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## **Veteran Service Organizations' Declining Membership and How to Fix It**

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Veteran Service Organizations' Declining Membership and How to Fix It

by

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## Introduction

Turning a normal citizen into a service member is a lengthy process that requires an initial transition period to teach and instill the cultural values required to be a productive component in the vast military-industrial complex. In order to successfully integrate into military society a person must adapt from an individualistic to collectivistic perspective. An individual must develop a strong sense of community and camaraderie to form an emotional attachment to the group, a strong level of cohesion, and a common sense of purpose that instills a sense of loyalty (Truusa and Castro 2019). This culture contrasts greatly with normal civilian society and leads to “formation of strong bonds and a shared identity that persists and influences life after service” (Pedlar, Thompson, and Castro 2019). Upon leaving the military, most service members have successful transitions into society.

Shifting back from the military culture to the civilian is often jarring but not impossible to undertake. The knowledge, skills, and abilities learned while on duty prepare service members well for entering society as productive members of their communities. The main challenges are similar to relocating to any new community; obtaining meaningful employment, forming new social bonds, securing housing requirements, establishing health care plans, and learning new cultural norms (Pedlar, Thompson, and Castro 2019). While most service members are capable of navigating the transition successfully, most if not all service members will require at least some form of external support and those with personalized transition plans experience much more positive outcomes (Truusa and Castro 2019).

Not being properly prepared while leaving the military, especially under negative circumstances, is detrimental to all aspects of the transition process and has extraordinary

negative impacts on the veteran's life. Difficulties transitioning causes stress on physical and mental health as well as on their families and social ties (Brown et al. 2016). Physical difficulties are more easily perceived and treated while mental conditions can be harder to address. A physically wounded warrior has tangible problems that may be diagnosed and treated in a clinical, structured, and straightforward manner. There exist a vast number of medical resources to assist veterans with these types of issues and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is at the forefront of service and innovation. Psychological challenges on the other hand are often more difficult to diagnose and treat (Brown et al. 2016).

They require a lot more time and resources not only by medical providers but by the individual veterans and their family members. While an overall assessment across all conflict eras shows psychological issues are likely to be incurred, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) / Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) / Operation New Dawn (OND) veterans are coming home with more instances than earlier service eras (MacLean, Murray, and Lazier 2019). This places a tremendous strain on the agencies tasked with helping and on individuals with vested interests in each veteran.

Veterans with families do not transition alone. Their families must also forge new social ties, acclimate to new surroundings, and integrate into new communities. Spouses, parents, children, and other relatives are on the front lines of assisting troubled veterans and shoulder the brunt of the burden. They must deal with the daily consequences of an unsuccessful transition. They often provide valuable information and feedback to healthcare providers and are positive influencers to encourage veterans to seek out assistance (Lee, Watkins, and Dursun 2019). Veterans who have families benefit from a trusted social support network that reduces the

instances of destructive social isolation and other negative coping strategies (Brown et al. 2016). Support not only for veterans but also for their families is an important aspect of holistic veteran care that is usually overlooked and underestimated (Fossey, Cooper, and Raid 2019). Leaving the military can be a challenge for service members and their families and serving during specific conflict eras can have a significant impact on the experience.

World War 2 (WW2) veterans benefited greatly from the generous social and political support provided by the public both nationally and locally (Duel, Truusa, and Elands 2019). The conflict enjoyed extreme public support and approval. This support reduced the likelihood of stigma and discrimination reducing their chances of an unsuccessful reintegration. Returning service members were hailed as heroes and warmly welcomed. Unfortunately, Korean and Vietnam veterans were not supported in the same way.

Both the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War were not popular with the public. Veterans of this era report feeling unwelcomed by their own communities and some experienced open hostility for their service (Duel, Truusa, and Elands 2019). Protests and negative media attention made the veterans feel at fault for the war and caused them to withdraw from society. It also led many to mistrust the government and adapted to transitioning without much external support. One of the biggest differences between this era and the WW2 era is the manner of enlistment. WW2 veterans volunteered for service while Vietnam veterans were involuntarily drafted (Pedlar, Thompson, and Castro 2019). Being forced to serve in an unpopular war only compounded the trauma in an already horrifying experience. Thankfully, it seems as though the public has learned how not to lay the blame of an unpopular military action at the feet of the service members. Public support and services have increased since the Vietnam war and modern

veterans have access to programs and benefits that their forerunners never had. The benefits of retiring from the military are generous but most service members do not make it that far in their careers.

Service members that serve for 20 years or over are eligible for retirement with a pension based on the highest rank achieved, medical and dental benefits. Service members who do not qualify for retirement leave the military with no medical benefits but do have access to education assistance in the form of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Veterans who incur injuries while enlisted or have a preexisting condition that is aggravated by their service may submit to a medical evaluation and have their condition documented as being a service-connected disability and receive monetary compensation and medical care directly related to the diagnosis from the VA. Career service members along with their families are much more likely to be prepared to enjoy the benefits of converting their military experience and retirement benefits into a prosperous new chapter in their lives but this is not always the case (Fossey, Cooper, and Raid 2019).

The military ensures that its members are well taken care of while on active duty. This increases recruitment and retention but does little to prepare them for the transition. A service member enjoys many perks and benefits while serving. Housing, food, medical, dental, education, as well as a structured promotion process in a team-based environment. These benefits can be a detriment to a military family during the transition if they aren't prudent (Truusa and Castro 2019). Short term veterans may not serve long enough to develop such a dependent lifestyle, but they have their own unique challenges.

Leaving the military before being eligible for retirement is more common than not. A member may become injured, disabled, or deemed psychologically unfit to serve and is forced to

separate. Others simply complete their service obligation and voluntarily decide not to reenlist. They develop their adult identities in the military and have to cope and adapt to a different culture when they leave. The process can be disruptive and daunting. Many of them report losing their sense of purpose, inadequate healthcare and housing, and difficulty finding and keeping gainful employment (Pedlar, Thompson, and Castro 2019). These veterans receive the least amount of assistance after leaving but they typically experience the most difficulty transitioning and require the most help (Truusa and Castro 2019).

