

# CLEARINGHOUSE FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

## Veterans and Agriculture: Rapid Literature Review

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Clearinghouse Technical Assistance Team

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## Introduction

The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State Technical Assistance (TA) Team conducted a rapid literature review on the topic of Veterans and agriculture. The purpose of this review is twofold: (1) identify best practices for implementing programs that promote the relationship between agriculture and Veterans and (2) determine if there is evidence that agriculture could assist Veterans with coping or overcoming mental health issues. This rapid literature review is based on a small sample size of publications; however, common and consistent messaging has been identified and will be discussed below. The TA Team searched for peer reviewed journals using a combination of the following search terms: “*veteran*,” “*agriculture*,” “*PTSD*,” “*farming*,” “*mental health*,” and “*military*.” The search produced a limited number of articles that specifically discussed the use of agriculture as a means of support to military Veterans. This rapid literature review should be used as an introduction to the topic of agriculture and Veterans and not utilized as a full review of the topic.

## Why Agriculture

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducts a census of agriculture every 5 years. As of the development of this rapid literature review, the 2017 statistics have not been released. Therefore, data from the 2012 USDA report were reviewed. The 2012 USDA report stated that there was a 4.3% decline of principal farmers in the United States. They also reported that 70% of farmers were male; there has been a 5.9% decrease in principal female farmers; and the average age of farmers was 58.3 years, which is an increase of almost 8 years of age since 1982. In addition, fewer new farms were started in 2012 compared to the 2007 USDA census report. With the increase of the average age of current farmers and fewer new farmers, the United States could face a serious situation in which agricultural knowledge and experience could dissipate or disappear resulting in an inability to meet the demand of produce in the upcoming years. Furthermore, there is a higher demand for locally grown foods (Boyce, 2013), which has increased and will continue to increase the need for local farms and farmers.

There are several factors that support Veterans pursuing careers in agriculture. According to Donoghue et al. (2014), approximately 45% of Veterans returning from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan are from rural areas, and Besterman-Dahan, Chavez, and Njoh (in press) report that over 5.4 million Veterans live in rural areas. Greenleaf and Roessger (2017) highlight that Veterans are accustomed to discipline and regimented routines that are required of a farming lifestyle. The Agricultural Act of 2014, also referred to as the 2014 Farm Bill, identified military Veterans as a priority group and established new mandates, such as at least 5% of program funds for the beginning farmer and rancher development program be reserved for supporting military Veterans every fiscal year. With the identified need of farmers, Veterans’ skill set that

is suitable for farming, and government support for Veterans for farming, supporting Veterans in pursuing careers in agriculture post military service could be a good fit for Veterans and the agriculture economy.

## Benefits of Agriculture

Greenleaf and Roessger (2017) state that there continues to be more research that supports the connection of increased positive well-being with exposure to nature and agriculture. A health quality of life study conducted by Weeks et al. (2004) revealed that while rural Veterans have more physical health comorbidities, they have less mental health comorbidities. Other studies (Besterman-Dahan et al., in press; Donoghue et al., 2014; Greenleaf & Roessger, 2017) have shown that participation in various forms of agriculture (e.g., farming, animal husbandry) promote better mental health.

Furthermore, these studies postulate that engaging in agricultural activities provides a sense of purpose, increases self-esteem, and encourages better relationships with the surrounding community. Donoghue et al. (2014), explained that combat Veterans often have a hard time relating to civilians, including friends and family, due to the vast differences in experiences. Farming allows Veterans to have a common experience, which can build civilian relationships and allow the civilian population, in turn, to have a better understanding of the Veteran (Besterman-Dahan et al., in press). Other key benefits highlighted by Besterman-Dahan et al. (in press), were “improvements in sleep, exercise, and diet and decreases in anxiety and depression” (p. 4).

## Opportunities in Agriculture

There are opportunities for Veterans to learn about and gain experience in agriculture even if they do not have prior experience. Care farming is one avenue Veterans can pursue to begin learning about agriculture. Greenleaf and Roessger (2017) describe care farming as, “the activity of using working farms and agricultural landscapes to promote mental and physical health (Di Iacovo, Senni, & de Knecht, 2006)” (p. 87). There are a growing number of care farms around the United States that focus on specific populations, such as children or adults with autism, people with dementia, and Veterans. The Operation We Are Here website has a list of care farms and other programs for Veterans (<http://www.operationwearehere.com/FarmTherapy.html>).

Organizations, like the Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC), provide another opportunity for Veterans to get involved in agriculture. According to their 2016 Annual Report, FVC assisted 125 Veteran farmers by giving \$349,450 in grant awards and by partnering with Kubota Tractor Corporation to give away four Kubota tractors. The USDA has dedicated

a website (<https://newfarmers.usda.gov/veterans>) to provide valuable information on programs and resources for Veteran farmers from education and employment opportunities to information for entrepreneurship.

## Best Practices

Besterman-Dahan et al. (in press), report that education, training, and capital are the biggest barriers to new farmers getting started and recommend that Veterans have access to these three components to help ensure success. In the Donoghue et al. (2014) study, the authors identified a number of key components that allowed their program to have success:

- Inclusion of a Veteran mentor;
- Inclusion of spouses and family members;
- Internships;
- Hands on training; and
- Targeted program selection.

Donoghue et al. (2014) explained that, while they attempted to keep programs at free or reduced costs, carefully selecting program participants was important. This also allowed them to customize the program to the needs and interests of program participants.

## Summary

Based on the 2012 United States Department of Agriculture census of agriculture, the United States is entering a critical time concerning agriculture. Our farmers are getting older with fewer new farms being opened. With the aging farmer population and the lack of new farmers, there should be a concern that farming knowledge and experience could dissipate and potentially disappear in the future. In addition, a new trend that moves away from corporate farms and closer to local farms, which increases the demand for local produce (Boyce, 2013), is increasing. Many of our nation's Veterans are from and return to rural areas of the country after military service. They have learned and demonstrated the skills that could assist them in transitioning to a farming lifestyle, such as discipline and understanding a regimented schedule. Literature suggests there are other benefits, such as increased mental health and general well-being. Consequently, farming could provide our Veterans and the country an opportunity to address this potential crisis. Programs and opportunities exist that assist Veterans in starting a career in agriculture, and the programs that have been successful include components, such as education, mentorship, hands on training, support with gaining capital, and participant selection.

## Suggested Citation

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