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Helping veterans help themselves

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Helping Veterans Help Themselves



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CHHS 400B Capstone
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This capstone looks at how the current economic crisis is affecting the veterans of the Veteran's Transition Center, a non-profit organization in Marina that serves homeless veterans and their families. This capstone looks at current employment rates for veterans and the civilian population and possible solutions for helping veterans compete and find jobs in the current market.

Executive Summary

Agency and Population

The Veterans Transition Center works to provide services for Monterey County's homeless veterans and their families through case management, substance abuse counseling, 18-24 months of transitional housing, mental and physical health attention, and life skills classes.

Problem

With the national unemployment rate at 8.1%, the highest it has been in 15 years it is becoming increasingly difficult for veterans in the Coming Home Program to find and maintain employment.

Description of Capstone

A needs assessment of the veteran clients at the VTC revealed the current needs of the population. Several needs were identified, the greatest need being more assistance finding employment for the veterans in the program. The information that was collected from the needs assessment were presented to the agency and through collaborating with the case managers and program director new programs will be implemented to help the veterans find employment.

Findings and Recommendations

Through the process of conducting a needs assessment employment was identified as one of the largest concerns of the veterans in the program. The recommendations are for interns at the VTC to offer sessions and resources on interviewing skills, resume writing and filling out job applications. It is also recommended that the job posting board that already exists is updated more often and reflects jobs that are of interest to the veteran and that align with their skills.

Agency and Population

The mission of the Veterans Transition Center is to provide services for the homeless veterans of Monterey County and their families and those at risk of becoming homeless. Their goals are to provide the supportive housing and program structure necessary for homeless veterans and their families to make the transition from homelessness to permanent housing and from lives of unemployment and despair to lives of productive work and hope for the future. The specific ways that the VTC works to reach their goals is through intense case management, life skills training and also referrals to other agencies both in their community and out of it that could be a good resource for the veteran. The VTC is a private nonprofit agency and they are primarily funded through the Veterans Administration Grant and the Housing and Urban Development Grant and also through donations.

Since Fort Ord's closing in 1993, most buildings were left unoccupied. With Monterey's current housing crisis, members of VTC began working to obtain some of the former Army housing and buildings in the hope of restoring them and using them to better the lives of homeless veterans.

Two sections of property from the former Fort have been obtained for these purposes. The first is several houses in the Patton Park area, which once served as military housing and will serve as VTC's transitional housing program. The second is Martinez Hall, the former base reception center and early officer's club that serves as the service center.

The Coming Home program at the VTC was started in 2001 when 20 housing units at Patton Park in Marina were used by the VTC as transitional housing for veterans. The Coming Home program is a complete supportive service of case management and referrals to veterans and their families. The Coming Home program offers 24 months of clean and sober transitional housing for participants and for their family. VTC's program began with 14 veterans, 5 spouses, and 13 children. At full capacity the VTC can help 52 single veterans and 6 veterans with their families.

Statistics on the population served by the VTC :

- VTC has served approximately 1405 single veterans and 263 families.
- Veterans entering the program were 729 single veterans, 214 veterans' families, and 208 veterans' children
- 92% of the veterans that were in the program at least 1 year, maintained sobriety.
- 80% of the veterans that graduated back into society, have maintained sobriety in the past year.
- 80% of the graduates transitioned into permanent housing.
- 73% of the graduates maintained permanent housing for at least one year.
- 100% of clients got their military discharge papers that are required to obtain VA Medical Cards, establish veteran's disability claims and veteran status for hiring preferences.
- 77% had over \$1,000 in their savings when leaving the program
- 100% of the veterans completed physical examinations.
- 75% of all employable veterans had an average wage greater than \$9.00 per hour.
- 100% of all graduates had income from employment or permanent disability benefits at graduation from the program
- 100% of all school age children attended school.
- 80% of all children pursued an after-school hobby.