Even with increased public support and access to more services, modern veterans still have problems reintegrating into society and are more likely to develop mental health issues than previous generations (MacLean, Murray, and Lazier 2019). They report feeling disconnected from society and view it as being negative. Many veterans also experience difficulty finding meaning and purpose in their lives (Pedlar, Thompson, and Castro 2019). The Department of Labor (DoL) numbers tell the story with a 20 percent unemployment rate and 25 percent averaging less than \$25,000 a year (Lutey 2009). Women veterans are more likely to experience even worse outcomes.

Female service members are more likely to experience difficulties in the transition process because the military has been predominantly a white male institution. This has led to a disproportionate number of unsuccessful transitions (Pedlar, Thompson, and Castro 2019). Women represent nearly 20 percent of the armed forces and the fastest-growing group in the VA healthcare system (women's health report 2015). Even though women are still a minority population in the military, there are more of them serving than any previous time period and now they are able to enter combat positions previously unavailable to them.

Women are more likely to experience Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and current outreach by governments and private organizations has not been effective. (Thomas et al. 2017). All of these transitional barriers and challenges have created a situation where the DoD attempts to prepare service members that are leaving using broad-based techniques and models designed for the majority of service members and not fine-tuned to address particular issues of the minority groups. This has led to the VA having to pick up where the DoD has left off but the longer a veteran goes without assistance increases their chances of experiencing negative outcomes (Fossey et al. 2019). This gap in services has presented a unique opportunity for Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) to assist their fellow veterans.

The American Legion (TAL) is one of the largest and most influential non-profit organizations chartered by Congress to take on this monumental task. TAL has a storied history helping veterans and service-members successfully transition back into society. They successfully lobbied Congress and created the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Montgomery GI bill), subsequently helping WW2 veterans become productive members in their communities and positively affected an entire generation of Americans (Handgraaf 2018). By sponsoring and supporting existing civilian organizations such as this, the VA can focus their resources on the health care aspects of transitioning veterans (Castro et al. 2019). They have a unique role of representing and advocating for members that they can personally relate with. The American Legion has committed members that assist veterans transition by creating a social bridge that increases the likelihood of a successful return to society (Thomas et al. 2017). Many service members attempt to transition on their own once they realize how daunting the process is to navigate the vast array of services. This leads to underutilization of services and decreased

positive outcomes in which VSO's have the opportunity to bridge the gap and assist their comrades in returning to society.

Veteran Service Organizations reach out and connect with veterans and assist them with the medical, employment, education, and social benefits that they are entitled to (Castro and Dursun 2019). Education is especially important as 80 percent of veterans say that they joined the military for the education benefits (McLaughlin 2011). This further displays how many service members do not plan on military retirement but rather on obtaining new skills, furthering their education, and joining the civilian workforce. The American Legion pressured Congress to create job-training programs for combat veterans who possessed training that was not transferable to a civilian counterpart helping those service members find suitable employment (Lutey 2009).

The Veterans potentially benefiting the most are the ones that report feeling disconnected from a sense of purpose and losing their sense of shared identity (Pedlar, Thompson, and Castro 2019). VSO's offer a place and forum for members to connect with like-minded people who genuinely want to be a resource for others. Veterans can fulfill a sense of purpose by helping The American Legion achieve its four-point mission of increasing national security, assisting with care for veterans, securing our future by mentoring youth, and empowering social connections through patriotism (McLaughlin 2011). Peer support organizations have been proven to increase Military-to-Civilian Transition (MCT) in their communities by providing a place for veterans to access support and assistance to sustain positive behavioral changes such as improving self-care, decreasing isolation, and develop productive coping strategies (Brown et al. 2016). Unfortunately, membership in VSO's have been in steady decline since the end of the

Vietnam war, active members are dying with no replacements, and local posts are closing all over the country.

Local posts are historically located or at least have an alcohol bar where members can socialize and unwind after their scheduled meetings. Many of these posts have successfully used the environment to build relationships and plan community events to great effect. The unfortunate side effect is the stereotype that has manifested after decades of this operational structure. New members find themselves feeling alienated with the draconian practice, especially female veterans. They often pay their annual membership dues, learn the local system, discover that they do not have the time to develop and maintain these types of relationships, and don't end up renewing their memberships.

Many local posts are prominently located in their communities and are often social hubs. They historically hosted Christmas parties with Santa Claus, Easter egg hunts, weddings, parties, meetings, and other community-based functions (Aamot 2016). These functions have been largely reduced because the decline in membership resulted in inadequate financial and labor support. This cycle is causing a tailspin effect that reduces operating costs by cutting programs and services but ultimately is not attracting new members to replace vacant positions. The only services and programs left in many posts are the ones that are paramount to the Legion's mission; veteran burial services and fundraising (Thomas et al. 2017).

Modern veterans with families are asked to sacrifice time away from each other to participate in activities such as honor guard, food drives, community outreach, and fundraising. These activities require a lot of time, planning, and preparation that new members must juggle between work, school, family, and social life. This strategy is not helping VSO's recruit and

retain members. Veteran Service Organization's need to identify, understand, and reach their ever-evolving demographic and offer them programs and services not only for the veteran but for their families as well. The most effective way of defining potential members and their expectations is to ask them.

Surveys can be used to quickly gather the necessary information and survey analysis will provide relevant trends, barriers, and opportunities for improvement. Local posts need to communicate with their local population to identify their community's specific needs, work towards organizing realistic plans to offer the desired services, and make the opportunity for participation as manageable as possible. Survey data is paramount in developing these localized restructuring plans as each region has differing needs and desires (Shi et al. 2017).

Many local posts have managed to stay relevant by offering unique programs and services like weekly bingo, various raffles, academic scholarships, youth programs, and motorcycle events (Lutey 2009). These activities are costly and require a lot of resources. Before a post considers adding them to their schedule, research is recommended before committing. A tailored survey created from a pool of relevant and research-based questions will assist the post greatly in identifying which programs and activities are worthwhile in their specific community (Shi et al. 2017).

The purpose of this project is to provide VSO's struggling to recruit and retain members with a resource to assist them in identifying potential members, their barriers for membership, what programs and services they desire, and solicit recommendations for improvement. By focusing on TAL and analyzing their issues, a standard survey pool can be developed so that similar organizations can create personalized surveys that are concise, efficient, and effective as

well as reducing respondent burden as much as possible. Such a survey is more likely to be completed by veterans and their families offering more data for analysis useful in discovering meaningful trends in each veteran population. This information is invaluable in assisting organizations to evolve along with their members and stakeholders and ensure their solvency and continued existence.

## Literature Review

This project utilizes a series of books, journal articles, survey reports, and news articles to identify topics and trends related to organizational recruitment, needs assessments, and changes to the military veteran population. The results will be used to synthesize the literature into topics for the purpose of determining the best practices for understanding a population to better serve and recruit them. In order to recruit members, the article “A Member Saved Is a Member Earned? The Recruitment- Retention Trade-Off and Organizational Strategies for Membership Growth” (Shi et al. 2017) states that organizations must utilize their members' social ties and networks to meet and attract new members. Veteran organizations are especially blessed as plenty of research shows the camaraderie between service members and veterans is generally quite robust (Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan 2017); (Thomas et al. 2017); (Fales et al. 2018); (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015).

This bond makes introducing new members to an organization much easier than having to court someone who hasn't served. Unfortunately, an organization must do more than connect peers, it must offer programs and services to be viable and such activities require planning and coordination. These responsibilities must fall upon people who have the time, skills, and desire to take on the role. The real challenge is recruiting qualified candidates because these positions require so much commitment that they negatively affect membership duration (Shi et al. 2017). There are many news articles reporting new members not being able to fully commit because of employment or family commitments (Handgraaf 2018; McLaughlin 2011; Lutey 2009). These barriers have had a major impact on membership in the VSO's. Especially in The American Legion.

The American Legion was founded in 1919 and is the nation's largest Veteran Service Organization. They have historically been very successful in serving our veterans. From spearheading new education benefits to providing emergency financial assistance to veterans in need. The organization has enjoyed immense success but changes in their demographic have not been accounted for and they are not recruiting enough new members to replace the ones leaving (Aamot, 2016). Many surveys performed by The Department of Veterans Affairs, The American Legion, The Wounded Warrior Project, and various academic sources have done well in defining the characteristics of veterans from different service eras but applying the information to recruitment has been difficult.

These survey reports are used in this project to identify the barriers that are preventing active participation in TAL as reported by the respondents. They agree that veterans of the GWOT are more likely to incur mental and physical disabilities that make peer support organizations more necessary than ever (Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan 2017; Fales, A., Choi, J., Borger, C., Genoversa-Wong, K., Haider, J., Hintze, W., Hornbostel, M., Sigman, R., Noftsinger, R., Wilson, M. and Anderson, D. 2017; Maribel Aponte, Florinda Balfour, Tom Garin, Dorothy Glasgow, Tamara Lee, Eddie Thomas, Kayla Williams 2017; Hastings 2019; Fales et al. 2018; Thomas et al. 2017). The best way to determine how best to serve the population and remove the barriers is to ask them.

Surveys are the most effective tool for getting someone's opinion. This project includes sources that provide guidelines for the best practices when designing and administering a survey. One important insight comes from an article titled "Assessing User Needs" (Edward Evans and Saponaro 2012). The authors stress the importance of continuous monitoring. This

recommendation is highly encouraged because it will continuously improve programs and services as well as detect any changes in the population. This indicator will serve to prevent future disconnect between VSO's and their members. Another useful resource is the book "A guide to assessing needs" (R. W. M. Watkins Maurya Visser 2012). Needs assessments provide information for decision making that has far-reaching ramifications in organizations. Using research-based survey methods increases the frequency of obtaining useful and relevant data to make informed decisions based on this literature review.

Based on this literature review this project will use the best practices of organizational recruitment to develop survey questions based upon the topics and trends synthesized from the research. This approach is novel in that it will solicit feedback directly from the end-users to make operational decisions focused on recruitment and retention. Continuous monitoring of program satisfaction through semi-annual or quarterly surveys will help chapters respond more readily to their members' needs. Learning and understanding the specific barriers in each community will empower VSO's to reach previously unavailable members and to serve their populations in the most effective way possible.

## Methodology

This project will use a review article approach to gather information from survey reports, organizational evaluation reports, and news articles related to the military to civilian transition process (Paré G 2017). The literature gathered will be synthesized to evaluate the generational changes in the veteran demographic that have led to declining memberships in The American Legion. The analysis will then be used to improve its recruitment strategy to address the issue (Green, Johnson, and Adams 2006). The findings will be incorporated into a survey that may be customized by individual Post to identify their specific challenges. The results may then be used to develop an informed strategy to modernize their services to better serve current populations of veterans (Paré et al. 2015). This will ensure that The American Legion remains solvent and continues its century-long mission of serving those who served.

The trends and topics of the literature will be structured by topics in paragraphs to make the information as organized as possible (Green, Johnson, and Adams 2006). The findings and conclusions will be useful in decision making and policy setting (Paré et al. 2015). Not only will the project help TAL, other VSO's may use the information to survey their members and improve their programs as well. These generational changes are having a detrimental effect on stakeholders that can't adapt to the changes but this methodology will yield useful tools and recommendations.

## Analysis of VSO Service Program Literature

Many organizations use surveys to solicit feedback from their users to improve their programs and services but there is an opportunity to use uniquely designed surveys to improve recruitment and retention within VSO's. There have been recent surveys administered to veterans and their caregivers to identify trends in the population and gather feedback for services. Most have been targeted at veterans in general and few have specifically asked female veterans. By examining the questions asked and answered, trends may be developed and analyzed to see what barriers and challenges in the population exist and must be overcome in order to increase member participation in VSO's and assist the DoD and VA to bridge the transition gap (Institute of Medicine, Board on the Health of Select Populations, and Committee on the Initial Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families 2010).

