



TEAM RUBICON

**Team Rubicon mobilizes** veterans who crave a sense of mission and camaraderie to help out after disasters across the United States and even around the world.

# VSO 2.0

A new generation of service organizations empowers young veterans with community and purpose

By Matt Alderton

**M**ILITARY MEN AND WOMEN are lions in human clothing. As individuals, they're fast, smart, agile and strong. As a pride, however, they're downright cunning. That's why they live, travel and hunt in groups. Even in the harshest environments — a food-starved savannah or an Iraqi desert — they thrive because of their pack mentality. Their interdependence is the secret to their survival.

It should come as no surprise, then, that when they leave the military, what veterans miss most is each other.

"The common thread that binds all veterans is a thirst for camaraderie and community," said Army veteran Paul Rieckhoff, founder and CEO of Iraq and

Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), the nation's first and largest organization for post-9/11 veterans.

That thirst is the driving force behind veterans service organizations (VSOs) like the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and the American Legion, which date back to 1899 and 1919, respectively. Although they're well known for their services and benefits, their congressional charters explicitly charge them with preserving the shared bonds born of military service.

The best way to do so is the subject of much debate in the veteran community, which in the last decade has spawned a new wave of VSOs that are challenging the old models.

"In the old days, you had a bricks-and-mortar veterans' hall where you congregated with other veterans. We're

turning that old veterans' hall inside-out," Rieckhoff said.

The problem with traditional veterans' halls is that some vets see them as exclusive and insular, according to Navy veteran Ken Harbaugh, chief operations officer at Team Rubicon, a VSO that engages veterans in disaster relief projects. Instead, he said, young veterans want to belong to organizations that are inclusive and open.

"Groups like the American Legion and the VFW literally build walls. They have posts, and when you go to them your ID is checked at the door," he explained. "Groups like Team Rubicon are the opposite. We make every effort to get out and tear walls down. In our case, quite literally."

Despite their fundamental differences,

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— Marine Corps veteran Regan Turner, West Coast regional director for The Mission Continues



IAVA founder Paul Rieckhoff speaks onstage at his organization's 10th Anniversary Heroes Gala in late 2014. The flashy, celebrity-studded event is the group's largest fundraiser.



PHOTOS BY STEPHEN LOVEKIN/GETTY IMAGES FOR IAVA

both the old guard and the new guard agree: With a new generation of veterans must come a new approach to delivering veterans' services — the basis of which should be collaboration, not competition.

### FINDING PURPOSE

The Mission Continues is a poster child for the new class of VSOs. Established in 2007, it helps post-9/11 veterans transition from military life by deploying them on community service projects. Veterans can apply for a fellowship that supports them during six months of daily volunteerism, or they can join one of more than 50 “Service Platoons” that execute individual service

projects. In both cases, the programs form a bridge between military and civilian life by allowing veterans to continue using their skills in service of their

country — even after they've retired their uniform.

“The Mission Continues was founded to facilitate reintegration for veterans by providing them meaningful service and leadership opportunities here at home,” said Marine Corps veteran Regan Turner, West Coast regional director for the organization. “There is something special about a person who volunteers to serve in the U.S. military. Whether they deploy to combat or not, they're putting themselves on the line. Once that person leaves the military, they still have that spirit of service inside them. I think that's why you're seeing so many organizations like The

Mission Continues and Team Rubicon take off and be successful.”

Such organizations leverage service to recreate a military mindset. Team Red, White & Blue (Team RWB) does the same with exercise. Established in 2010, it initially used athletic events like marathons and triathlons to raise money for veterans. When it realized the transformative power of exercise, however, it pivoted. Today, the organization operates 155 chapters that organize local meetups for the purpose of shared physical activity, such as running, CrossFit, yoga and rock-climbing.

“As an organization, we exist to help veterans connect with people in their community,” said Army veteran Mike Erwin, founder and chairman of Team RWB. “Going through physical experiences together allows them to forge relationships in a very authentic and powerful way. Because whether you're in yoga for an hour and everyone's struggling, or you're running a race and you want to stop, there's always a point (during exercise) when everyone wants to quit. Pushing

through that with each other really brings people together.”

IAVA similarly fosters community through locally organized gatherings called “VetTogethers.” “Instead of being in a veterans' hall, they can be at a baseball game, an ice-fishing event or a bar,” Rieckhoff said. “It's a much more dynamic, flexible way of bringing people together.”

Along with their geography — their members congregate out in the world instead of inside private posts — their composition is another differentiator for next-gen VSOs: The Mission Continues, Team Rubicon, Team RWB and IAVA are open not only to veterans, but also to civilian supporters.

“We have a sincere desire to see veterans succeed and successfully reintegrate after the military,” Turner said. “The best way to do that is to get them working, playing and collaborating alongside non-veterans so both sides can understand each other better.”

