

ORGANIZATION NEWS

Information/Education Page

Hosting Community Events for Veterans and Planning for Invisible Disabilities



To support veterans and their families, organizations sponsor events for a wide range of purposes. Communities may want to raise awareness or funds, celebrate history,¹ or share information about health care, financial assistance, or special programs. For example, a web search of .org websites using the terms “community events” and “veterans” yielded well over 2 million results, showing how common these events are. Community events can also help veterans and their families with community reintegration² and the return to community life after military service.

Returning to community life can be difficult for veterans with invisible disabilities such as traumatic brain injury (TBI) or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).³⁻⁷ These conditions can create sensory and psychological problems,⁸⁻¹⁰ such as making sounds seem much louder than they are or creating the feeling that there is a threat when there is none. As a result, a veteran with TBI or PTSD can become anxious or be alarmed by sudden movements or sounds. The effects of TBI and PTSD can be long lasting and may keep veterans from fully returning to community life. For example, in 1 study, veterans with TBI or PTSD continued to need therapy for 8 years.

Accommodations for persons with physical disabilities, like entrance ramps, are relatively well known (www.ADA.gov). Organizations may

not know how to accommodate veterans with invisible disabilities. Based on information from the Invisible Disabilities Association (IDA) (<https://invisible disabilities.org>) and research from the Department of Veterans Affairs,¹¹ the following suggestions have been developed to help organizations host successful events for all veterans and their families and friends.

Environmental accommodations and considerations

- Event size
 - Consider smaller events that some may prefer.
 - For large events:
 - ◆ Have preopening times for small groups that limit noise and have low lighting and calming music.
 - ◆ Allow early access for finding rooms, taking seats, and becoming accustomed to the physical environment.
- Parking: If parking is limited or far from the venue, consider free valet parking.
- Signs: Provide clear, frequent signs with directions to the venue.
- Entrance fee: Waive the entrance fee for caregivers.
- Restrooms
 - Include family restrooms.
 - Post notices:
 - ◆ In key areas about where bathrooms are.
 - ◆ At bathrooms about potential use of restrooms by both participants and their opposite sex companions.
- Noise: Limit background noise as much as possible.

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- **Lighting:** Event and access halls should be well lit.
- **Service animals:** Provide for service animals, including drinking stations and waste bags. More information at: <https://adata.org/publication/service-animals-booklet>.
- **Refreshments:** Provide multiple refreshment stations close to seating areas for quick and easy access for caregivers of those veterans who rely on them for assistance.
- **Presentations:** Consider presenting information in a variety of ways: visual, audio, and/or sign language.
 - Use plain language with frequent pauses to allow time for processing.
 - Build in breaks within the event.
 - Create a tip sheet with pictures and instructions for using online platforms.
 - Include assistive listening systems and text display via closed captioning or computer-aided real-time reporting.

Know your attendees

- **Understand your audience:** Read about the targeted veteran population who will attend.
 - Veterans who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, a specific military branch, or in the process of returning to their communities.
 - Veterans with cognitive or emotional limitations.
 - The following links suggest books about military and veteran experiences:
 - ◆ <http://www.newsweek.com/best-books-todays-wars-pens-veterans-63801>
 - ◆ <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/military>
- **Planning:** Include members of the target audience in event planning.

Provide opportunities for participants to connect with peers

- **Identification**
 - Include introductions and name tags using large print.
 - Discuss with veterans and caregivers the benefits of self-identifying as a person with an invisible disability through a wallet

card, medallion on a lanyard, or lapel button.

- **Enable connections**
 - Allow time in your agenda before and after the event for peers to meet.
 - Suggest veterans share contact information with each other.
- **Debriefing:** Facilitate a meeting with veterans immediately after the event to determine if any problems occurred.

Inform and support your attendees

- **Agenda:** Provide an agenda with a brief event description to aid in following along and being prepared for emotion-provoking content.
- **Announcements:** Make important announcements at the beginning of the event.
 - Tell the audience if there will be any fire alarms or strong content such as gun fire, flashing lights, sirens, or references to suicide in the event.
 - Tell the audience it is alright to leave during the program and point out the exits.
 - Identify support staff at exits and throughout the venue.
- **Staff**
 - Train staff to anticipate audience needs related to transportation, parking, and event activities.
 - Have support staff wear an easily identifiable shirt or vest.
- **Attendees and strong emotional reactions**
 - Use principles and practices of psychological safety in planning events, such as psychological first aid: http://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/facilitator_manual_2014/en/.
- If possible, have mental health providers attend the event.
- **Make brochures and handouts available:**
 - On health care, social and mental health, and rehabilitation services from VA and from non-VA providers
 - On crisis intervention from the National VA Crisis Line including the website, <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/support/shareable-materials>.

Authorship

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