



A NATIONAL VETERANS COVENANT

Community as the Catalyst and Resource

A thought paper based on collegial conversations, published documents and a USC Roundtable Discussion.
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KEY POINTS

- ❖ The United States has a moral obligation to ensure that its veterans and their families receive the services promised to them when they enlisted, to maximize the advantages gained through their service, and mitigate any disadvantages of injury, illness, or other disparity created as a result of their service.

- ❖ Community support for veterans and their families is plagued by fragmentation. There are a multitude of services available to the nation's veterans, but the disjointed nature of how they are provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, other federal agencies, and a wide variety of state and community-based organizations makes it difficult for veterans to receive the services they need. A national veterans covenant would provide an overarching vision of a more coherent system for the provision of services to the nation's veterans and would function as a versatile vehicle for developing a national veterans policy. A national covenant would represent a call to action within communities, schools, and civilian institutions to support the seamless integration of returning veterans into civilian society.

- ❖ A national veterans covenant would serve as the touchstone for creating a more effective and coordinated community system for delivering services to veterans and their families. A community refers to all civilian institutions such as schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses and corporations, religious organizations, neighborhoods, and municipal, state, and federal entities within a given locale. The themes laid out in this covenant should include:
 - the sacred duty that the nation has to those who serve in its military and their families,
 - the need to ensure that those who are injured or disabled while serving their nation receive the best care when and for as long as needed, and
 - the assurance that veterans and their families have convenient access to all the necessary services to help them transition successfully between military and civilian communities.

- ❖ Developing a national veterans covenant requires input from all constituencies that provide support, advocacy, and services to veterans, as well as a commitment by the American public to actively honor the nation's obligations to its veterans and their families.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Department of Defense has routinely developed, reviewed, and modified a national defense policy for this country. However, there is no comparable process for veterans policy. Rather, the nation supports a federal institution, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), with an array of programs that have grown incrementally in response to presidential and congressional priorities or national emergencies. In addition, nonprofit organizations, corporations, educational institutions, volunteer groups, state and local governmental agencies, and private foundations provide an array of services and programs designed to address the needs of the approximately 22 million U.S. veterans. The length of time that the country has been at war and the expanded involvement of military reservists have brought family and community issues into the realm of veterans issues. The resulting patchwork of funding streams, administrative authorities, and public/private initiatives is difficult to assess in terms of effectiveness and even more challenging to manage in a way that maximizes services for veterans and their families.

The many problems facing veterans and their families—homelessness, suicide, the effects of traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma, unemployment that exceeds the national average, family needs, and others—are not necessarily the result of insufficient resources and programs but rather the lack of optimal implementation. A large percentage of veterans and their families are not aware of the services that are available to them. On issues such as housing, business startup opportunities, family counseling, and even educational benefits, available services are usually disjointed, making it difficult for veterans to find needed and timely assistance. This is particularly true when benefits are provided by the myriad external organizations that receive funding from the VA, Department of Defense and other federal, state, and local community entities.

This issue of implementation is also complicated by the fact that not all federal veterans programs are offered through the VA. The Departments of Education, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development all have veterans policies and programs, and it is unclear how all of these programs fit with one another to form an integrated package of benefits for veterans. A presidential directive ordering every department to develop a veterans strategy, if not well coordinated, could create more, not fewer, barriers for veterans to overcome. A properly designed national veterans strategy would provide an overarching framework for these departmental efforts that would help unify disparate programs and prevent duplication of services, in addition to helping policy makers articulate how federal programs should work together to meet the nation's obligations to its veterans and their families.

Taking Action

As a first step to developing a clearer understanding of the challenges related to constructing a more coordinated and consistent system to meet the needs of the nation's veterans and their families, the University of Southern California School of Social Work's Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families convened a national roundtable of 17 representatives from universities, government agencies, national policy institutes, and major community-based institutions, as well as experts on veterans issues from Canada and Great Britain. Their expertise spanned disciplines and specialties including housing, mental health, public health, higher education, public administration, and social services.

This position paper provides an overview of the group's deliberations, input, and recommendations on how to develop an immediate initiative that can better meet the nation's sacred duty to those who have served the country at times of peace and war.

A NATIONAL COVENANT FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Our colleagues, Nancy Berglass and Dr. Jon Sherin, regularly remind us that we need an "all-in" initiative orchestrated by community leaders that plays to the strengths of the community—small groups of stakeholders who have the resources and existing relationships needed to work well together. These types of initiatives can help guide community practitioners, build community networks, inform policy, and identify broadly applicable and effective solutions that rely on promising preventive strategies. The overall goal is to build new policy bridges that promote more effective and fiscally sound programs to support the reintegration of veterans and their families into civilian communities across the United States.

