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Stand Down for Veterans: The Impact of Volunteerism on Student Learning

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Stand Down for Veterans: The Impact of Volunteerism on Student Learning

Cover Page Footnote

The history of the Stand Down event was obtained from the Military Family Research Institute web page on the Lafayette area Stand Down event.

STAND DOWN FOR VETERANS:

The Impact of Volunteerism on Student Learning

Kelsey Herwick, College of Health and Human Sciences

ABSTRACT

In this article, Kelsey Herwick, a graduating senior in dietetics and nutrition, fitness, and health, describes her experience with Stand Down. The first ever Stand Down event occurred during the Vietnam War and had the purpose of giving soldiers in combat time to eat warm meals, attend to personal hygiene needs, and tend to any medical needs (MFRI, n.d.a). Over time, Stand Down has become an event that has the purpose of giving veterans a break from homelessness. A group of 14 nutrition science students from Purdue University planned and served at a booth for the Lafayette Stand Down event, which is organized by the Military Family Research Institute. The Purdue University Department of Nutrition Science booth provided lentil soup in a jar, tote bags, trail mix, and recipe books for the veterans to take with them. The children's booth included educational nutrition activities with fruit snacks and granola bars for prizes. The November 2015 Lafayette Stand Down event was a successful event where over 130 veterans were served. The service project proved to be a very valuable experience for the student volunteers, as well, because it opened their eyes to the prevalence of veteran homelessness in the Lafayette area.

INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there were approximately 76,000 homeless veterans in the United States in 2009 (MFRI, n.d.b). I have several family members who have served in the armed forces, including some who were severely injured in ways that continue to affect their lives after their military service

has ended. It has always bothered me when I see veterans in dire circumstances after returning home and attempting to resume their civilian lives. The Stand Down event organized by the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is a wonderful opportunity for Purdue students to give back to veterans who have given so much for this country.

The first Stand Down event occurred during the Vietnam War, with the purpose of giving combat soldiers time to eat warm meals, attend to personal hygiene needs, and tend to any medical needs (MFRI, n.d.a). Over time, Stand Down has transitioned into an event with the purpose of giving Veterans a break from issues of homelessness for a day by providing live music, food, and access to basic necessities.

METHODOLOGY

I began working with a faculty member in the Department of Nutrition Science at Purdue University in May 2015 to plan two booths for the Stand Down event in November 2015. I had volunteered on the planning committee for the 2014 event, so I felt prepared to lead the planning of the 2015 event, along with two other dietetics students who plan to lead the tradition next year. Volunteer opportunities are open to students in the Department of Nutrition Science at Purdue each fall semester. We collaborated weekly on the Purdue University campus. The objective of our team of 14 nutrition science students was to create a booth that would offer veterans contributions suggested by Lafayette Stand Down event coordinators.

Figure 1. Adult booth at the 2016 Stand Down event.

We partnered with the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue to discuss veterans' needs and to add an aspect of nutrition not previously included in the Stand Down event. Founded in 2000, MFRI's mission is to complete research in areas that benefit service members, veterans, and their families. The MFRI uses results and findings from their research to influence policies, programs, and practices that affect military families. The MFRI focuses on five different goal outcomes, including: (1) support the military practices that support families, (2) strengthen the motivation and capacity of civilian groups to support military families, (3) gain knowledge about military families, (4) influence policies that support military families, and (5) develop a valuable learning organization (MFRI, n.d.a). The institute is housed in the Purdue Department of Human Development and Family Studies in the College of Health and Human Sciences. The MFRI partners with several community sponsors, including Food Finders, who contributed a large number of donations.

Our group's goal was to provide general nutrition information, recipes utilizing the contributions from Food Finders, and other tangible goods and gifts. These included a tote bag to carry their items, lentil soup in a jar (a good source of protein that only required water and an onion for preparation), and reusable water bottles, which are always a big hit at this event. We also devel-

oped children's activities and provided prizes based on child-friendly nutrition information. The games included a food group relay race and coloring and activity pages. Our volunteer group staffed both booths for the children and adults. Our professor, Donna Zoss, or I were present at the booths at all times to supervise and answer participant questions.

Our donations were provided with funds we received from a Purdue University Service-Learning Grant. We completed the application process and a detailed budget plan by itemizing what we wanted to donate and the quantities of each item. Each team member was tasked with determining the cost of a specific item, and we developed the final budget together. We were granted \$930.00 and came in under budget at \$824.18.

Figure 2. Children's booth at the 2016 Stand Down event.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The attendees benefited from our service through education about common disease states (e.g., diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure) and how nutrition choices impact these disease states. They also benefited from our gifts—the grant money enabled us to provide 204 soups in a jar, 200 tote bags, 300 trail mix snack bags, and 200 recipe books. Our most successful item was the tote bag;

Figure 3. 204 soups in a jar.

almost every attendee took at least one tote bag to help carry their collected donations. We tracked the number of participants and the number of gifts provided and found that the Food Finders truck served 150 individuals from 49 Lafayette area households.

STUDENT IMPACT

Our instructor, Professor Zoss, was instrumental in volunteer recruitment, as she presented this opportunity to students in her class. We discussed the opportunity to serve on the planning committee after volunteering. We also shared our experiences and discussed the needs of the veteran population in the Greater Lafayette area with potential volunteers.

The issue of poverty and homelessness is a prominent public health issue in the dietetics field. This experience aligned well with concepts I learned in public health courses. Providing nutrition resources for members of the veteran population could very well be a significant part of my future as a dietetic intern or as a professional.

The primary barrier we encountered was the timing of the grant money with the event. After we applied for the

grant money, there was a long waiting period; we didn't know whether we would receive funds until three weeks before the event. This left us scrambling to put the donations together. We were also challenged by not knowing how many attendees to prepare for and expect. In 2014 we prepared donations for 300 attendees and had a lot of items left over. We realized this situation created waste, and after discussing the issue, we decided to prepare for about 200 participants in 2015, which worked out well.

This experience improved my ability to work within a team, as well as my ability to delegate tasks. I learned how to think outside of the box in order to meet the needs of a specific population, and I gained personal satisfaction knowing I helped veterans. Lastly, I built a stronger professional relationship with Professor Zoss, who agreed to write a letter of recommendation for my dietetic internship applications.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the November 2015 Lafayette Stand Down event was a success. The service project opened my eyes to the prevalence of veteran homelessness in the Lafayette area. This experience inspired me to give back to my community through professional endeavors—in

Figure 4. Close-up of soup in a jar.

Figure 5. Age groups of donation recipients at the 2015 Stand Down event.

ways that benefit more than just my didactic education. I now realize how important it is to have a generous attitude, instead of getting caught up with only meeting my own professional goals. I plan to use my new knowledge in future opportunities to lead team projects. Since I graduated this year, I am leaving the Lafayette area, but I will seek out Stand Down events in my future area of

residence. This project helped me understand the benefits of volunteerism to student learning, and to those being served. My participation in the Stand Down event helped MFRI achieve their larger goal of providing resources to service members, veterans, and their families through donations of food, soap, bedding, clothes, haircuts, and many sources of valuable information.

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