Understanding the changing demographic is more important than ever to reach new members. Surveys administered by The American Legion, The Wounded Warrior Project, USC School of Social Work, and Department of Veteran Affairs have yielded very useful data. The results show that most Veterans are from the Vietnam service era and the Iraq and Afghanistan or Global War on Terror (GWOT) service era with around 62 percent hailing from the former (Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan 2017; Fales, A., Choi, J., Borger, C., Genoversa-Wong, K., Haider, J., Hintze, W., Hornbostel, M., Sigman, R., Noftsinger, R., Wilson, M. and Anderson, D. 2017; Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). There are currently 22.2 million veterans in the United States and 11 percent of them are women with 91 percent of all veterans were from the enlisted ranks. (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015).

Many veterans report feeling disconnected from their communities. An astonishing 49 percent of Post 9/11 veterans do not feel any connection with the world around them. They do not have a sense of belonging even with their friends and family (Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan 2017). This negative perception of community makes them much more likely to isolate themselves and be less physically healthy with 81 percent of them reporting mental or physical issues that prevent them from being emotionally and physically less productive (Fales, A., Choi, J., Borger, C., Genoversa-Wong, K., Haider, J., Hintze, W., Hornbostel, M., Sigman, R., Noftsinger, R., Wilson, M. and Anderson, D. 2017). Although 86 percent of veterans are concerned about being healthy and 42 percent report exercising more than three days per week (Fales, A., Choi, J., Borger, C., Genoversa-Wong, K., Haider, J., Hintze, W., Hornbostel, M., Sigman, R., Noftsinger, R., Wilson, M. and Anderson, D. 2017).

Employment and family obligations present a significant barrier to becoming active VSO members. 62 percent of veterans are employed with almost half of them working full time (Fales, A., Choi, J., Borger, C., Genoversa-Wong, K., Haider, J., Hintze, W., Hornbostel, M., Sigman, R., Noftsinger, R., Wilson, M. and Anderson, D. 2017). This leads to very little time to spend with family let alone an external organization. The survey time requirement and the method itself is a factor in determining whether or not someone is likely to complete the survey.

Traditionally mail-based surveys have been used to great effect but changes in technology have reduced the response rate to current demographics and the administrative costs are beginning to outweigh the tangible benefits. In the past, mail-based surveys were sent out to people who were used to receiving and responding to physical media. They generally achieved more educational success because of higher GI bill utilization rates than modern veterans. World

War 2 (WW2) veterans benefited greatly from the GI bill that The American Legion successfully lobbied for and they make up a large portion of the most active post members. Generally speaking, it is much easier to solicit feedback from this cohort as they are much more likely to be involved and have a vested interest in the organization (Maribel Aponte, Florinda Balfour, Tom Garin, Dorothy Glasgow, Tamara Lee, Eddie Thomas, Kayla Williams 2017).

Vietnam Veterans currently make up the bulk of VSO's but they differ vastly from the WW2 generation. They still respond well to mail-based surveys but they are also more likely to be comfortable participating in web-based ones as well. This shift in survey design and response has led to reduced administrative costs, further reach, but also lower response rate ratios. This group of veterans is generally in the mid to upper management levels in their careers with their professional and social associations well established. Finding new members in this group is less likely because of these entrenched associations but newer veterans that have yet to establish themselves are more likely to respond positively to building new professional and personal relationships.

Post 9/11 veterans are the newest generation most likely to respond to web-based survey formats. They are either recently retired service members starting second careers or younger service members transitioning to new careers. Their familiarity with technology lends itself well to web-based surveys and increases response frequency, especially when offered incentives. In contrast, it also makes them less likely to respond to mail-based survey formats.

Survey designs vary greatly and there are many different ways to ask for feedback.

Closed-ended questions, ranking scales, and write-in answers are the most common. Women

veterans however differ from their male counterparts, as they are more likely to respond to mail-based surveys (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015).

The WWP administered their survey online with a 33 percent completion rate while the VA's Study of Barriers for Women's Care report used a telephone collection method and enjoyed a 53 percent completion rate (Fales, A., Choi, J., Borger, C., Genoversa-Wong, K., Haider, J., Hintze, W., Hornbostel, M., Sigman, R., Noftsinger, R., Wilson, M. and Anderson, D. 2017); (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). Although the email format is less costly to disseminate and requires less time to administer, telephone calls can clarify any confusion and increase the likelihood of completion. Both methods have their distinct advantages and disadvantages and it is up to each agency to determine which method is reasonable for their resources and target demographic.

A lot of research has been done on the format of surveys and the most effective ways to ask for feedback. There are many different types of ways to administer and disseminate surveys. With all things being equal, online surveys offer the best return on investment (Shi et al. 2017). Veterans are more likely to be exposed, interact, and complete a web-based survey that is not overly time-consuming. The American Legion stands to benefit greatly from this type of format as most people in the organization are familiar with technology enough to complete surveys with little to no burden. In order to create an effective recruitment and retention based feedback implement, questions must be clear and concise with their purpose evident to the user. This will communicate to the surveyor how the organization values their time and input.

Questions need to be focused on two main categories: programs and services improvement ideas and identifying barriers to participation. Programs and services can vary

greatly from one post to another and not all of them are worthwhile in every community. Each Post needs to solicit feedback from its members to determine which ones are worth continuing or creating based upon demand and the available resources. Many of the barriers found in previous survey reports depend greatly upon the local population which makes local feedback imperative in reducing localized issues effectively. By recognizing and identifying local issues post officers can effectively spend valuable resources to address the problems and work towards growing its membership and sustain its mission.

The primary goal of the survey is to address the major issue affecting veterans. Over half of veterans experiencing mental health issues are confident in their own ability to provide self-care and would rather manage their problems on their own (Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan 2017). This finding is significant because veterans are unlikely to seek mental health treatment if it will have a negative effect on their current employment or fear of stigma from asking a family member or friend. Creating a question that respects their decision but provides a chance for someone who is experiencing an unusually difficult hardship to get assistance even though they are unlikely to ask someone. Another major issue discovered is related to financial hardship (Hastings 2019).

