



(U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Barry Loo taken Jan. 24, 2020) U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Kato, a supply noncommissioned officer with U.S. Special Operations Command, reads to Everett, 6, at Tinker K-8 School, MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, Florida, Jan. 24, 2020.

Community Relations and Volunteer Service

By 1st Sgt. James Walters

Published in *From One Leader to Another Volume II* by the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 2014

"Most Americans know 'precious little' about the military," said former U.S. Navy Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Few Americans have personal contact with members of the military. The disconnect between the civilian and military worlds is partially because only a fraction of the population serves and those in uniform increasingly hail from fewer, primarily rural, areas of the country."

The United States has been at war for over a decade and since few Americans have contact with military members they often rely solely on media reports and what they hear from others regarding our military in order to inform their own personal opinion. Due to the stigma associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, many military veterans experience difficulty when trying to find employment in today's economy.

During an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Michael Butcher, a Soldier who served in Iraq, stated he had applied for 25 jobs and was turned down for each one, including McDonald's. He even stated he felt as though

he was addressed as though he openly suffered from a mental disorder. Alexandra Zavis of the Los Angeles Times stated, "Many of these new veterans struggle to find and retain civilian jobs. Not only are they returning to the worst economy in decades, but many employers do not know how to accommodate for these invisible wounds and worry that they might 'go postal.'"

When the military released their statistics on sexual assaults within our ranks, our status was once again reduced in the eyes of our civilian population. The disbelief in how this could happen to our returning heroes may stem from never truly understanding our service



A Soldier with the Indiana Army National Guard loads a box of fresh produce in to a vehicle for a family in need during a mobile food pantry event at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, in Indiana, May 23, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Alejandro Smith-Antuna)

members and relying solely on the media's interpretation of the situation versus the word of a veteran.

Have you personally ever said or thought something to the effect of, "They have no idea about the good things we do in the military?" There are ways in which each one of us can address that question and change the stigmas and bias associated with today's military by increasing our relations and volunteering in our communities.

Volunteering is a great way to interact with the local community and to build community relations. When Soldiers volunteer, they grow as leaders. It increases our mutual trust and general knowledge in the great things our military accomplishes and reassures our civilian population our standards and discipline are present and strong.

Building upon the Army's image is important for not only its recruiting mission, but it is also fundamental for developing the public's belief and respect in our military at large. According to the Institute for Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development (INCOPD), an outcome of the Army Profession Learning Area for a senior noncommissioned officer is building trust in the platoon and with external stakeholders, meaning senior NCOs will work to build the trust in and with the people outside of the Army and their organization – our local communities.

We work alongside of and for the civilians in our community to ensure the Army's image is upheld to the highest standards and to maximize our trust with the American population. The more we work to interact with the communities surrounding our military organizations, the more relationships between our civilian and military populations will

begin to mold into relationships of trust and confidence which will further build upon the Army's image. Volunteer service is a great way to simultaneously develop leaders, help your organization, and the U.S. Army.

As a senior military leader, I have been afforded the opportunity to interact with a great many people from all walks of life ranging from senators and congressmen and women to everyday citizens who are currently down on their luck.

Currently, my battalion sponsors a partnership with a local elementary school where Soldiers and drill sergeants volunteer to speak to students during class and eat lunch with them in order to provide them with a sense of familiarity with our military. This interaction allows our children who do not frequently see service members to interact with them while also helping to eliminate

any stigmas associated with the military by answering their questions. This program does not only accustom the children to our service members but it also reaches their parents and staff as well. The Soldiers who take this opportunity to volunteer find a sense of pride and motivation from the children because they are viewed as heroes.

Our community service does not only extend to elementary school children but it also reaches out to college students as well. Recently, we partnered with a community college to assist with their homecoming football game. Often the schools like to reciprocate by assisting us in our activities, such as allowing us to use their football stadium for a new physical training venue. These small benefits do not take into account the personal reward that is garnered from the new relationships we have established from volunteering.



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Ryan Jenkins taken Nov. 22, 2019) U.S. Army 1st Lt. Jack-son Butkus, a provost marshal officer with the 25th Infantry Division, speaks to students at Barbers Points Elementary School, Kapolei, Hawaii, Nov. 22, 2019.

Along with our school partnerships, we additionally volunteer once a quarter to serve dinner at a local shelter. While serving, our Soldiers sit with the less fortunate and discuss their stories with one another. Many Soldiers come away with a new sense of gratitude for their life because many of the people being served are veterans themselves. They see how fast their own homes, Families, and benefits could be lost and they take the time to appreciate what they can do for others who are not as fortunate as they are in that moment in time.

The volunteer opportunities Soldiers perform demonstrate to our community our Soldiers care for the fellow members of our community and for the missions of the organizations that allow them to volunteer. As a result, volunteerism increases the Army's outreach creating a positive image with the civilian population and builds relationships in the community.

As always, there are Soldiers who desire to volunteer but simply do not have the time due to work constraints. As leaders, we must make the time to allow our Soldiers to volunteer and grow as future leaders. Challenge yourself to partner your organizations with local businesses, schools or charities and tie it all together by providing a command emphasis when discussing your volunteer events in training meetings which will further spark interest and spread the word to other Army organizations.

In the end getting as many Soldiers as possible involved in the local community increases awareness and develops the leaders of tomorrow. So do your part and volunteer not only to develop your Soldiers and NCOs, but to help the community and build their trust in the military and the U.S. Army.

If you would like to volunteer in your area I recommend you contact your local YMCA, United Way, Salvation Army, and the nearest homeless shelter. ■



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