

The Partnership Toolkit

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

A Healing Wings Supplement



Developing Programs for Members of the Military Community



VA / ROBERT TURTIL

The National Park Service (NPS) is committed to providing opportunities for veterans and other members of the military community to experience our parks. This handout summarizes strategies for reaching out to those groups.

Purpose and Scope

Healing Wings implements veteran-focused outdoor experience and service projects. The pilot project at Colorado National Monument was developed as part of the 2021 NPS Generating Organizational Advancement and Leadership (GOAL) Academy.

Healing Wings provides veterans and members of the military community with opportunities to heal bird populations through participation in team-based service projects such as bird counts and habitat improvement efforts.

This document shares some lessons learned about how to engage veterans and veteran-related organizations—a prerequisite for the successful implementation of a veteran-focused program at *any* park.

This toolkit pulls from existing strategies and documents, highlighting the key details we found most helpful in designing our program.

Why connect NPS units with veterans and the military community?

Existing national strategies related to veteran and military engagement support the development of programs like *Healing Wings*. We encourage interested parties to explore additional information specific to the NPS on the [American Military website of NPS.gov](https://www.americanmilitary.com/nps).

The 2019 NPS-published *Military and Veteran Engagement Strategy* makes a comprehensive case for engaging with veterans and other members of the military community, including their families. Among six primary motivations for such engagement, the first and most important is veteran Health and Wellness. The NPS needs to take the initiative to “improve the overall health and wellness of service members, veterans, and their families by offering park-based services and programs to address physical, mental, and spiritual health, and social well-being.”

From the veterans’ side, a similar argument emerges. The Department of Veterans Affairs’s (VA) [National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide](https://www.va.gov/strategy) offers information about health and wellness from the VA perspective. The VA Strategy identifies the need for “partners and like-minded groups across

all sectors “to work with us in reaching all Veterans, wherever they may be.” And clearly the NPS is a like-minded group. Besides the parks themselves—places which offer beauty, solitude, and inspiration—there is the National Park Service, a service-oriented and uniformed federal organization which employs many veterans and has a structure and culture in many ways similar to the military organizations that are familiar to all veterans.

Programs like *Healing Wings* are just one way the NPS can and should be a partner for veterans and veterans’s organizations. However, it is important to emphasize the benefits of programs like *Healing Wings* are not limited to mental health. Recreation and education remain potent reasons to engage veterans, like all Americans, in outdoor experience and service projects in national parks.

Strategies for connecting with veterans

Find the Nearest VA Office Of all the veterans organizations to reach out to, the Veterans Administration is the most obvious and important. They have many branches throughout the country. Find nearby NPS units and VA locations on this [handy map](#).

VA Recreational Therapy Service Program

This program aims “to improve and enrich bio-psycho-social functioning through active therapy and/or meaningful therapeutic activities.” Many activities occur outdoors, making NPS-managed lands ideal settings for this programming. For more information, including contact information for staff at the national and local levels, visit the [Recreation Therapy website](#).

Build Relationships Partnerships can’t happen without personal relationships between individuals at a local NPS unit and a local veteran’s organization (like a VA hospital). Pick up a phone and call.

Engage Your Veterans Veterans and military community family members comprise a large proportion of the NPS workforce. Use them! Nobody knows how to connect with veterans better than them. Relationship building doesn’t always have to be delegated to NPS personnel in particular positions—offer veterans from any position in the organization an opportunity to participate in outreach and programming.

Provide Mission-oriented Programs Veterans are familiar with mission-focused tasks in team settings. Programs with these characteristics, like the [American Veterans Archaeological Recovery \(AVAR\)](#) program, may be the most effective. AVAR has experience connecting veterans with archaeological fieldwork projects with a team-based approach. The veteran participants not only gain knowledge and skills related to archaeology, but also benefit from the bonds made working towards a goal with a team.

Don’t Focus Explicitly on Mental Health Projects like *Healing Wings* can provide health and wellness benefits without specifically targeting mental health or suicide risk. It is important to recognize that only mental health professionals and experts can address these topics directly—your goal should be to provide a positive experience with potential health and wellness benefits.

Trade Development A past example within the NPS comes from the [Veterans Trades and Apprenticeship program](#). This program placed veterans with the NPS Historic Preservation Training Center (HPTC) to work on historic preservation projects throughout the NPS. While not all projects need to develop skills directly related to a trade as specialized as historic preservation, providing a development opportunity is an important part of a non-classroom learning experience.



Veterans, members of our military community, and their families benefit from all that national parks have to offer, yet the National Park Service can strengthen that connection with proactive partnership efforts.