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RESEARCH REVIEW | ISSUE 251

Supporting Servicemembers and Veterans During Their Transition to Civilian Life Using Certified Sponsors: A Three-Arm Randomized Controlled Trial

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SOURCE: American Psychological Association**DATE:** 2023**LINK:** doi.org/10.1037/ser0000764**PUBLICATION TYPE:** Peer-Reviewed Journal Article**KEYWORDS:** reintegration difficulties, community interventions, sponsors, transitioning servicemembers and veterans**ABSTRACT:**

“Transitioning servicemembers and veterans (TSMVs) face difficulties throughout their reintegration to civilian life, including challenges with employment, poor social connection, and elevated risk for suicide. To meet the needs of this high-risk population, national initiatives have leveraged community-based interventions. Authors conducted a three-arm randomized controlled trial (n = 200) to evaluate two community-based interventions. The first, Team Red, White, and Blue (RWB), connects TSMVs to their community through physical/social activities. The second, Expiration Term of Service Sponsorship Program (ETS-SP) provides one-on-one certified sponsors to TSMVs who provide support during the reintegration process. TSMVs were assessed at baseline, 3, 6, and 12 months. The primary hypothesis was not supported as reintegration difficulties and social support were not significantly different for participants randomly assigned to the two community-based interventions (Arm-2/RWB and Arm-3/RWB + ETS-SP), when the data from the separate arms were collapsed and combined, compared to the wait list. The results did support the secondary hypothesis as

Arm-3/RWB + ETS-SP had less reintegration difficulties over 12 months and initially had more social support compared to Arm-2/RWB, which suggest that augmenting interventions with sponsors outperforms participation in community-based interventions alone. Overall, the results show some limitations of the studied community-based interventions, as implemented, and researched within this study. The authors identified factors that may have contributed to the null findings for the primary hypothesis, which can be addressed in future studies, such as addressing the unique needs of TSMVs, enrolling TSMVs into interventions prior to military discharge, measuring and improving participation levels, and providing stepped-care interventions based on risk levels.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Unlike other studies, researchers in the current study used randomly controlled trials focused on reducing reintegration difficulties and improving social support for transitioning servicemembers and veterans (TSMVs) through community-based interventions to evaluate their relative efficacy.
- Results revealed that the group receiving the addition of certified sponsors from the Expiration Term of Service Sponsorship Program (ETS-SP), showed promise in reducing reintegration difficulties and improving social support for TSMVs.
- Participants reported benefits of the Expiration Term of Service Sponsorship Program (ETS-SP), including increased social support (44%), frequent communication with sponsors (33%), and access to information/resources and career/educational development tools (32%).
- Results highlight the potential benefits of adding sponsors to community-based interventions for TSMVs’ successful reintegration to civilian life.

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

The study highlights the potential value of adding mentor-sponsorship programs to community-based interventions for TSMVs. Results also indicate that sponsors can support TSMVs by providing honest advice, career/education information, and connecting them to resources. Practitioners should consider incorporating task-oriented and relational-oriented leadership behaviors, like those employed by military leaders, to provide support during the transition to civilian life. Practitioners should also consider augmenting a community-based intervention with a sponsorship program and address the unique needs of transitioning servicemembers and veterans (TSMV's), including specific reintegration challenges such as confiding or sharing personal thoughts and feelings, getting along with spouses or partners, and finding or keeping employment.

FOR POLICY

This research highlights the potential value of mentor-sponsorship programs and underscores the significance of effective leadership behaviors in supporting TSMVs during their transition process. Policy implications include the need to address the unique needs of TSMVs, enroll them in interventions like the DoD Transition Assistance Program prior to military discharge. Results from this study also found such interventions to better support TSMV's during the critical period immediately after separation, when challenges and suicide risk are, we found, particularly high. Thus, policy efforts should include evaluating ways to improve participation levels, and provide stepped-care interventions based on risk levels.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the focus of the study on early interventions, only 21% of the TSMVs were still serving. In addition, the present study did not determine risk levels of TSMVs nor offer a stepped-care intervention approach based on risk level. That said, future studies with TSMVs, should consider looking at the unique needs of TSMVs, those TSMVs enrolled into interventions prior to military discharge, along with measuring participation levels, as well as those TSMV's provided stepped-care interventions at various risk levels. Future studies should also consider a broader range of outcome measures to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of community-based interventions for TSMVs, including mental health, physical health, and employment/educational outcomes. Last, while considered adequate, the current sample was comprised predominantly of white men with prior service in the U.S. Army. Thus, future research should consider including a larger and more heterogeneous samples.

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