



## TU Veterans Services Partnership Program Guide

### TU Veterans Services Partnership Background and Mission

TU has been working for over 55 years to conserve, protect, and restore North America's trout and salmon fisheries and their watersheds. What really sets TU apart from other conservation organizations is our tremendous representation on the ground. TU's grassroots members, working through 400+ chapters and councils, do precisely what the name implies: they root our work in the watersheds, communities and river beds of our mission. As we look into the future, TU believes we are uniquely positioned to do more to build on our unique brand of "conservation, community and fishing" to engage and support to our nation's veterans in hundreds of communities across the country.

The Veterans Service Partnership (VSP) began in January of 2011 as an initiative to serve our nation's veterans and active military, able and disabled, their spouses, and their families and involve them with TU chapter activities with the ultimate goal of engaging them in meaningful and sustaining ways with the TU community locally and the mission more universally.

The greatest selling point for the VSP is our network of 300,000 members and supporters that operate out of over 400 chapters across the country. Each chapter is a ready-made community of passionate conservationists and anglers. Each participant in the VSP program receives [a complimentary membership to TU](#) and is automatically assigned to a TU chapter. For many served by TU's VSP, they are quickly integrated into their chapter community which becomes a safe haven where vets and wounded warriors can serve and be served in return. The chapter is a place where friends are made; where someone comes to learn fly tying, learns the roll cast and the thrill of a strike, and then returns to teach it; and it's a place where a passion is born and a commitment to protect the resource is fostered.

Many veterans need our help, but we also need them. Active service military and veterans have been trained in the military creed to act as a member of a team, to always place the mission first, to never accept defeat, to never quit or leave a fallen comrade. In order to recognize TU's vision<sup>1</sup>, we need engage the nation's finest in our efforts. We believe that TU chapters provide spaces where veterans, in particular, can once again serve a mission, i.e. help with a stream clean-up or volunteer in TU youth education programs. In return, the veteran is provided with a ready-made community to support and serve him or her for many years.

The VSP was created to be a resource at the national level to help foster and support this important work in chapters and communities across the country. To that end, this program guide is a good place to start. However, please know that every chapter and every community approaches things a bit differently. There is no one size fits all approach or way to do this "right." So, please don't hesitate to reach out to our VSP staff to talk about your unique situation so that we might help support you with resources catered to your specific needs.

**Dave Kumlien**, TU's Veterans Service Partnership Coordinator [406.570.0023 | [dkumlien@tu.org](mailto:dkumlien@tu.org)]

### Getting Started

There are no specific requirements to be included in the VSP program. Chapters are encouraged to seek veteran's service opportunities that suit their interests, their location, and their volunteer resources. Some chapters may offer fly casting instruction and fishing experiences while others may offer fly tying or rod building programs with VA hospitals, clinics, and military hospitals, or work with college veteran's programs and vets clubs. Some may do weekly or monthly meetings and on stream outings while others may meet less frequently. The goal of VSP is to get TU chapters and members thinking about how they can actively engage our nation's active service military and veteran population locally by serving those who have served us in events and activities associated with fishing. But, if we are really to be successful, we must aim higher than one-off events or activities. The one thing that we hope every TU chapter with a VSP program has in common

is that each puts into place systems to try and continually engage and involve your local veteran and active service military population with your ongoing chapter activities.

To begin a TU chapter VSP program, you will need volunteers. Consider forming a sub-committee. A really active, effective VSP program can involve a lot of work, so having a dedicated sub-committee of the chapter can help spread the workload and avoid burnout among officers. One of the challenges facing many TU chapters is finding volunteers. However, our experience has been that the cause of working with and serving our nation's veterans will attract new volunteers who may not have been deeply involved in other chapter activities. Our recommendation is to reach out beyond the regular volunteer cadre for VSP volunteers. One way you might find new faces to step forward would be to put a call out for volunteers in your regular newsletter or e-newsletter. Social media is another quick way to find willing folks to step forward, and this can be particularly effective for helping to find younger volunteers. Something as simple as, "the xyz chapter is interested in starting up a veterans services partnership program to introduce our local disabled and non-disabled veterans and active duty service members to the healing powers of our waters, with a goal of thanking them for their service and engaging them in our chapter activities. For those interested in volunteering to help coordinate a series of events and activities associated with this new program, please contact John Doe at johndoe@gmail.com."