The Problem

According to the National Coalition of Homeless Veterans, veterans are twice as likely as other Americans to be chronically homeless. Male veterans are 1.3 times more likely to become homeless than non-veteran males; and female veterans are 3.6 times more likely to become homeless than non-veteran females.

Chronic homelessness is a huge problem for the veteran community. According to the National Allegiance of Mental Illness one-third of the homeless population are veterans (National Allegiance, 2008). Approximately 529,000 to 840,000 veterans will experience homelessness at some time during the year (Driscoll, 2006). With so many homeless veterans it is important to have a successful program that not only addresses the client's current homeless status but also the causes of the homelessness. According to *the Report of the Veteran Homelessness* by J. Driscoll, there are three main factors that lead to homelessness in the veteran population. Those three factors are; economic hardship, health issues and lack of affordable housing (Driscoll, 2006).

Economic hardships come in the form of low paying jobs, being laid off or having a criminal record that prevents working at certain jobs. Health issues manifest themselves in many ways. Alcoholism and drug use are very common within the homeless veteran population as well as undiagnosed mental and physical illnesses. Studies show that up to one-third of combat veterans are likely to experience some clinical degree of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other emotional/psychological difficulties directly related to their military experience (VA Iraq War Clinician Guide, 2004). Lastly almost all urban areas lack sufficient low income housing to accommodate all people who are without high paying jobs.

The VTC has the Coming Home Program to offers homeless veterans a chance to gain economic intendance, stability in their mental and physical health and to hopefully find them affordable housing before their exit of the program. The VTC seeks to address the three main causes of homelessness to insure that they veterans who complete the program will be successful out in the community. To maintain eligibility for the program veterans must meet certain standards. Veterans in the program must maintain a clean and sober life while working on maintaining their sobriety so that they can be successful outside of the program. They must make all of their scheduled appointments with the VA health care system. This can include visiting their physician, a mental health professional or a Substance Abuse Recovery Team (SART)

meeting or any other appointment suggested by their case manager. They must also pay rent that is 30% of their gross income, for those without an income they are still responsible for a minimum rent of \$105 per month. For many of the veterans this means finding and maintaining a job.

With the current economy in such a shaky place we are see an increase in unemployment. According to the United States Department of Labor California is one of the hardest hit states. In January 2009 the state unemployment rate was 10.1%, the forth highest in the country. In the month of January alone 79,300 Californians lost their jobs (Regional and State Employment and Unemployment (Monthly) News Release, 2009). The problem is particularly devastating to veterans who already face many challenges in finding employment such as a criminal record, long periods of unemployment of homelessness, substance abuse, mental or physical disabilities, and lack of marketable job skills.

With the national unemployment rate at 8.1%, the highest it has been in 15 years it is becoming increasingly difficult for veterans in the Coming Home Program to find and maintain employment.

Description of the Capstone Project

For my capstone I will be interviewing all of the veterans enrolled in the "Coming Home" program. The purpose of these interviews is to gauge the effectiveness of the programs as well as to ascertain whether all of the needs of the Veterans are being meet. The Veterans Transition Center offers many different services to their clients; food, shelter, help with finding jobs or school placement, life skills and the ability to live and work in a functioning community of peers. The purpose of the needs assessment is to see what the current needs of the veterans are and then take that information and devise a way of addressing those needs with in the agency. It is my belief and the belief of the case manager that one of the greatest needs of the clients is help in finding employment.

I will begin by creating a needs assessment that will ask questions about what is working for them in the program and what maybe missing or keeping them from being successful. I would not only like to find out what's not working but also the clients suggestion for how to solve the problem.

The deliverables for my capstone will be a questionnaire/needs assessment that I will use to interview the veterans to see how they feel about effectiveness of the current case plan and possible ideas for improvement. I will also be compiling the data into an easy to read and manage reference sheet with the finding for the case managers, case manager supervisor and program manager. I will then take the findings from the client interviews and I will present them to the staff for feedback and ideas on how to improve the current services offered to the veterans. I will then have a brainstorming session with the case managers to devise a plan of action for improvements within the agency so that the veterans can be as successful as possible.

