



PURPOSE IN ACTION

Strengthening Communities through Veteran Volunteerism

TRUE PATRIOT
LOVE

CANADA'S FOUNDATION FOR
THE MILITARY COMMUNITY

2026 | Summary Report

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Introduction

As Canada's volunteer shortage deepens, Veterans are a powerful, underutilized part of the solution

This report presents the findings of True Patriot Love Foundation's Veteran Volunteer Initiative (VVI) and introduces the National Veteran Volunteerism Action Plan (NVVAP). Together, they explore how increasing Veteran volunteerism can address both the national volunteer shortage and improve Veteran well-being.

The decline in volunteer participation across Canada is having widespread impacts. Non-profit organizations are reducing or cancelling programs, while staff are taking on additional responsibilities, contributing to increased burnout. At the same time, research shows that volunteering helps address the

challenges of transitioning to life after service, such as loss of purpose, social disconnection, and reduced well-being.

This represents a missed opportunity to address two interconnected challenges: strengthening community capacity and supporting Veteran well-being.



"There are many places needing the skills that Veterans and military people have, and it is a wonderful thing to share your time and expertise with people who need it."

— COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH
THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT COMMUNITY

Turning Insight into Action

In 2023, True Patriot Love Foundation launched the Veteran Volunteerism Initiative (VVI), funded by Veteran Affairs Canada, to establish a knowledge base for future program and policy decisions and fill an identified gap to better understand the impact of volunteerism on the Veteran community.

It is grounded in the hypothesis that meaningful volunteer engagement strengthens well-being among Veterans by enhancing community connection and sense of belonging.

Given the significant need across Canada, and the reality that many Veterans transition from service with skills that are underrepresented in both the formal volunteering sector and informal community spaces, the Initiative identified a mutually beneficial relationship.

The VVI committed to testing the hypothesis through research, program evaluation and developing a national framework to increase Veteran volunteerism across Canada if the evidence supported it.

VVI PROGRAM GOALS

01

Veteran & Family Well-being

Support Veterans and their families through meaningful volunteer involvement.

02

Evidence & Understanding

Clarify how volunteer involvement affects Veterans and their families, using what we learn to guide decisions.

03

Community Connection

Increase participation that brings Veterans and local communities into closer relationship, with benefits on both sides.

