

## VOLUNTEERISM/CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

# A Washington State Initiative

## Veterans' Service to Country, Service to Community

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As a part of its mission to engage all Americans in service, and as directed by the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) places a high priority on engaging veterans in national service and using service as a strategy to support veterans and their families. Also in 2009, the Washington Commission for National and Community Service (WCNCS) partnered with the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs to launch the first CNCS-funded Vet Corps program in the nation to engage veterans in AmeriCorps national service positions.

While voluntarily serving as AmeriCorps members in the Vet Corps, veterans continue their mission to their county through their civilian national service experience as they make a positive difference in communities across Washington State.

During the first year of operation, 46 veterans enrolled in the Vet Corps, providing services to more than 3,000 veterans, active duty military members or their families. Their service outreach included starting 15 Vet Clubs on college campuses to create a safe and supportive community where veterans could learn how to navigate the higher education system and network with their fellow veterans; conducting in-take procedures to assure connection to critical services; and assisting dozens of homeless veterans with referrals to housing and other social services.

Kara Hayes, a twelve year Gulf War era Army veteran ended her military service in June of 2000, and then continued her career as an Army Recruiter. In 2004, after reactivating an injury she received in the Army, Hayes returned to college, graduating in 2008 from a Pharmacy Technology program at Clover Park Technical College. When she heard that the Vet Corps was being established, Hayes chose Clover Park to render her first year of national service as a Veteran Navigator because she had personally benefited from the veteran-friendly atmosphere at the school. Hayes decided she wanted to give back to a community that embraced and respected all military veterans and family members. "Clover Park Technical College is second to none when it comes to embracing the military community," Hayes remarked.

Now in its second year, the Vet Corps has expanded its membership to include not only veterans, but also military spouses and widows. They continue to assist veterans, active duty members, and family members with



Vet Corps member, Kara Hayes, speaks on the theme, Honor to Serve, at the 2010 AmeriCorps Launch at the Seattle Center.

their transition and reintegration into civilian life by providing information and guidance about VA and medical benefits, housing, job search, and the educational system.

In addition, Vet Corps members recruited 800 community volunteers who have come together for service projects around the state to plant hundreds of trees, gather food for food banks, work on Rebuilding Together and Habitat for Humanity projects, and organizing movie nights and other events for children with cancer at the Ronald McDonald House.

Program Manager, Mark Fisher, reported, "The Vet Corps members' biggest contributions this year have been in the initiatives of mobilizing more volunteers, engaging students (college age) in their communities and harnessing the experience of the Baby Boom population. Some of our Vet Corps members are Baby Boomers, and we often are able to bring older veterans and other volunteers out to our projects. It is the Baby Boomer Vet Corps members at the Warrior Transition Battalion who have created a significant program there, and have leveraged several hundred volunteers."

Fisher also said that feedback from veterans in colleges has been extremely positive. Vet Club members at the colleges report success in accessing VA benefits, college benefits, and other services that they would not have known about without the help of the Vet Corps member.

One Vet Corp member at Centralia College has created a resource list that is extensive and is being used by other members around the state. It contains resources for veterans on the national, state and local levels and can be easily adjusted to fit any local college or other site.

Kara Hayes is now serving a second term of AmeriCorps national service and has chosen to serve as a Navigator at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT). She wants to enlighten and unite the veteran community of staff, faculty and students on the UWT campus. During her tenure at UWT, Hayes plans to continue her academic endeavors of completing all requirements to achieve her doctorate in studies relating to veterans affairs, psychology, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In October 2010 Hayes addressed a crowd of nearly 1,000 AmeriCorps members who were assembled at the Seattle Center to take their oath of service. In her speech, titled, Honor to Serve, Hayes outlined three reasons why it is an honor for her to serve our veteran students. "First," she said, "it is an honor to serve because student veterans today tend to be younger, have more traumatic injuries and are less educated. I help all veterans but I specialize in ages 17 to 30 because most of these veterans have not had a chance to go to college. When they return from war, leave the military and enter college, they need someone to guide them or they may give up."

Benefit to the community was a second reason Hayes gave for feeling honored to serve. "Our community benefits when each of us has an opportunity to gain skills, knowledge, and an education to support ourselves and our families." For her third reason, Hayes offered, "It is an honor to serve because serving others is the simplest form of elevating mankind. I am more complete when my veteran neighbor has a home, when my veteran neighbor has healthcare, and when my veteran neighbor has an education."

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The service commitment of the veteran does not end on the battlefield, but continues after their return home. Veterans not only have the capacity and skills to help address problems in communities, there is also therapeutic value which aids in their reintegration back into the community following their military service, by being of meaningful service to each other and to the community at-large.

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