



Operation RESILIENCY Overview & Expectations

Introduction

The VA and The Independence Fund have formed an important partnership with the Operation RESILIENCY Reunion Program, an effort to reunite Veterans who served together and re-establish the common bonds that existed during their service to the country. This supportive and empowering reunion in a nonclinical setting promotes connectedness among the Veterans, increases awareness of VA's suicide prevention tools and programs, and contributes to protective factors that can offset risk factors for suicide *before* Veterans are in crisis.

Goals:

- Facilitate connectedness and re-establish relationships between those who served together.
- Educate participants on ways to increase positive action in their own lives, as well as increasing positivity in their interactions with others.
- Identify potential needs and provide participants with concrete skills they can use in their daily lives to improve their health and increase their self-efficacy and sense of connectedness.

Engagement:

- Expanding the reach of educational tools and web-based resources for Veterans.
- Creating awareness of easily accessible means to increase protective factors.
- Identifying Veterans who are not enrolled in VA health care, increase their awareness of enrollment opportunities, and share Veteran-focused resources.

The Independence Fund has hosted over 400 combat tested service members through Operation RESILIENCY and the results have far exceeded expectations. In fiscal year 2022, The Independence will host six additional retreats across the United States.

Operation RESILIENCY Retreats

How does a unit submit an application?

Unit applications will be submitted through [Operation RESILIENCY - The Independence Fund](#) and MUST include the nomination request form along with a recommendation from the company leadership (Company Commander, Executive Officer, or Senior Enlisted Leadership). The recommendation letter should state the timeframe the unit was deployed and a general overview of the combat operations they experienced. Once the application has been received, The Independence Fund reviews submissions every quarter. Units will be notified when the results of the quarterly review occurs and if more information on submissions are needed. After the unit is selected, monthly conference calls with the unit will be held until 90 days prior. From 90 days prior, bi-monthly meetings will be held to keep the leadership involved and informed.

How many participants are needed?

Because of the coordination required for a RESILIENCY retreat, a minimum of 50 participants are needed. The Independence Fund staff will work to establish an on-line registration, and certain benchmarks will be expected for registrations. If registration benchmarks are not met, the retreat can be postponed to a date to help facilitate more participation.



What if the unit isn't selected?

If a unit is not selected, or possibly postponed to more involvement is received, a member of The Independence Fund staff will work with the unit leadership to provide resources to other organizations that may be able to assist.

What units qualify?

Contrary to what you may hear, young combat Veterans are at a higher likelihood to die by suicide. Between 2005 and 2018, the most recent years for which the VA reported veteran suicide data, the veteran suicide rate has, indeed, risen precipitously across every age and gender demographic. But for the 18-34-year-old veterans, it's risen most significantly:

- In those years, the overall veteran suicide rate rose 30%, but the 18-34-year-old veteran suicide rate rose almost 80%.
- Between 2005 and 2018, an additional 379 veterans died from suicide annually. But 300 of those 379 additional veteran suicide deaths were veterans age 18-34 – in other words, while 18-34-year-old veterans make up only 10% of the veteran population, they represent 79% of the increase in veteran deaths.
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Because of this, The Independence Fund focuses on tactical combat units that saw heavy conflict in Iraq and/or Afghanistan during the Global War on Terrorism. Furthermore, The Independence Fund wants to focus on those units that were, “hit hardest when they got home” and have been affected by suicides in their unit.

What can we expect from a weekend?

Retreats occurred over a long weekend, with opening kickoff taking place Thursday evenings, followed by two full days of activities, and a sendoff early Sunday, after a resource fair with local and national programs (both internal to the VA and community partners). The agenda was designed to promote bonding and communication, engage participants in fun recreational activities, and create opportunities to build coping skills and learn about helpful resources. Experiential activities varied based on location, ranging from rafting and axe throwing, to exercise and spending time on a ranch.

Are travel/expenses covered?

All expenses during scheduled retreat activities are handled by the Independence Fund to include a travel stipend per person. The Independence Fund will reimburse up to \$250 per attendee, to be provided within 2 weeks of the retreat (receipts should be sent in advance). However, TIF understands that each financial situation may vary, and never wants cost to be a factor in not attending; please communicate to our team if your travel exceeds \$250 and you cannot support the difference.

Program Evaluation

A program evaluation component has been integrated into the Operation RESILIENCY Reunion Program to offer opportunities to assess and identify project successes and opportunities for improvement. Each retreat participant is asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire immediately before and after the event, as well as 30-days following completion of the retreat. This initial review of results is based solely on information collected before and after the retreats due to insufficient number of follow-up surveys returned. Efforts to



increase the response rate for follow-up surveys for future retreats can clarify longer-term effects of the program.

Retreat Participants

To date, all retreat participants were male, and most were in the 31 to 36-year-old age range. Most Veterans in the program were enrolled in VA care and receiving VA services. Those Veterans who are not enrolled in VA care are provided adequate resources for enrollment and can be enrolled during the retreat.

Results:

Survey results suggest that the Operation RESILIENCY Reunion is effectively meeting its goals of promoting a sense of connectedness, building effective coping skills, and promoting resilience for Veteran participants.

Connectedness: The Operation RESILIENCY Reunion program empowers and restores a sense of connection, support, and open dialogue amongst participants. Results have shown improvements in feelings of support and connection to family, friends and community.

Effective Coping: Operation RESILIENCY also increases participant awareness, competence, and comfort with use of coping skills following completion of the program. This is a vital component of mental health and wellness emphasized during the retreat. Veterans in the program reported increases in knowledge of effective coping skills, competence of practicing effective coping skills, and comfort of practicing effective coping skills. These are remarkable gains.

Resilience: The theme of building resilience by establishing meaningful connections was reflected throughout the program. This is consistent with feedback that showed increases in perceived resilience amongst Veterans in the program.

Follow-on:

After the retreat, participants will be contacted with 72-hours as an initial check-in from one of the The Independence Fund staff members. This contact, which will be fostered during the retreat, will continue 30-days, 60-days, 90-days, 6 months, and a year after. The contact is non-invasive and intended to keep the participant engaged and provide an outlet for access to additional resources if needed.

Unit Leadership Expectations:

The same leadership that was shown to the unit during their time together is still expected to be shown to these heroes before, during, and after the retreat. Leadership sets the example and continues to lead, both in and out of uniform. The Independence Fund staff will work with the unit leadership to provide the tools necessary to be successful before, during, and after the retreat. Expectations include (but not limited to):

- Active involvement in the planning process
- Attending scheduled calls
- Recruiting participants
- Volunteering as a Small Group Leader
- Assisting in accountability during the retreat
- Maintaining accountability following the retreat with routine check-ins to include those that weren't able to attend the retreat



- Provide constructive criticism to The Independence Fund to improve the program for future units

It is incumbent that the unit leadership is identified ahead of the retreat and takes an active roll in the execution of the weekend. This continued care SAVES LIVES.

The Independence Fund Expectations:

We would not have expectations of the unit and leadership if we did not have expectations of our own staff and volunteers. Expectations of The Independence Fund staff and volunteers include:

- Professionalism and courtesy during every interaction
- Consistent interaction with unit leadership to include monthly check-in calls
- Assist in recruiting participants
- Provide the tools and information needed to ensure all participants are prepared and well informed
- Conduct routine check-ins with participants with 72-hours, 30-days, 60-days, 90-days, 6 months, and 1 year
- Provide tools, referrals, and resources to participants (and those that may not be able to attend) before, during, and after the retreat

Process Flow:

