time sign ups!

Rack Cards and Fliers; Business Cards

TRR provides “rack cards” (4x8) that details TRR’s mission, who can participate, and describes how to sign up to programs. Hand out these cards liberally to veterans and to the VA. You can add your contact information to them as well. Also, fliers, posters, and other printed handouts are useful-but need to be followed up personally and often, as they can become “invisible” over time.

Have you and your volunteers obtain TRR Business Cards. These are a well known way to share your contact personally.

Summary

Outreach is personal. Your enthusiasm and honesty, along with a personal touch and a smile, is really the best outreach there is. Never pass up an opportunity to introduce yourself to a veteran or future participant you meet. Some of the best veteran participants were met in the most informal manner in public.

This is not an inclusive list of sources on how to find veterans for your program. It’s a good start though. Recruiting can be exhausting and at times frustrating. Veterans are often busy getting their life’s on track, pursuing jobs, degrees and being a mom or dad. On the other hand there are veterans who are having a serious time coping with life and adjusting to post military who are not motivated to try something new. Paddlesports are not for everyone, but that’s ok. Our role is to present opportunities to paddle. Good luck and thank you for undertaking this role. You will be greatly rewarded by introducing paddling to our veterans. For any questions, feel free to contact me.
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www.TeamRiverRunner.org