04

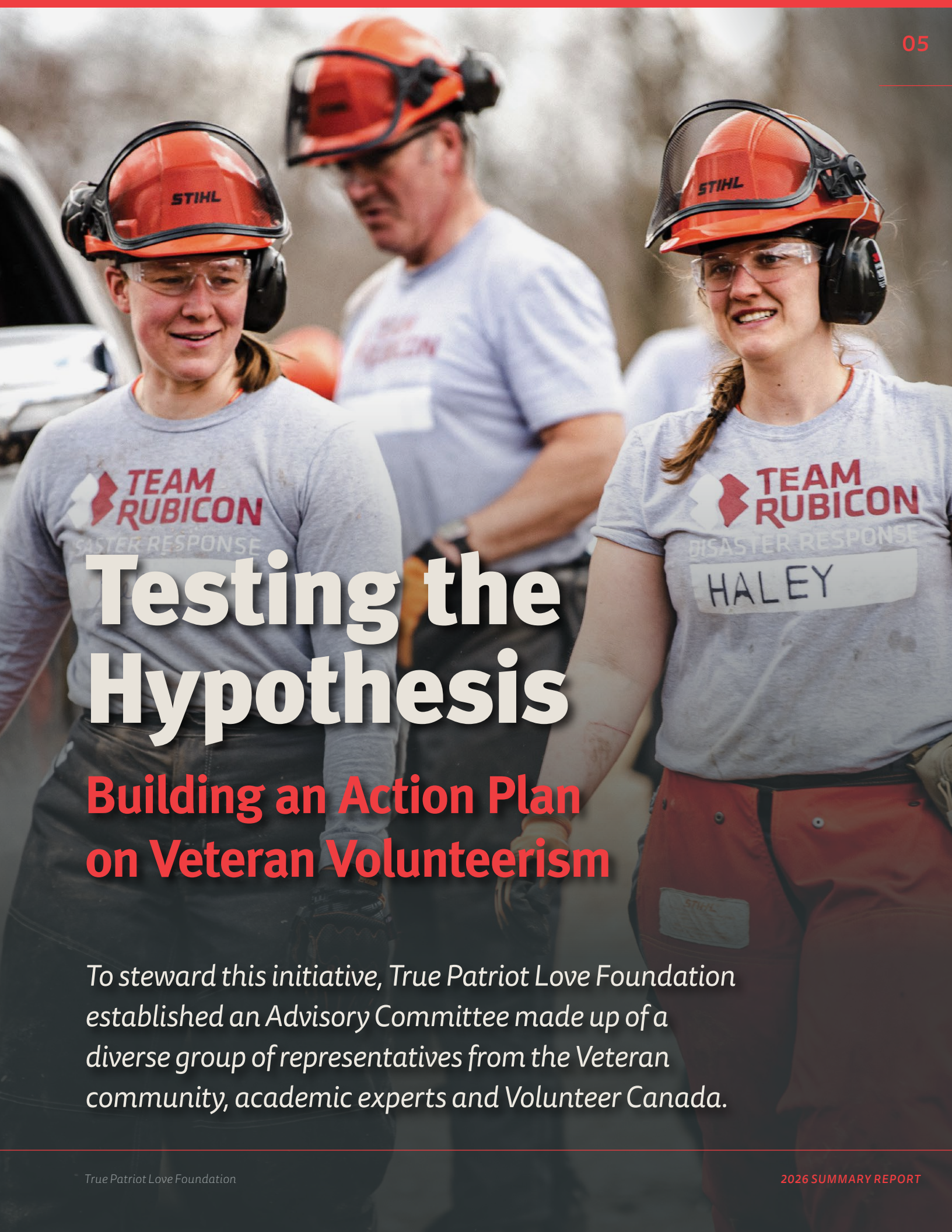
Knowledge Translation

Create recurring ways to share findings and put them into practice in the volunteer sector and beyond.

05

National Action Plan (NVVAP)

Create a Canada-wide plan that leads to more Veterans volunteering, and helps keep that participation going over time, across military and civilian settings.



Testing the Hypothesis

Building an Action Plan on Veteran Volunteerism

To steward this initiative, True Patriot Love Foundation established an Advisory Committee made up of a diverse group of representatives from the Veteran community, academic experts and Volunteer Canada.

Academic Research to Inform the Road Ahead

Research in allied countries showed a strong case for action and highlighted the need for Canadian evidence

As a first step and in partnership with the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR), True Patriot Love commissioned a literature review to kick off the Initiative with a current understanding of the relationship between volunteerism and Veteran well-being in Canada.

Findings

The research on Veteran volunteerism found that many Veterans in our allied

nations experience challenges transitioning to civilian life, including loss of purpose and social disconnection. Existing studies indicate that volunteering can help address these challenges by improving mental health, reducing isolation, and restoring a sense of purpose. These Veterans often view volunteering as a continuation of service and report positive impacts on overall health, well-being, and social connection. Notably, no studies identified negative effects associated with volunteering.

Canadian Context

However, despite evidence that Veterans are generally highly motivated and well-equipped to volunteer, no Canadian research or data existed on how Veterans engage in volunteerism, or the impact to their well-being. There was no Canadian evidence on volunteering among Canadian Armed Forces Veterans and military members to guide local, provincial/territorial, or national volunteer programming and services that could accurately inform a National Action Plan.

What the Research Shows



**Improved
Mental Health**



**Reduced
Isolation**



**Restored Sense
of Purpose**

First Canadian Study of Veteran Volunteerism and Well-being

Addressing the gap in Canadian data

To that end, True Patriot Love commissioned the first study of its kind to investigate the intersection of Veteran well-being and volunteerism in the Canadian context and to examine the potential of volunteerism to enhance the well-being of Canadian Veterans who engage in volunteer service. It was completed by Cicero Group/MGT as part of the Veteran Volunteerism Initiative.

Methodology

This study collected data from Veteran volunteers via two surveys between March 2024 – February 2025. These Veterans had been recruited across seven non-profits throughout Canada. The results were:

- > 214 Veterans completed the pre-survey and 121 Veterans completed the post-survey

"I was rather lost & felt I wasn't contributing to society when I first retired. By volunteering I have found my purpose again, and I feel fulfilled while making numerous friends along the way."

