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A Donor's Guide to Serving the Needs of Veterans and the Military

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Over 3.8 million war veterans were receiving disability compensation from the U.S. Veterans Affairs Department (VA) as of March 2014, according to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS). This is out of over 21.6 million U.S. veterans in 2014, based on NCVAS projections. Even though the government, tens of thousands of nonprofit organizations, and millions of caring Americans try to provide support for veterans and military families, many are not receiving the help they need. Much of the blame for this lies with the U.S. government, which provides the lion's share of services to past and present military personnel and their families. A smaller share of the blame lies with the growing number of poorly run and inefficient charities claiming to serve veterans and the military. The inefficiencies of the VA and the existence of so many wasteful nonprofits make it all that much more critical for donors to choose wisely when contributing to a veterans and military charity.

Donors who want to make contributions towards charitable programs that serve the military and veterans face an almost overwhelming volume of choices with, by some accounts, the existence of over 40,000 nonprofit organizations dedicated to serving the military and veterans and an estimated 400,000 service organizations that in some way touch veterans or service members. Even the 2013/2014 Directory of Veterans and Military Service Organizations published by the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs as an informational service for veterans seeking support lists over 140 national nonprofit organizations. Additionally, the number of new veterans charities has increased relatively rapidly over the past five years or so, growing by 41% since 2008 compared with 19% for charities in general, according to The Urban Institute as reported in a December 2013 *The NonProfit Times* article. With so many veterans and military organizations competing for charitable dollars, it may take a little extra effort on the part of donors to be well-informed, but that effort is essential given the great need for donations to be used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Fortunately, CharityWatch's ratings provide donors with one easy way to choose a financially efficient veterans and military charity. Another useful resource is a publication by The Philanthropy Roundtable titled *Serving Those Who Served* (2013), for which its "main purpose is to help philanthropists make certain their gifts go beyond sentimental support, and actually aid a population that every good American wants to see prosper" (p. 8). Based on the veterans and military charities that CharityWatch grades a "C-" or better and the program service areas wherein donors can be of most assistance according to *Serving Those Who Served*, the following will help guide donors to where their donations can have the greatest impact for veterans and military members in need of particular services.

Of the 53 charities CharityWatch currently rates in the Veterans & Military category, unfortunately, about half (26 of the 53) receive an “F” grade, including some of the largest and most famous groups such as **AMVETS**, **Military Order of the Purple Heart Service Foundation**, **Paralyzed Veterans of America**, and **Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.** There are, however, still 16 financially efficient Veterans & Military charities graded in the A, B, or C range by CharityWatch from which donors can choose. Plus, **Habitat for Humanity International** (National Office) with a “B+” grade in the Homelessness & Housing category provides housing solutions and volunteer and employment opportunities to veterans and the military.

The six major program service areas for the needs of veterans and the military highlighted in *Serving Those Who Served* (2013) are education, employment, family and community, legal/financial/housing, mental health, and physical health. *Serving Those Who Served* further divides each of the six major areas into more specific “need categories,” which gives donors the opportunity to focus their contributions more directly to the charities that provide particular types of programs to support the needs of veterans and the military. For example, the physical health area is divided into needs focused on amputations, burns, spinal injuries, blindness, increasing access to care, adaptive sports, and five other physical health related needs; and mental health is divided into needs focused on brain injury & traumatic stress, substance abuse, research, reducing stigma, and three other mental health related needs.

Of the 35 need categories for veterans and the military included in *Serving Those Who Served* (2013), there are 12 for which one or more of the 16 Veterans & Military charities graded “C-” or higher by CharityWatch provide services. The table below summarizes these 12 need categories for veterans and the military (listed alphabetically), along with the corresponding charities that have a satisfactory or better grade from CharityWatch. (Charities are listed in order alphabetically by descending grade when there are multiple charities that provide the same need.) Please note that *Serving Those Who Served* describes that its list outlines examples of funders and service providers active in the field and should not be treated as all comprehensive, nor as an endorsement. Also, CharityWatch’s grades are based on financial efficiency and do not consider the quality of the program services provided.

Programs for Veterans & the Military	Charities Graded C- or Better by CharityWatch
Adaptive Sports	Bob Woodruff Family Foundation
Amputations	Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund
Bereavement Services	Fisher House Foundation; TAPS
Brain Injury & Traumatic Stress	Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund
Connections with Other Vets & Continuation of Service	Bob Woodruff Family Foundation; Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America; WWP (Wounded Warrior Project)
Emergency Funds	Operation Homefront; Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society
Employment Placement	USO (United Service Organizations)
Family Support	Fisher House Foundation; Bob Woodruff Family Foundation; National Military Family Association; USO
Home Ownership & Adaptive Housing	Operation Homefront; Habitat for Humanity
Increasing Access to Physical Care (e.g., transportation services)	Operation Homefront
Mental Health Research	Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund
Severely Wounded &/or their Caregivers (Support for them)	Fisher House Foundation; Operation Homefront; WWP (Wounded Warrior Project)

Source: *Serving Those Who Served* (2013), The Philanthropy Roundtable

In trying to decide on the most effective way to support veterans and the military, donors ought to consider the role of the U.S. government and recognize that the budgets of nonprofits pale in comparison with that of the federal government. For example, of the 12 need categories listed in the above table, the government provides support services for all but three—Bereavement Services, Connections with Other Veterans, and Emergency Funds—according to *Serving Those Who*

Served (2013). The Veterans Affairs Department (VA) is the second largest federal agency in the U.S. government, behind only the Defense Department, with over 340,000 employees and has a proposed 2015 budget of almost \$164 billion. Included in the VA proposed budget is over \$95 billion allocated for mandatory programs such as veterans' disability compensation and pensions and \$56 billion for veterans' medical care. The VA proposed budget is in support of its goals to expand access to health care and other benefits, eliminate the disability claims backlog, and end homelessness among veterans, according to the March 2014 news release by the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs concerning the VA's 2015 budget proposal. At almost \$164 billion, the VA proposed budget is about 400 times larger than the combined cash budget of only approximately \$0.4 billion for the 16 Veterans & Military nonprofits with a satisfactory or better grade from CharityWatch.

Despite the VA's size and growing budget, the VA system is overburdened and distressed, which calls into question the reach of its capabilities and effectiveness. For example, although veteran homelessness did decrease by over 23% between 2009 and 2013 according to the VA, substantial progress remains if the VA is to achieve its goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. Also of concern is the VA's chronic problem of lengthy backlogs for veterans awaiting benefit claims and health care services. The proposed 2015 VA budget allocates over \$300 million "to bring leading-edge technology to the claims backlog" and \$3.9 billion for information technology in general, which provides some indication as to the aged state of the technology that the VA system currently employs. Further, the recent scandal related to the alleged "secret" wait lists at several VA medical facilities that forced the resignation of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki during the last week of May 2014 serves as a glaring example of some of the serious troubles that are rooted within the VA system.

The problems and challenges facing the VA system heighten the need for nonprofits to be as efficient and effective as possible when it comes to providing for the military and veterans and for donors to give wisely. Also keep in mind that there may be opportunities to help through volunteering at veterans charities in your community or by supporting veterans programs that may be run through local hospitals or universities. In whichever way you might choose to support veterans and military families, the needs are great and the choices can be overwhelming, so take a little extra time and use this article as a guide to make sure that your donated dollars will be used efficiently towards the types of veterans and military charitable programs you prefer to support.

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