Over a quarter of post 9/11 and 15% of pre-9/11 veterans indicated the need for help in paying for expenses (Castro et al., 2017). Adding a question related to this will provide an opportunity for veterans who are experiencing hardships that are tangible and detrimental to their immediate health and well-being to discover a little known resource as the Temporary Financial Assistance (TAF) program (Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan 2017). Each post has unique characteristics and resources. The resources of the Post pale in comparison to the potential

support from the local community. Therefore, identifying the barriers that are preventing recruitment and retention will yield results that may be used to engage local stakeholders to get involved and address the issues in a holistic manner.

Survey reports show that the vast majority of veterans are employed full time and 66 percent of them are married (Castro et al., 2017). The old stereotype of The American Legion being “a bunch of old guys sitting around telling war stories” (Aamot, 2016) needs to be addressed by offering more family-based programs and services available to veteran and their families. Removing the conflict of having to choose between The American Legion and family will increase the participation rate of not only the veteran but by their families as well (Maribel Aponte, Florinda Balfour, Tom Garin, Dorothy Glasgow, Tamara Lee, Eddie Thomas, Kayla Williams 2017). By adding these types of questions a post can reallocate resources or seek out additional resources if their organization is not currently equipped to address them (Hayden et al. 2014). Another common barrier is the time required to seek a higher education.

Most veterans report joining the military for the education benefits (McLaughlin 2011). The opportunity to attend college while receiving a monetary stipend and having tuition covered is a benefit that is greatly utilized. Unfortunately, the time and energy required for successful completion does not leave a lot of time for extracurricular activities. Identifying veterans students in a VSO is a great opportunity for local officers to assist with any administrative requirements and potentially connect veterans with other qualified members who are willing to mentor them. VSO's can also connect with local academic institutions to provide advocacy and assistance to student veterans who are not currently members.

The secondary goal of the survey is to determine what programs and services members are currently using, which ones are underutilized, and to solicit recommendations for future services. A list of various programs and services with numerical ranking values along with possible new programs and services need to be included. A write-in section should be provided to capture any programs that are not listed. This type of feedback is paramount in identifying what programs and services are desirable in a given community and starts the process of offering community-specific resources (Watkins, Meiers, and Visser 2012).

Providing high demand programs and services will increase local moral, member retention, stakeholder participation, and the overall health of the post (Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan 2017; Institute of Medicine, Board on the Health of Select Populations, and Committee on the Initial Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families 2010). In order to increase the likelihood of member participation, local barriers must first be addressed. Women veterans are especially vulnerable to feeling unwelcome and require additional attention (Thomas et al. 2017).

The most common issues reported by women veterans are not understanding what their VA benefits are and how to access them (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). If a respondent answers yes to not having access to VA information, then the survey administrator must follow up with brochures as they are the most desired means of communication with almost 50 percent of women stating that they are the most helpful form (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). It is recommended that surveys designed towards women should be in mail format as 47 percent have listed it as the preferred communication method (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015).

Surveys targeted directly towards women should be administered on a semi-annual or quarterly basis in each post. With Military Sexual Trauma being disproportionately more prevalent in women veterans, the increased survey frequency will provide a safe place for them to report any new issues that may have arisen between surveys (Brown et al. 2016). Adding a dedicated question about MST reporting will convey to the veteran how seriously the organization cares for them. The issue is highly sensitive and is related to many negative outcomes (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). Veteran Service Organizations must strive to do everything in their power to be a resource for women that want help but need an opportunity to request it.

All surveys should have a follow-up date and organizers need to remind participants if they haven't responded within a certain time (Cook et al., 2000). Sending out pre-notification letters and emails explaining the survey and offering incentives such as gift cards will increase the participation rate (Wolf et al. 2016). Assurances of confidentiality need to be expressed emphatically and contact information of survey.

The addition of this type of customized survey administration will assist local Legion posts in identifying the main MCT issues at the grassroots level and squarely place them as advocates for reluctant service members who may be too proud to ask for help. It will also offer a valuable tool for identifying which programs and services are being utilized to make informed decisions when optimizing the existing repertoire and implementing new recommendations. This increased efficiency will more effectively allocate resources and offer in-demand services that will increase membership participation rate, recruitment, and retention.

## Findings

The Department of Veterans Affairs, The American Legion, and many academic sources have researched the Military Veterans Transition process. Although the process is complex, considerable progress has been made in identifying the challenges that most separating service members must face. Many of the books and journal articles reviewed in this project emphasize the importance of a veteran taking prudent measures for returning to civilian life well before leaving the military. Veterans who preemptively prepare for departure enjoy much greater outcomes than ones that are not prepared.

The DoD offers transition courses and some are mandatory for each service member but they are aimed at a general audience and not all service members receive specialized information pertaining to their unique demographic (women's health report 2015). Women veterans suffer the most in this regard as the military has been slow to keep up with their ever-increasing number of enlistments (Thomas et al. 2017). Women veterans make up 20 percent of the armed forces in the United States. This number is unprecedented and is changing the landscape dramatically (Pedlar, Thompson, and Castro 2019). The military has not been able to integrate them well enough into the system causing them to have disproportionate unsuccessful transitions home (women's health report 2015). They are more likely to experience Military Sexual Trauma creating an opportunity for peer support organizations such as TAL to assist (Brown et al. 2016). Changes in service eras also create a strain on the transition programs because veterans from different wars differ vastly.

World War 1 (WW1) veterans experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) even if medical professionals didn't fully understand at the time what it was and dubbed it "shell

Shock” (Duel, Truusa, and Elands 2019). In fact, the disorder has been documented and noticed since antiquity from the invasion of Greece by the Persians to the American civil war. Only recently has the disorder been so widely scrutinized and studied. A stigma has developed in the hypermasculine military culture where it is detrimental to one's professional and social standing to admit any kind of weakness making self-reporting less likely and the unresolved issues follow them in their transition home (Lutey 2009).