– VVI COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK

- > 50 Veterans completed both pre- and post-surveys
- > 37 individuals from Veteran-adjacent groups (e.g., family members, currently serving members of the Forces, Reservists) also participated in the surveys

True Patriot Love facilitated the participation of a group of not-for-profits, chosen based on the strength of their volunteer programs and their willingness to recruit a new cohort of Veteran volunteers.

The seven participating non-profit organizations were:

- > Team Rubicon Canada
- > Perley Health
- > Mood Disorders Society of Canada
- > Camp Aftermath
- > Veteran Farm Project
- > Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada
- > Invictus Games Vancouver Whistler 2025

Overall Findings

The study results provide strong evidence that volunteering positively impacts a variety of well-being aspects among Canadian Veterans who choose to participate in volunteer service.

- > A strong majority (97%) of respondents described their overall experience volunteering with the seven participating partner organizations as somewhat (15%) or very positive (82%).
- > 81% reported experiencing a strong sense of camaraderie and support while volunteering.
- > 69% of Veterans felt their service was very impactful on the communities or individuals they supported.
- > 92% of Veterans surveyed report that volunteering was somewhat (35%) or very impactful (58%) on their well-being.
- > Female Veterans were represented (39%) at a rate significantly higher than their proportion within the overall Veteran population.
- > Veterans who volunteered more than average reported higher well-being across a variety of factors compared to those who volunteered less than average.

Study Highlights

- 97%** had a positive volunteer experience
- 92%** saw a positive impact on their well-being
- 98%** would recommend volunteering to peers
- 81%** felt a strong sense of camaraderie and support while volunteering

Conclusions

This study provides strong evidence that volunteering positively impacts the well-being of Canadian Veterans. A significant majority (92%) reported improved well-being, with higher levels of engagement linked to stronger outcomes across multiple factors.

Volunteering seems to make the biggest difference in areas where Veterans can struggle, especially during military to civilian transition, social connection, sense of purpose, and mental health. The qualitative insights reinforce this, with many Veterans pointing to a renewed sense of purpose and community as key outcomes.

The study found higher participation by women than their proportion in the Veteran community. This points to a potentially high level of engagement within this group and suggests value in exploring targeted approaches as part of a broader, inclusive strategy to reach all Veterans.

With 98% of participants likely to recommend volunteering to peers, the findings underscore the potential for Veteran volunteerism to both enhance individual well-being and help address Canada's broader volunteer shortage.

**Read the full
reports at
VeteranHub.ca.**

Community Engagement and Sector Perspectives

Non-Profit Sector Perspectives

Fourteen non-profit organizations provided insight into how Veterans are understood and engaged within the sector. Their perspectives were consistent across three key areas. The feedback overall points to a high level of respect for Veterans and a willingness to engage, paired with a clear need for increased capacity, confidence, and coordination across the sector.

Perceptions of Veterans

Organizations consistently viewed Veterans very positively as volunteers, associating them with strong leadership, discipline, reliability, teamwork, and a deep sense of service. They are seen as capable, values-driven individuals who can bring structure, accountability, and the ability to perform under pressure, with particular strength as mentors and community leaders. Overall, Veterans are recognized as highly capable volunteers whose desire to continue serving is a key asset.

Concerns About Engagement

Organizations' concerns were less about engaging Veterans and more about their own readiness to do so effectively. Many cited uncertainty around appropriate support, understanding diverse transition experiences, and matching skills to meaningful roles. Overall, this points to gaps in knowledge, tools, and organizational capacity rather than a lack of willingness to engage.

Recruitment and Pathways

Recruitment of Veteran volunteers is currently informal and largely relationship-based rather than systematic. While many organizations are open to engaging more Veterans, few have established pathways, targeted outreach strategies, or tailored roles to support this. Several organizations expressed a desire to deepen engagement and create more opportunities but lack the tools, guidance, and infrastructure.

Engagement with Veteran, Non-Profit, and Government Communities

In addition to the research, to inform and gain additional perspectives for the NVVAP, True Patriot Love hosted regional in-person community engagement consultative sessions, called Ecosystem Connects, with the military, Veteran, non-profit, and government collaborators in Halifax, Ottawa, and Edmonton.

These consultations were supplemented by online community engagement and virtual roundtables with the military community of serving members, Veterans, and families, in which over 300 individuals participated from across Canada.

Through these efforts, the Foundation gathered a strong and diverse set of insights from Veterans, serving members, their families, and leaders across the non-profit, municipal, provincial, and federal landscape.