The strength and viability of an all-volunteer force is undermined when the health and well-being of its members and veterans is precarious. Given the daunting issues facing our military, their families, and our communities, it is essential that the U.S. government draw upon an emerging network of nongovernmental organizations and professionals to form a model of public-private partnerships to greatly enhance the care and services provided to those who have served the nation.

We believe a national covenant can promote warm and welcoming communities for veterans and their families. A national covenant will explicitly state that veterans and their families are not a separate class of individuals, but remain integral members of civilian society who happened to have served the nation through military service. Changing cultural attitudes and misconceptions between civilians and members of the military, past and present, must be a central theme of any national covenant for veterans and their families, a process that may require congressional action, both in terms of setting a national example and developing

legislation that will enable closer collaboration between the VA, Department of Defense, and communities across the nation.

Currently, community support for veterans and their families is fragmented. Various sectors of our communities—businesses, schools, social service organizations, churches, and government—do not work together. They exist in relative isolation, as do so many individual veterans and family members, who long for a connection to their community but end up marginalized, their abilities and skills overlooked and their potential contributions lost. This disconnection and detachment makes it hard if not impossible for veterans and their family members to feel a sense of belonging. A key aspect of a successful community is the extent of widespread relatedness and interaction among its citizens.

Lessons From Our Allies

Although there are significant differences among the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, both in terms of the number of veterans and the organization of government, there are important lessons that the United States can learn from two of its major allies regarding a national veterans covenant.

Passed by the Parliament of Canada in 2011, the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act outlines the sacred obligation of the nation to its veterans and their families.¹ It is based on models of wellness, transition to civilian life, and family support. The charter is grounded in the guiding principle that the nation must provide veterans and their families with the necessary help and resources, for as long as needed, to lead healthy, rewarding, and independent lives. The Canadian government regards the charter as a living document that will be amended and adjusted as circumstances require.

The goal of the Canadian charter is to achieve five specific outcomes for veterans and their families—namely, to ensure that they:

- feel recognized for their contribution to the nation;
- experience improved health and function, particularly for those veterans who were wounded during military service;
- participate and integrate fully into their communities;
- participate in the civilian workforce; and
- have adequate income.

To achieve these outcomes, the charter includes provisions designed to ease the transition to civilian life, including a decompression and adjustment program following active military

¹Accessed on Oct. 16, 2012, at http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/AnnualStatutes/2011_12/page-1.html

operations, assured confidentiality of medical records, medical employment limitations, and the creation of joint personnel support units.

Of all U.S. allies, Great Britain arguably provides the most coherent set of services for its veterans as a result of the Armed Forces Covenant, which was enacted in May 2011.² The covenant, a three-paragraph statement, defines the relationship between the British nation and its veterans, recognizes the sacred obligation the country has to members of the armed forces and their families, and establishes how they should be treated.

The first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. Our Armed Forces fulfill that responsibility on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and, sometimes, suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty. Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families. They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment.

Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.

This obligation involves the whole of society: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognizing those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant.

A guiding principle of the British covenant is its explicit mandate for the armed forces community, the general public, and the government to bear equal responsibility to ensure that veterans and their families receive the services they need to thrive when they return to civilian life. The covenant also recognizes the central roles that the chain of command, the monarchy, and voluntary and charitable organizations must play in helping the nation meet its obligations.

²Accessed on Oct. 16, 2012, at http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/4E9E2014-5CE6-43F2-AE28-B6C5FA90B68F/0/Armed_Forces_Covenant.pdf

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

A national veterans covenant in the United States could play a catalytic role in building a supportive national environment that recognizes the sacrifices that veterans and their families have made for the country. Such a covenant could serve as the touchstone for creating a more effective and coordinated system to deliver services to veterans and their families.

The themes featured in this covenant should include the moral obligation that the nation has to those who serve in its military and their families, the need to ensure that those who are injured or disabled while serving their nation receive the best care possible for as long as needed, and that veterans and their families have access to all the necessary services to help them successfully transition to civilian life. In addition, the covenant should serve as a call to every community, institution, and individual to create an environment that welcomes veterans and recognizes the sacrifices they make for the nation.

To codify these ideas into a living document, the contributors to this proposal will convene a larger forum, a professionally facilitated meeting with representatives from a wide range of constituencies. At this larger roundtable, attendees will draft a covenant. This larger discussion will be followed by a second meeting to formulate a national media campaign strategy to advance the covenant by bringing it to Congress and distributing it to organizations and communities across the country to galvanize action on behalf of the nation's veterans and their families.

Participants in the Roundtable on The Need for a National Veterans Policy, September 28, 2012

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A special recognition to our fellow colleagues for their thought leadership on this important topic.

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