This stigma is related to one of the biggest challenges most modern veterans must overcome in order to have the highest likelihood of success: feeling personally responsible for one's mental health treatment (Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan 2017). This sense of personal duty often prevents a veteran from recognizing any symptoms let alone voluntarily seeking treatment. This self-defeating behavior can exacerbate minor problems into larger, harder to manage symptoms leading to many preventable difficulties and behaviors in the veterans life. Having an understanding and educated support network can help a veteran realize that mental health is not a weakness but rather a mission that must be accomplished (Lutey 2009). With so many service members being diagnosed with PTSD from the GWOT than any other previous era, treatment must be of the highest priority not just for governments but for society as a whole (Brown et al. 2016).

Social support is the single most effective treatment for PTSD as compassion and love from family and friends can empower a troubled veteran to seek help or remain committed to treatment programs. Spouses are on the front lines in every veteran household and have the unique position of monitoring behaviors and encouraging the positive ones (Lee, Watkins, and Dursun 2019). They often provide health care providers with an alternate perspective on health

outcomes offering a more well-rounded treatment discussion. These intimate relationships increase positive outcomes for veterans but limited time constraints between employment and family obligations have made this generation of veterans less likely to participate in Veteran Service Organizations (MacLean, Murray, and Lazier 2019).

Historically, WW2 veterans were able to commit to VSO's and the membership numbers flourished (Duel, Truusa, and Elands 2019). However, as veterans demographics changed to the Korea and Vietnam era, culture and opinions shifted from public support of the military to widespread animosity. This negatively impacted VSO's as community resources dwindled and potential members were less likely to join or want any association with the government (Duel, Truusa, and Elands 2019). Veterans were forced to socially distance themselves from their communities and focus on organizational survival.

With the transition to the Gulf War and the GWOT era, The American Legion's deep-rooted practice of strict rules of conduct and order have boiled over into the new generation. Unfortunately, modern veterans are much more diverse than previous generations and the antiquated practices alienate new members (Duel, Truusa, and Elands 2019). Post 9/11 veterans report the desire to be outdoors and actively participate in their communities. Current The American Legion practices do not offer such programs and activities limiting desirable opportunities for young veterans to get involved. With over half of veterans being married and working full time, The American Legion needs to factor those commitments when developing programs and services. More than 80 percent of veterans report mental health or physical issues preventing them from being more productive (Fales, A., Choi, J., Borger, C., Genoversa-Wong, K., Haider, J., Hintze, W., Hornbostel, M., Sigman, R., Noftsinger, R., Wilson, M. and

Anderson, D. 2017). This barrier forces veterans to spend their limited energy on their family and careers instead of VSO's leading to a steady decline in membership.

Declining membership decreases post-funding and resources eventually leading to post closures. Currently, The American Legion has 1.8 million members which shows a steady decline from a record high of 3.1 million in 1992 ("TAL National Membership Record" 2019). With no sign of improvement, it is imperative that The American Legion identifies and studies its evolved demographic to better recruit members and remove the barriers for participation. In order to effectively do this, The American Legion needs to provide surveys to each post and help them develop localized plans to improve.

Surveys have been administered to veterans for various purposes by many organizations. Usually to analyze changing demographics and ascertain the level of satisfaction with VA services. The American Legion strives to improve the relationship between veterans and the VA by surveying and studying their interactions. The survey methods are sound and grounded in research which emphasizes their validity. Results show that veterans are generally satisfied with care but there are many opportunities for improvement (Castro and Dursun 2019). By offering a list of survey questions designed to address the main issues with transitioning and increasing member recruitment, The American Legion can begin to take the necessary steps to ensure organizational survival.

Using surveys to identify barriers is an effective way of gathering information directly from stakeholders in order to tailor the most in-demand activities that will increase the efficiency of each post (Shi et al. 2017). Providing a list of currently available services with a ranking system will help in determining which programs and services are being utilized and the

information can be used to terminate or reconfigure underutilized ones. A write-in section will be useful in learning about innovative programs and empower members to contribute (Watkins, Meiers, and Visser 2012). This in turn will increase member participation and offer a sense of cooperation and camaraderie (Institute of Medicine, Board on the Health of Select Populations, and Committee on the Initial Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families 2010).

These surveys must be clear and concise with the purpose of improvement inherent in the nature of the questions. The respondent must not feel burdened with the task or feel like their opinions won't be valued (Torghele et al., 2007). Providing incentives in the form of gift cards or other tangible benefits will encourage participation but care must be taken to not influence the ranking systems of the survey. The gifts should be mailed out or claimed at a later date in order to separate the survey from the incentive (Wolf et al., 2016). A section of the survey needs to be dedicated to addressing the main issues of MCT. This section will be added at the end of each survey.

These questions are designed to identify veterans who are asking for immediate assistance about an urgent matter and get them help as soon as possible. Surveyor administrators need to be trained to recognize the urgent need as soon as the survey is returned. They need to have the contact information of Post Officers and VA representatives in order to notify the appropriate contacts and arrange the meetings. Brochures and informational pamphlets need to be handed out for any programs or services that the respondent expresses interest in the survey.

The largest gap in MCT is between the DoD and the VA. Assisting separating service members while in the military can seem like a conflict of interest as retention leads to better

operational effectiveness. Nevertheless, research shows that most members do not retire and leave at a relatively young age to join the civilian workforce (McLaughlin 2011). The DoD needs to collaborate better with the VA in order to identify members who are likely to separate and prepare them more effectively. A large majority of women veterans recommended transition assistance while still on active duty to make the transition as seamless as possible (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). The most common problem women veterans experience is not understanding what VA benefits and services are available to them. The research does not explain what the causes are and further research should be conducted to find out why. This gap in services between the DoD and the VA does provide an opportunity for VSO's to fill the niche.

Peer support organizations serve the population most effectively as advocates and coordinators. They cannot force change within DoD and VA, only offer research-based recommendations for improvement. VSO's can focus on the social aspects of MCT and provide support for veterans experiencing difficulty with the system. Unfortunately, any perceived delay in services or difficulties with the VA may be unfairly be transposed onto VSO's so organizations must take care to be as transparent and forthcoming as possible. Compassionate communication is important when advocating for this population so sensitivity training is recommended for local post officers. Any barriers discovered from surveys also need to be addressed in a timely manner with all stakeholders informed. Survey administration and analysis may also be difficult for local posts to implement.

The American Legion national office needs to coordinate and train post officers in the most effective use of this type of survey. Delegating the responsibility of survey administration before monthly meetings and the sending out of web-based and postal surveys during

predetermined intervals should not be taken lightly. The prospective member will be responsible for disseminating, analyzing, and reporting findings to the Post Commander. They should be cognizant enough to identify when respondents are in need of help and are able to assist in an appropriate and respectful manner. With the lack of manpower currently being experienced, it may be very challenging to find a qualified person to assume the role. Survey format decision itself can be a challenging task

Online surveys may be developed easy enough but they only average a 33 percent completion rate (Fales, A., Choi, J., Borger, C., Genoversa-Wong, K., Haider, J., Hintze, W., Hornbostel, M., Sigman, R., Noftsinger, R., Wilson, M. and Anderson, D. 2017). Telephone surveys increase the rate up to 50 percent but the time and training required to administer them is much more rigorous. Although over half of the women veterans prefer mail surveys, the time commitment required for preparing, sending, receiving, and analyzing them can be quite burdensome for a local post (Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). One of the purposes of the survey is to identify if respondents are currently experiencing a situation in which they are requesting assistance.

If a respondent presents an issue, they expect a reasonable response from the organization. If post officers are not informed in a timely manner or if they are improperly trained, the problem may get worse and the relationship between the member and the post may be irreversibly affected. Training from The American Legion National Headquarters is needed before this survey can be utilized to its full potential. If respondents make recommendations for new programs and services but do not perceive that their suggestions are being taken seriously,

they may become disillusioned with the process and reduce their chances of taking the survey again.

Surveys can be valuable diagnostic tools as long as they are administered and analyzed by qualified people. VSO's are experiencing steep declines in membership because they have not been able to adapt to the changes in their population. By using this tool to redefine and understand their new target audience, The American Legion can increase its membership to continue its mission of helping veterans reintegrate back to their communities. VSO's have the opportunity to represent a commanding voice in advocating for the needs of their population to governmental organizations charged with their well-being ([Thomas et al. 2017](#)).

VSO's cannot properly assist veterans if the government does not cooperate with them. MCT is a complicated process that needs to be addressed by all stakeholders involved. That includes the DoD, VA, State, Local, and private organizations. The American Legion can assist tremendously by using its resources to advocate but it needs to take into consideration all of the intricacies working in a cooperative. Some potential partners are educational institutions. With 80 percent of veterans reporting how they intend to take advantage of the GI Bill (McLaughlin 2011), many schools and colleges could work with VSO's to connect professional contacts with graduates to secure employment even before completing school. More potential partners are physical fitness facilities that can tap into a user base that is accustomed to exercise and more likely to renew their memberships. Having a better understanding of evolving demographics is required for VSO's to recruit and retain its members.

## Results

Veteran Service Organizations need to better understand their new demographic. Modern veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn are very different from previous eras. Service members are returning with more instances of mental and physical injuries resulting in more dependence on health care services. There are more women enlisted in the armed forces than ever before but the military has not been able to adapt them successfully into the ranks and have failed to prepare them for the transition home. Although needs assessments have been conducted by DoD, VA, and Veteran Service Organizations, they haven't asked the end-user what they want to see in a peer support service organization.

Surveys have been used to study and define veterans and ascertain their opinions on VA programs and services but little research has applied the results to declining memberships of Veteran Service Organizations. There are numerous anecdotal accounts of Local Post closures and reduced programs and services but collecting the data must be done at the grassroots level. Each community is different with varying needs and desires meaning that each Post must conduct its own needs assessment to determine how best to serve their population. This project is using research-based data to develop such a survey system to assist The American Legion and help the veteran community as a whole.

Each question presented is designed to provide veterans with a resource that they wouldn't normally utilize because of their experience in the military. Personal responsibility is a valuable skill in the armed forces but the reinforced character trait often prevents a veteran from seeking help he would benefit from it greatly. He or she ends up trying to cope with his

problems alone and unfortunately he is not usually successful and the problem worsens. The next section will list each of the newly designed questions with an explanation of their intended purpose.

### Survey Questions

1. *Would you participate more if your family was allowed to participate?*

This first question is related to the reported barrier in the literature of how employment and family obligations prevent members from actively participating in The American Legion. By asking the question, the Post may determine if they need to consider allowing family members to attend certain functions that are only intended for active members. If a post discovers that many of its members are reporting this issue, it should consider developing services and activities to include family members. Allowing spouses and children to attend will decrease the burden of finding childcare or spending time away from a spouse and increase member attendance.

2. *How can we serve veterans better? Please rate American Legion programs and services:*

This is a program evaluation and improvement question designed to obtain feedback on current offerings and how members feel about their effectiveness. The survey administrator includes all of the current programs and services being offered by the Post in a list with a numerical ranking system. This information is extremely useful in identifying programs that are underutilized or underperforming. The American Legion does not currently have such an evaluation system in place and this question would help them save time and resources.

3. *Which programs or services would you be interested in participating?*

This question addresses the need to know what the members desire, making them part of the decision-making process, and expressing how much you value their input. The literature reveals that many programs and services are often cut due to administrative or technical reasons, not from lack of demand. By soliciting ideas from users, Posts can develop services and activities that Officers may not have considered. This can create a collaborative environment where members can contribute to their community and develop a sense of purpose. A sentiment that many veterans lose when they leave the military.

4. *Would you like assistance with any academic issues or help with your GI Bill benefits?*

This question offers a chance for organizations to identify students and connect them with resources to increase their chances of success. Organizations that can assist students in graduating create a bond that will likely result in gaining a new member and eventually a professional contact. Student veterans can also assist VSO's in connecting with other student veterans and increase their membership potential.

5. *Do you currently need financial assistance? If yes, you will be provided a Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA) application.*

This is an important question because 20 percent of veterans report needing financial assistance with no options available to them. The American Legion has a program that not many members are aware of. This question serves to inform them of the program and provides a chance to apply for assistance.