Veteran Volunteering in Canada:

Benefits

Through the community consultations and online feedback, the following themes emerged on the benefits of volunteerism in the Veteran community. It became clear that volunteering is a powerful driver of personal well-being, organizational strength, and community connection.

Restoration of Purpose and Identity

Many individuals described volunteerism as a way to reclaim a sense of purpose after leaving the military. For those who strongly identified with service, volunteering offered continuity and a new mission that made them feel useful, valued, and purposeful again. Several respondents said it helped fill the gap left by retirement or release, especially for those who felt “born to serve.”

Connection and Belonging

Volunteering was repeatedly linked to fostering community, camaraderie, and shared values. Respondents emphasized how service opportunities helped them form meaningful connections with others, particularly with people who understood their military experience. This sense of belonging was described as essential to emotional well-being and mental health.

Mental Health Benefits

Participants often associated volunteering with improved mental wellness, including reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD. They mentioned that engaging in volunteer work gave them structure, distraction from personal struggles, and opportunities to focus outward instead of inward. Some even said it kept them “grounded” and helped restore faith in others.

Physical and Cognitive Engagement

Some noted that volunteer activities helped them stay physically active, mentally stimulated, and socially engaged, especially post-retirement. Whether helping at events, mentoring or contributing to local projects, many said volunteering kept them “moving,” “thinking” and “relevant.”

Sense of Accomplishment and Giving Back

Respondents highlighted the pride and satisfaction that comes from helping others. For many, especially those who struggled after service, volunteerism created a feedback loop of positivity: by helping others, they also healed themselves. Several participants said they “got more than they gave.”

Veteran Volunteering in Canada:

Barriers

In addition to the benefits described above, the community consultations and virtual feedback also uncovered barriers and risks associated with Veteran volunteerism that are essential to acknowledge.

Time, Capacity, and Burnout

Competing priorities including work, family responsibilities, and the demands of military service limit availability. For some, volunteering can also lead to overcommitment and burnout, particularly in the absence of clear boundaries and support.

Financial and Practical Constraints

Out-of-pocket costs (e.g., transportation, childcare) and concerns about the potential impact on benefits can create additional barriers, particularly for those on fixed incomes.

Health, Well-being, and Emotional Considerations

Physical and mental health challenges such as PTSD, chronic pain, anxiety, and depression can affect participation. While volunteering can be beneficial, it may also be emotionally demanding, especially in trauma-exposed or under-resourced settings. Without appropriate support and boundaries, some Veterans reported burnout, emotional exhaustion, or re-triggering of past trauma, highlighting the need for safer, better structured volunteer environments.

Access and Navigation Barriers

Many Veterans face challenges identifying and accessing meaningful opportunities. A lack of clear pathways, limited outreach and difficulty translating military experience into civilian contexts can make engagement feel complex or inaccessible. Others noted experiences of gatekeeping which discouraged them from becoming involved.

Fit, Culture, and Recognition

Misalignment between organizational culture and Veteran values, along with a lack of recognition or appreciation, can reduce motivation to participate. Some Veterans also report difficulty integrating into civilian environments or finding a sense of belonging.

Key Recommendations

Based on extensive consultations with Veterans, serving members, their families, and not-for-profit organizations across Canada, a set of Key Recommendations has been identified to strengthen and support Veteran volunteerism.

01

Ongoing Service

Clearly communicate that volunteerism can help sustain or rebuild a life rooted in service after release, while simultaneously creating opportunities to continue leading in civilian life.

02

Safe Volunteering

Advocate for personal agency and best practices, and take into account the need for a trauma- and violence-informed lens.

03

Flexible Opportunities

Encourage flexible and episodic, formal and informal volunteer opportunities to reduce access barriers.

04

Guided Pathways

Include centralized signposting and clear guidance to help Veterans identify appropriate volunteer opportunities and pathways.

05

Civic Asset Lens

Approach Veteran volunteerism as a strength-based civic asset.

06

Sustainable Roles

Emphasize sustainable engagement models, role clarity, and healthy participation limits. It should also create or leverage tools that support the “right fit.”

07

Meaningful Recognition

Incorporate and reinforce formal and informal recognition mechanisms and promote national, provincial and regional recognition efforts.

08

Employment Connections

Deliberately connect volunteer pathways with employment initiatives and employer engagement strategies.

09

Visible Impact

Actively profile successes and publicly showcase Veteran volunteer impact across communities in Canada.