This capstone will be useful to my internship by addressing the most urgent needs of the clients as well as how to strengthen the program by implement changes that will help the clients be more successful in the program and out in the community. My capstone will be focused on how current unemployment problems can be solved with in the agency.

When my capstone is successfully completed I will have recommendations for my agency on how to address unemployment issues for the clients as well as how those recommendations may be implemented with in the agency. I will also have a list of other recommendations generated from the clients on how the agency can improve other areas of their operation to better serve their clients.

To complete my capstone the VTC will have to give me access to case managers, clients and also the case manager supervisor. The case managers are helpful and available for questions and I am currently setting up interviews with the clients to begin the interviews. VTC offers me access to all things I will need to complete my capstone. The VTC will see higher rates of clients who gain jobs while in the program and maintain jobs after leaving the program if

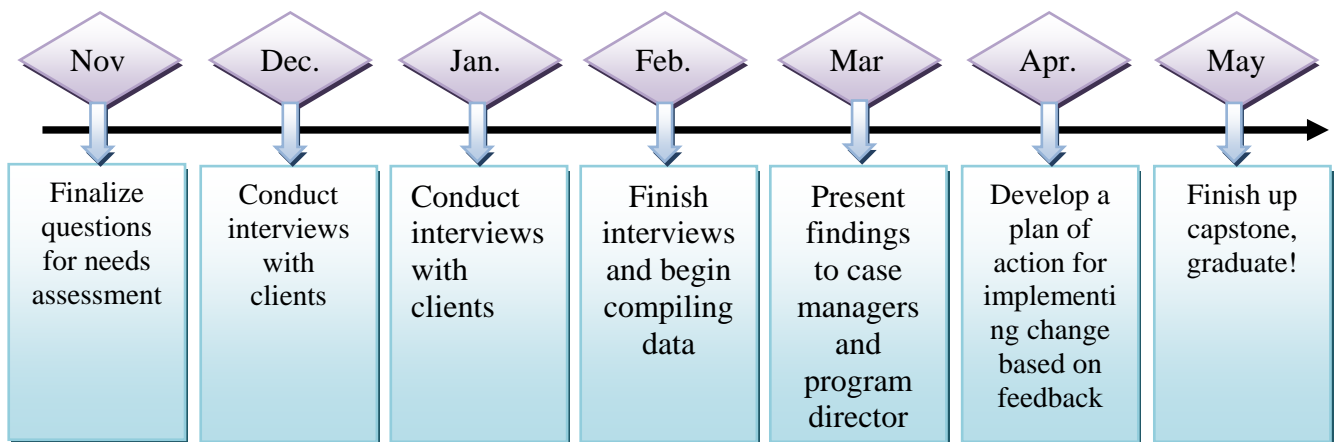
my recommendations are implemented and successful at helping the clients find work.

What was accomplished?

The main accomplishment of my completed capstone was to provide the VTC with the current needs of their veterans. Before conducting the needs assessment it was unclear what the most pressing needs for the clients were. Now we know that there are several areas that need to be addressed such as updating the welcoming packet, offering life skills classes about conflict negotiation and communication, re-implementing the mentoring system but the greatest need by far was assistance finding employment. I was able to also solicit ideas from the veterans on what services could be offered to them that would help them to be more successful finding employment and I got some the following as feedback: assistance writing resumes, interviewing skills, job posting boards, help filling out applications and also contact within the community who are interested in helping veterans or who may give veterans preferential job placement.

The VTC is currently working on a new set of goals for the program that will use the knowledge gained from the needs assessment to make sure that the program is going in a direction that is beneficial to the veterans and helps them to be successful both in and outside of the program.

Timeline



Application of Project to Academic Requirements

The MLO's that I will be addressing in my project will be Information Management, Cross Cultural Competency and Collaboration. I will be gathering information using a needs assessment and interviews to compile and assess the program and the current issues affecting the veterans for this I will be using Information Management Skills.