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**American Legion member** Gary Jensen discusses opportunities for veterans at the Hiring Our Heroes job fair in Chicago. The vintage veterans' group is trying to reach out to younger members, and often collaborates with newer veterans' organizations.

## SHARING STRENGTHS

As their younger counterparts mature, the original VSOs are attempting to evolve in their image.

"We have some posts that are experiencing great success in recruiting younger veterans," said VFW Communications Manager Randi Law, who cited as an example a VFW post in Denver that is organizing veteran yoga classes and hosting veteran art exhibits. "Many of our posts are closing their canteens, setting up game rooms and hosting family nights. They recognize that the younger generation doesn't want to sit in a dingy environment swapping war stories. They want to be engaged and continue working for their community."

Even so, traditional VSOs don't feel the need to mimic new groups in order to remain relevant. Rather, they aspire to complement them. "These up-and-coming veterans' groups are extremely important, but I think that in a lot of ways and for a lot of reasons they turn to the local VFW for the support they need," Law continued. "We've been around a long time, so we offer a solid support system in thousands of communities across America."

One group that's leveraged that support system is Student Veterans of America (SVA), a 7-year-old federation of approximately 1,300 student veteran organizations on college campuses nationwide. "Without the support of the older VSOs, we probably wouldn't even exist," said SVA Director of Program Walter Tillman. "In fact, we spent

our first year or two as an organization as nothing more than a table in the American Legion's national headquarters."

The student group currently is partnering with the VFW on a legislative fellowship program in which student veterans are invited to meet with federal lawmakers as participants in the VFW's annual legislative conference.

"If you've got groups that are really good at something, you can either try to duplicate that success or you can rely on the unique strengths the other groups bring to the table," continued Tillman, who said new and old VSOs are carving out a cafeteria-style ecosystem in which veterans can customize the services they receive by cherry-picking what they need and want from different VSOs. "We all see ourselves as filling particular niches in the transition process."

With the exception of SVA, partnerships aren't yet occurring on a national scale. Locally, however, collaboration is rampant. A Team RWB chapter in San Antonio, for instance, begins and ends a weekly run at the local VFW post. Likewise, VFW and American Legion members regularly participate in service projects with The Mission Continues.

"To their credit, a lot of the local Legion posts and VFW chapters are reaching out to see how they can be part of what we're doing and how we can get our members interested in what they offer, because they offer opportunities and benefits that we certainly do not," Turner said.

Those benefits include financial resources and political influence. "They have phenomenal resources that we won't have for a very long time just by virtue of their age, size and political clout," Harbaugh explained. "We've been able to tap into that, and in some cases they've been incredibly generous with us. For example, when (Team Rubicon) responds to disasters, often our first thought is to connect with the local Legion or VFW post to see if they can support by accommodating our deploying members. More often than not, they say, 'Yes.'"

Next-gen VSOs extend the same courtesy to one another. "Almost none of the new VSOs are dues-paying organizations, so there's virtually no competition for members," Harbaugh said. "We do everything we can to encourage cross-pollination."

It remains to be seen whether the old VSO model can survive, and whether the new one will endure. At the end of the day, though, it doesn't matter, according to Turner — as long as veterans receive the support they deserve.

"Whether it's Team Rubicon or the American Legion, the men and women who are served by these organizations all have something in common: We all wore our nation's uniform," Turner said. "I personally don't care if a veteran comes to The Mission Continues or the VFW; all I care about is that that veteran is a success story after the military. I think we all share in that sentiment." ●



## WHICH VSO IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes nearly 150 veterans service organizations (VSOs) that have been officially chartered by Congress. According to the National Association of Veteran-Serving Organizations, however, there are more than 40,000 veterans-focused organizations across the country. To find the best fit, veterans should:

► **Set goals:** Whether it's volunteerism, help with VA benefits or just a social outlet, deciding what you want to get out of VSO membership is the first step, according to Regan Turner, West Coast regional director for The Mission Continues.

► **Look for credible organizations:** A congressional charter is one sign of legitimacy, but it's not the only one. According to Paul Rieckhoff, founder and CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, veterans should pay attention to organizations' tax-exempt status. Credible groups, he said, typically are 501(c)(3)s; groups that are 501(c)(4)s, on the other hand, often are political action committees (PACs).

► **Ask for referrals:** Fellow veterans often are the best resource for finding good groups, according to Rieckhoff.

► **Consider location:** If community is important, look for groups with a presence where you live, advised Mike Erwin, founder and chairman of Team Red, White & Blue.

► **Take a test drive:** Ultimately, the best way to judge a group is to try it, according to Rieckhoff, who said most groups allow veterans to attend events or sample programs before joining.

— Matt Alderton