10

Ongoing Convening

Continue national and regional convening efforts to refine, test, and strengthen the emerging network.

These insights are incorporated into the Action Plan and reflect the experiences, needs and ideas of those on the ground, highlighting both the opportunities and considerations required for meaningful volunteer engagement.

The National Veteran Volunteerism **Action Plan**

A plan for collective action.

The National Veteran Volunteerism Action Plan (NVVAP) is a core output of True Patriot Love's Veteran Volunteerism Initiative. The Foundation has committed to fund key elements of the first year of activities and will be seeking partner and donor support to grow and sustain the initiative.

The NVVAP advances Veteran purpose, connection, and well-being by building a culture that actively values, enables, and sustains their volunteer engagement. It focuses on reducing barriers, strengthening networks, and increasing the visibility of Veterans' contributions to Canadian communities.

The Action Plan is a roadmap for addressing critical gaps in Veteran volunteerism by coordinating, stewarding, and investing in existing efforts across the sector. It does not seek to replace or replicate expertise, but rather builds on established resources with clear,

time-bound goals, partnerships, and a commitment to measurable action.

Positioned within Volunteer Canada's National Action Strategy, the five-year Action Plan leverages and strengthens

existing infrastructure across the volunteer ecosystem. It is organized around three mutually reinforcing goals, supported by integrated governance and a national measurement framework.

The 3 Goals of the NVVAP

1

Establish Veteran volunteerism as a pathway to a strengthened sense of purpose and well-being.

2

Strengthen recognition of Veterans as valued contributors to Canadian civil society.

3

Engage Veterans in solving complex national and community challenges.

These goals are anchored by the following foundational elements:

- > A Monitoring and Evaluation Framework to track implementation and impact as well as assess how outcomes vary across populations. Data will be disaggregated to assess variation in access, experience, and outcomes.
- > A Governance Framework, housed within True Patriot Love, provides structural oversight, fundraising capacity, coordinated leadership, and milestone tracking.

Implementation Timeline

The Action Plan will unfold in three phases over a five-year period, with each phase focused on a distinct set of priorities.

PHASE 1 YEARS 1–2

Build the Foundation and Standardize Best Practices

- > Set up a clear governance and monitoring structure, transitioning from the Advisory Committee to an Operationalization Committee with a fundraising role. A dedicated project officer will be hired to drive and track progress, with Veteran voices included in national coordination efforts.
- > Establish baseline data through Statistics Canada, including the use of data from the 2021 and 2026 censuses. Put in place ongoing measurement and evaluation tools. Identify and continue to close key research gaps.
- > Develop and share best practices for engaging Veteran volunteers, with a trauma- and violence-informed approach. Encourage sector adoption through incentives like the True Patriot Love granting cycle.
- > Equip non-profits with tools (like communications kits) to better reach and engage Veterans. Make it easier to find the right opportunities by highlighting trusted organizations on the Veteran Hub, creating regular opportunities for people to connect and collaborate.
- > Raise awareness of the value of Veteran volunteerism through coordinated communications, including with the Canadian Armed Forces. Share stories, recognize contributions, and help dispel common misconceptions (like impacts on VAC benefits).
- > Progress policy recommendations through joint advocacy and strengthen alignment with key partners like Veterans Affairs Canada, Volunteer Canada, and the Canadian

Armed Forces. Create convening opportunities to grow awareness, improve communication pathways, and address shared challenges.

Key Policy Objectives

- > Secure federal commitment to collect and report baseline data on Veteran volunteerism
- > Integrate optional volunteer pathways into CAF transition and VAC rehabilitation programs.
- > Introduce tax and financial incentives to offset out-of-pocket volunteer costs (for example, credits for travel, equipment, and training)
- > Pursue federal support to incentivize adoption of best practices.

PHASE 2 YEARS 3–4

Scaling and Structured Mobilization

- > Expand Veteran volunteerism nationally by continuing to promote and incentivize the adoption of established best practices across the sector.
- > Launch a national collaborator network to strengthen regional engagement and deepen connections with provincial and municipal partners.
- > Align Veteran volunteer capacity with complex community and national challenges, and actively profile high-impact roles and organizations.
- > Shift communications to highlight measurable outcomes, demonstrating the real impact of Veteran volunteerism in communities across Canada.
- > Strengthen coordination across national, provincial, and local partners to ensure Veteran volunteerism is embedded within broader community and sector strategies.
- > Ensure governance, partnerships, and measurement systems are stable and positioned for long-term growth and continued impact.