Similarly, another good place to start would be to put a call out to your membership to determine who among them might be a veteran. You might find right off the bat a veteran that wants to take the lead for running your local VSP program. You might not. But through this call-out, you'll likely identify a handful of members that should be your first targets. Download your roster from the Leaders Only Tools section and create a separate list of all those that have self-identified as veterans in your chapter. As your program grows so too will this list.

The next step in establishing a local VSP is to determine the size of the active service military and/or veteran population in your vicinity in order to determine what sort of program and scale you might plan around. There are a good number of veterans living in every community in America. A good source for this information would be your local VFW, American Legion, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), county Veterans Service Officer, college or university veterans program and on campus veterans club, for example. Because TU's VSP mission is to serve any and all veterans and active service military, regardless of disability rating or location, most chapters should have a sufficient population to justify building a program. If you find yourself in an area with a very small veteran population, you might consider partnering with a nearby chapter in a more highly populated area.

## Partners

It's our name, Veterans Service Partnership, we are a partnership, and have joined with countless other organizations to leverage our resources and increase our impact, including Project Healing Waters, Warriors and Quiet Waters, Rivers of Recovery, the R4 Alliance, Embrace-A-Vet, Sun Valley Higher Ground, Student Veterans of America, and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (T.A.P.S.) As TU's CEO likes to say, "we didn't create the lightbulb, we just make it burn brighter." So, consider finding a suitable local (or national) partner that you might work with to find a veteran population, to coordinate events with, etc...

Your partner need not necessarily be a veterans service organization, either. There may well be other non-profits in your community that you can combine forces with to leverage your impact. Similarly, inviting local businesses to be a part of your VSP program and events can help build relationships and provide an important source of funding.

## Go for It: Have a First Event

There are various types of kick-off events that you can plan. This is your first public event and will set the tone for activities to follow. A good VSP event does these four things well: 1) is communicated/ advertised broadly; 2) is welcoming; 3) is well organized; and 3) is meaningful and fun.

**1) Communicate** and advertise your event well. Again, the first place to start is with a mailing or e-mailing to your membership, which starts with a visit to the Leaders Only Tools section of tu.org. All officers and committee members have access to the roster, labels printing and bulk e-mail tool. Be sure your chapter is set

up with a Veterans Services Coordinator position in the Leaders Only Tools section so that the chair of your subcommittee has the access he or she needs to communicate.

Professional advertising materials can have a significant impact on event attendance. Take advantage of TU's relationship with [www.tu.ticketprinting.com](http://www.tu.ticketprinting.com) to order cost-effective, professional event posters, flyers, and other promotional materials you need. Then identify a volunteer (this is a great first-time volunteer job) who will be responsible for hanging the event posters/ fliers around town. Make sure you target places where veterans are likely to frequent. Posters are best placed one month out and again two weeks before your event.

Send press releases to your local daily and weekly papers, as well as any local fishing blogs, local radio, or other media outlets that have community calendars. Newspapers, radio, and TV are generally quite interested in covering veteran fly fishing events. Make sure you inform the local media of your event. If there's someone in the media you believe will be interested, make a personal invitation. Be aware of the regulations regarding taking photographs of or interviewing patients and active duty personnel. They must give their permission and must be told how the photographs and interviews will be used. We have media consent and hold harmless forms for your usage [in the Tacklebox](#).

Another cost-effective way to advertise your showing is by creating an event on your chapter's Facebook page. These are free to create, but can be "boosted" at a minimal cost. For most chapters, a boost to guarantee the post will reach 3,000-5,000 people will cost less than \$20!

**2) Create an event that is welcoming.** When choosing the venue, consider places that would be appropriate and could accommodate the unique needs of the disabled veterans participants. You'll find that some veterans will have limited mobility, so easy access to the water is important. Many states have created special places on streams or lakes that are outfitted with ramps or platforms to accommodate disabled participants. The outings are coordinated with the safety and well-being of the wounded and disabled given highest priority. If you are offering an event on challenging terrain, VSP has developed a form for organizers to ask the right questions to understand what event is appropriate for what participant. This form can be found in [the Tacklebox](#). For more information on how to help disabled anglers, please see our guide in [the Tacklebox](#).

