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Impact of Age on Perceived Veteran-Friendliness of Resource Referrals from a Wisconsin Community Resource Referral Service

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Background

- United States military veterans have high rates of mental health issues, homelessness, and legal problems.¹⁻⁴
- Peer mentorship can effectively assist in overcoming stigma and barriers that make it difficult for veterans to seek social services.⁵
- More than 50% of veterans in Wisconsin are 65 or older.^{6, 7}
- Compared to civilian older adults, older veterans have significantly higher rates of mental, physical, and functional impairments.⁸
- Dryhootch of America (Dryhootch) facilitates a Peer Mentor program for veterans seeking support.
- Peer Mentors utilize Wisconsin community resource referral services to create resource recommendations for their Veteran Mentees.

Questions about validating veteran-focused referrals and tailoring referrals to veteran sub-groups is an under-researched area.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to discover the qualities of a veteran-friendly resource, determine if community resource referral services are user-friendly and veteran-friendly, and analyze how age impacts the use of resource referral sources.

Methods

- Dryhootch recruited 8 Veteran Peer Mentors.
- Focus group occurred for 90 minutes, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim.
- Notable quotes and identified themes were recorded.
- Transcription was thematically analyzed using grounded theory.^{9, 10}

Results

Theme 1: Generational Differences

The generation of the veteran impacts how they will be able to interact with the resource, thus altering the resource referral a Peer Mentor will make.

THEME 1:

"... talking to some of the guys that served...in Vietnam... they definitely have a different culture when it comes to communicating about their mental health and what they're going through..."

THEME 1:

"Are there other people that are that age or in that [resource's group]... You send an old timer, to like, a meeting full of kids, yeah, mindsets are completely different. Their thought process is different."

THEME 1:

"They're definitely more, they're more 'do it yourself'...The Vietnam veterans. They're more like, 'Show me how to do this and get the fuck on with it.'"

THEME 1:

"Some of the older people are not gonna use things where they have to go on the internet to take care of it."

Theme 2: Resource Accessibility and Staff Hospitality

Resource staff members and the ability to get to and receive care from a resource are important.

THEME 2:

"I gotta use like, more than one resource..."

Sometimes you gotta just keep going through the list after you find something."

THEME 2:

"Are they capable to get there themselves... do they have those types of amenities for that group?"

THEME 2:

"A: Professionalism of the staff.
B: Especially if the staff hasn't served."

THEME 2:

"If they tell you no, ask for the veteran coordinator, every time."

Theme 3: Personal Experience

Having personally or knowing another Veteran who has personally vouched for a resource increases the likelihood of a Peer Mentor to recommend it to a veteran.

THEME 3:

"...I can tell you...what you're going to get out of it, what you're not going to get out of it... it's step by step, how the process works in that resource and what it can offer you, right?"

THEME 3:

"We trust what other veterans say."

THEME 5:

"And they don't have the experience, I get what you're saying, 'I was in the military, but I don't have the experience.'"

THEME 5:

"Are you really a veteran? Really older veterans, like, they don't communicate, as if, like, their experience was a problem. Even the ones that were like, the conflict."

Theme 4: Empathetic Understanding

Peer Mentors offer resources based on their understanding of a veteran's current state and capacities.

THEME 5:

"...I just met him halfway. So I said, Well, what? What are you able to do? And whatever you're not able to do, I can take over, but I'm going to tell you what I'm doing..."

THEME 4:

"...it's the veteran not knowing how to advocate for themselves... they really don't understand the process of some things... so just explaining things ... like, look, this isn't going to happen tomorrow."

Theme 5: Denial of Veteran Status

Older veterans dismiss their military service.

Discussion

- Each veteran's background and identity impact how a Peer Mentor approaches and coordinates resource referrals, thus requiring a wide variety of resources to choose from.
- An emphasis on empathy from lived experiences, from both Peer Mentors and resource employees, reinforces the importance of Peer Mentors in assisting veterans in search of support.
- Accessibility of resources involves both the physical ability of a veteran to use the resource and a technological way to access the resource.
- Not viewing oneself as a veteran, especially in older populations, is a large barrier to accessing community resources designed for veterans; this raises the question of how to best reach veterans who deny their veteran status.

Future Work

- Community resource usage by additional veteran sub-groups will be assessed.
- Sub-group specific themes, as well as overarching themes, will be compiled and formatted into a report to share with community resource referral services.
- From the report, these services can understand strengths and opportunities in serving their veteran and veteran family populations.

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