6. *Do you require immediate assistance and would you like to speak with someone today?*

Literature shows that over half of veterans feel as though they have the necessary tools to solve their own problems, including mental health diagnoses. This resilient attitude is admirable

and can be effective so long as problems aren't too serious as to overwhelm them.

Unfortunately, this macho attitude makes them less likely to seek out help from friends and family for fear of being perceived as weak. When veterans are overwhelmed, they experience negative outcomes and must cope with the situation. Meanwhile, the attitude never gets a chance to get tested or corrected. This question provides them an opportunity to seek assistance when they would normally choose to cope on their own. This option is passive and offers a member who has been ineffectively dealing with an ongoing issue a potentially new resource.

a. *If a respondent answers yes to speaking with a WVPM*

Question number five has an option that is specifically for women veterans. She has a chance to inform the surveyor that she would like to speak with a Women Veterans Program Manager from the VA. This representative is a gatekeeper for women to obtain assistance and referrals to women's specialty health services. This addresses the fact that the most common complaint women veterans have is not knowing what health benefits and services are available to them. If the WVPM box is checked, the survey administrator must inform the proper contact as soon as possible. They must then provide pertinent brochures as they are the most desired means of communication with almost 50 percent of women stating that they are the most helpful means.

7. *Would you like to speak to someone concerning Military Sexual Trauma?*

This question emphasizes the organization's commitment to providing advocacy and assistance to as many victims as possible. Including this question puts the discussion out there helps to reduce the fear and stigma of asking for help. The surveyor must contact the appropriate professional right away and reassure the veteran that everything is confidential.

## Conclusion

With membership enrollment at its lowest point in 28 years, Veteran Service Organization's need to find a viable solution quickly, or else they will not survive. The changing face of veterans has been slowly taking its toll on the agency and it needs to take steps to reconnect with its population to remain relevant. WW2 veterans paved the way for VSO's to create a lasting legacy of advocacy, representation, and assistance. The succeeding Korean and Vietnam veterans were unfairly scapegoated and blamed for the unpopular conflicts. The era set VSO's back and forced them to change their strategy from expansion to contraction. Programs and services that were deemed non-essential such as Christmas parties, social events, and gatherings had to be discontinued.

This stagnation and reduced manpower created a brain drain that prevented them from preparing for the new generation of veterans coming home from the GWOT. The struggling organizations did not understand or have anything relevant to offer this new cohort and the resulting decline in membership is threatening the very survival of these centennial organizations. Veteran Service Organizations have a rich history of helping veterans and they still have a lot more potential. They just need to understand what is preventing their members from participating and then taking meaningful steps to remove those barriers. This survey will be a powerful tool in that worthwhile endeavor. A sample survey will be provided in the appendix to showcase how concise and straightforward this instrument can be.

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## Appendix

## Sample Survey

1. Are you Male or Female?

Check one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Male	<input type="checkbox"/>	Female
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2. What is your age group?

Check one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	18-25	<input type="checkbox"/>	45-54
<input type="checkbox"/>	26-34	<input type="checkbox"/>	55-64
<input type="checkbox"/>	35-44	<input type="checkbox"/>	65+

3. Are you married or in a relationship?

Check one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
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4. Please check which service era or eras did you serve?

Check all that apply

<input type="checkbox"/>	WW2	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cold War
<input type="checkbox"/>	Korean War	<input type="checkbox"/>	OIF/OEF/OND
<input type="checkbox"/>	Vietnam War		

5. Are you a member?

Check one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
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- a. If not, why?

Please check all that apply:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Not eligible	<input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting location too distant
<input type="checkbox"/>	Employment conflicts	<input type="checkbox"/>	No transportation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Family obligations	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unwelcome environment
Other:			

6. Would you participate more if your family was allowed to participate?

Check one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
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7. Are you a current member? If no, skip #8.

8. How can we serve veterans better? Please rate American Legion programs and services:

Rate all that apply (1 worst - 5 best)

Monthly Meetings	1 2 3 4 5	Youth Cadet Law Enforcement Program	1 2 3 4 5
Local Communication	1 2 3 4 5	Buddy Poppy program	1 2 3 4 5
VA assistance	1 2 3 4 5	Legion Riders	1 2 3 4 5
TAL Auxiliary	1 2 3 4 5	Temporary Financial Assistance program	1 2 3 4 5
Sons of TAL	1 2 3 4 5	Operation Comfort Warriors	1 2 3 4 5
TAL Annual Convention	1 2 3 4 5	National Emergency Fund	1 2 3 4 5
The American Legion Magazine	1 2 3 4 5	Child Welfare Foundation	1 2 3 4 5
Legacy Scholarship	1 2 3 4 5	Fundraising	1 2 3 4 5

9. Which programs or services would you be interested in participating?

Check all that apply:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Christmas party	<input type="checkbox"/>	TAL Junior Shooting Sports
<input type="checkbox"/>	Easter party	<input type="checkbox"/>	Youth Baseball

	Thanksgiving meal		Youth academic programs
	Other holiday parties		Youth scholarships
	Memorial Day observation		Exercise classes
	Veterans Day Program		Camping trips
	Patriots Day Program		Hunting
	Legal assistance		Fishing
	Food drives and pantry		Bingo
	Raffles		Talent contests
	Community clean up projects		Local and long-distance retreats
	Job search assistance		Yoga
	Mentoring		Meditation
Other:			

10. Would you like assistance with any academic issues or help with your GI Bill benefits?

Choose one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Would like more information		

11. Would you like to speak to someone concerning Military Sexual Trauma?

Choose one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Later, schedule an appointment		

12. Do you currently need financial assistance?

Choose one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Would like more information		

- a. If yes, you will be provided a Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA) application

13. Do you require immediate assistance and would you like to speak with someone today?

Choose one:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Later, schedule an appointment		

a. If yes, who would you like to speak with?

Check all that apply:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Post Officer	<input type="checkbox"/>	VA Women Veterans Program Manager
<input type="checkbox"/>	VA Representative	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other:

If you would like to be contacted, please leave your contact information. **This is completely optional.**

Name:	Phone number:	Email:
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>