**PHASE 3** YEAR 5

Integration and Sustainability

- > Continue national measurement through Statistics Canada, including the 2031 Census, to track progress and outcomes over time.
- > Sustain and embed best practices within Canada's broader volunteer infrastructure to ensure consistency and accessibility.
- > Advance coordinated policy approaches across federal, provincial, and municipal levels, with particular focus on communities connected to Canadian Armed Forces bases.
- > Strengthen collaborator networks and municipal partnerships to deepen local engagement, while maintaining ongoing recognition of Veteran contributions.



Call to Action

The National Veteran Volunteerism Action Plan will only succeed through coordinated, sustained action across sectors. It is a practical, national effort that depends on partners choosing to participate, invest, and lead in ways that align Veteran capacity with community need.

As a collective, the following are areas for focus and action:

- > Fund research to better understand Veteran volunteerism and its relationship to well-being.
- > Fund national coordination efforts to support the implementation and sustainability of the Action Plan.
- > Amplify Veteran success stories, positioning Veteran volunteerism as a visible and valued national asset.
- > Support the development of best practices for engaging the Veteran community, along with the monitoring and evaluation required to ensure effective implementation.
- > Communicate and enable provincial and municipal opportunities to convene on volunteerism, ensuring the Veteran voice is present at the table, and remain engaged with this emerging work as it evolves.

This work is already underway, and its strength will come from those who choose to carry it forward. With sustained engagement, shared investment, and a commitment to learning as we go, there is a clear opportunity to better connect Veteran capacity with community need.

The Action Plan provides the structure. Its impact will be defined by the partners who implement it.



Proposed **Collaborator** Roles and Responsibilities

True Patriot Love Foundation

Responsible for governance and coordination of the National Veteran Volunteerism Action Plan (NVVAP). It leads baseline measurement and reporting, administers grant incentives and private funding strategy, funds the development of best practice standards, and supports national communications and recognition.

Canadian Armed Forces

Promotes the value of volunteerism within transition processes. Educate leadership, promote a culture of volunteerism among serving members. Facilitates connections between Transition Units and known well-managed volunteer opportunities. Supports the communication plan.

Veterans Affairs Canada

Clarifies policy considerations related to volunteer participation, supports funding, pilot initiatives and further research where appropriate. Supports communication plan development. Integrates volunteerism into the VAC Rehabilitation program.

Veteran Service Organizations

Acts as peer connections and trust bridges. They promote safe role fit, adopt established best practices, support the collaborator network, and inform the action plan.

Veterans

Start small and on your terms. Educate yourself on "what right looks like". Look for opportunities that are well-run, respectful, and clear about roles. Do not hesitate to step away if the fit isn't right. Share what's working, what's not, and what could be better.

Non-Profit Sector

Considers actively recruiting Veterans as volunteers, use tool kits provided, and consider communications strategies recommended.

Volunteer Canada and other coordinating bodies

Integrates NVVAP into the broader national volunteer strategy, connect Veteran collaborators with provincial and municipal bodies, promote standards and recognition mechanisms, and support alignment of measurement frameworks.

Thank You

To the Veterans, serving members, and families who supported this work, thank you for sharing your experiences and perspectives. This plan is anchored in your voice.

We also extend our sincere thanks to Veterans Affairs Canada for funding the Veteran Volunteerism Initiative, and our program partners for your commitment to this work.

FUNDER



Veterans Affairs
Canada

Anciens Combattants
Canada

PROJECT PARTNERS

Cicero
Social Impact

MGT



CIMVHR
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ICRSMV
L'Institut canadien de recherche sur
la santé des militaires et des vétérans

NON-PROFIT PARTNERS

**INVICTUS
GAMES**
VANCOUVER • WHISTLER 2025

PRESENTED BY - PRÉSENTÉ PAR

ATCO **BOEING**

**TEAM
RUBICON**
CANADA



**Perley
Health**
Community of Care



Veteran farm project



Mood Disorders Society of Canada
Société pour les troubles de l'humeur du Canada



**CAMP
AFTERMATH**



**Big Brothers Big Sisters
OF CANADA**



*"You always get more out
of it than you put in."*

– VVI COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK

VOLUNTEER



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THE MILITARY COMMUNITY

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