While working on my capstone I will be working with the veteran population, a population with which I am not very familiar, I will need to gain competency on their issues and culture so that I may better work with them. I will gain this knowledge by working with the veterans during the times that I am at my internship. I will also use my mentor and the other case workers at my internship as a resource for understanding the issues that affect the veterans being served by the program. I will apply this knowledge while conducting interviews with the clients and while interacting with them with in my internship.

I will also be collaboration with the clients in the organization, my mentor, and the case managers and also with some outside agencies such as VA to fully understand the issues and compile the data I need to complete my interviews, and assessment.

As the vision statement of CSUMB states "The campus will be distinctive in serving the diverse people of California, especially the working class and historically undereducated and low-income populations." (California State University Monterey Bay, 1994) My capstone serves the homeless veteran population of the Monterey Peninsula. In my capstone I will be addressing the needs of the homeless veteran population in the Monterey Bay area, a population that is often overlooked and underserved. I think it is particularly important to address the needs of veterans because the history of this area and our school in particular is one that is associated with the military. I think it is important to address the issues that hit closet to home. There is a large population of homeless veterans in California that need help, the Veterans

Transition Center helps them get back on their feet by addressing the underlying issues of their homelessness.

My capstone will be working with the local veteran population to help address their needs. I will be integrating my internship work and learning, with service in the community and reflection on what I am learning about the population and how I, as an individual can assist the clients, the agency and myself. I feel very lucky to have been given a chance to work with such a remarkable population. Veterans are the protectors of our country and they sometimes find themselves facing hard times. The VTC helps to pick them up, dust them off and get them going again. My capstone is only a small part of what the VTC does to help veterans but I feel it is an important component for helping these veterans be successful in their transition back to stability.

Conclusion

The findings of the needs assessment are as follows: 43% of the veterans stated help finding employment as their greatest need, 27% of the veterans stated that their greatest need was finding appropriate permanent housing upon exiting the program and the other 30% stated other needs were their greatest concern. This needs assessment will allow the VTC to create new goals for their program that will focus on employment and issues that effect employment such as interviewing skills and resume writing. Bobby Merritt the new intern has begun to work with the veterans on interviewing skills such as questions to that can and cannot be asked, how to answer questions about past employment and also how to present oneself at an interview.

I have learned a great deal from completing my capstone. The main thing I would say that I learned from this process is that you have to be flexible. My capstone has gone through many revisions to find one that was interesting to me, beneficial to my agency and understandable to an outsider. I was very lucky to have an agency that allowed me to revise my ideas and change my capstone accordingly. As I have been told many times by my mentor, "You have to be flexible, things change" and they do, often. In the real world you are always working on multiple projects and things come up so you have to be

willing to roll with the punches, I'm pretty sure I can do that now. The greatest gift I got from my internship and my time working on my capstone was an understanding of veterans and their issues. I feel like veterans are a very important population of people, who are often overlooked. I am really glad that I got the chance to work with a population I knew nothing about. The VTC is a very welcoming agency that embraced me and allowed me to really see how the agency was run, how they interacted with clients and how they functioned on a day to day basis.

My recommendations for my agency are to address the current unemployment crisis by offering more support to the veterans in the form of classes or one-on-one sessions that help the clients create resumes, fill out applications, learn interviewing skills and also help finding jobs that are appropriate to their abilities and interests. I also recommend that they address some of the other concerns that came from the needs assessment such as updated welcome packets, a stronger welcoming committee and re-implementation the mentoring system that used to be in place.

The VTC has been very successful with their Coming Home Program over the eight years it has existed because they are an agency that deeply cares for their client population and understand the unique issues that they come with. They are in the process of creating a community center and more units for the veterans to live in, it is this forward thinking that will allow them to continue to be successful in the future and help the new generation of veterans coming out of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. The VTC is bring protection and security to the men and women who have protected our country and allowed us to live in safety.

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