The VSP isn't set up only to serve wounded veterans; however, so make sure that your event is structured in a way that makes it clear that all (women, men, young, old, and disabled) are encouraged to attend. Consider advertising your event with images of people of different ethnicities, ages, genders, etc... to encourage different types of people to attend.

One of the simplest things you might do to make your event feel welcoming to newcomers is to offer nametags. That simple act indicates that you're not a clique and that the one new person in the room isn't being singled out as the "new guy."

**3) Have an organized and well run event.** Start with a plan and the right number of volunteers. A schedule can be a good place to start. Think through the timing of how you want the day to run. Have you identified who will be the speaker, if anyone? Will someone formally welcome all the veterans and explain the goals of the VSP program going forward? Will people be set loose to tie flies, for example, or will you assign mentors to each new person who comes through the door? Create a volunteer plan. Make sure that everyone that is there to volunteer knows what his or her task that day is. It might be to talk with three people about the chapter's conservation project. It might be as a greeter. Or it might be as the clean up crew. Thinking through those little details in advance of any event, makes the activity run much more smoothly.

Understand and enforce [TU's liability limitations](#) associated with any TU VSP event. If you're organizing your event through your chapter, you are covered under TU's liability policy. However this coverage does have limitations, notably associated with any events involving watercraft or alcohol. Please familiarize yourself with what these limitations are, and don't hesitate to reach out to [TU's volunteer operations staff](#) with questions.

**4) Your event better be meaningful and fun!** There are a lot of reasons we hope to work with veterans. There are a myriad of reasons we hope to engage veterans and active service military with TU. One major reason is for the healing that can occur when we connect veterans to the healing, restorative, and rejuvenating power of the water—and to the simple joy of fishing. In that unassuming sentence we hit at what it's all about: doing something meaningful and fun.

For your events, you'll want to have some type of fishing activity to "hook" their interest such as fly tying, fly casting instruction, rod building demonstration, or an actual on-the-water-chance-to-catch-a-fish activity. Fishing is the "hook", and we know our TU members love to fish and teach others the sport.

For your event, be sure you include refreshments, that you include lots of times for folks to take a break (from whatever the activity might be,) and give folks some downtime to laugh and get to know one another. Building relationships can be just as impactful as building a fly.

## **The Critical Piece: Follow Through**

During your first event or series of first few events, be sure to take notes on how things so that you'll be able to make improvements in subsequent events. This way, you'll find that each event becomes smoother and easier to organize and deliver a successful event.

At every VSP event you have, try some storytelling around your chapter's major activities and accomplishments. This will help your participants, many of whom may be new to the concept of conservation, connect fishing and conservation and will likely encourage them to become involved in your efforts going forward. Head to [the Leader's Store](#) to purchase TU brochures, stickers, hats, copies of *TROUT Magazine*, and other materials to help get the word out about your chapter and the benefits of joining TU.

And please don't forget that each participant in the VSP program may receive [a complimentary membership to TU](#). How does the free TU membership offer work? The requirements are that the individual is active service military or a veteran and has been involved, in some manner, with your chapter VSP event or program. It can be as simple as an individual showing up at a chapter meeting, attending a chapter sponsored event or participating in an event run by a partner organization such as Project Healing Waters or an R4 Alliance program. We ask the sponsoring TU chapter to use its own good judgment when offering the free membership and not to abuse this great offer available online.

You never know when your chapter's next president, or treasurer, or webmaster might walk through the door of one of your VSP events. We want to encourage our active duty military and veteran participants to continue to engage, and we want them to know that we'd love for them to serve as leaders within our organization too. Ensure that you provide your participants with volunteer opportunities that are diverse and tiered (starting small giving them increasing amounts of responsibility.)

## **Final Advice**

Our job is to help you launch a successful TU Veterans Service Partnership program. Through our current network of 150 TU chapters with VSP programs in place, there are many that have significant experience in serving the veteran community, and they can help mentor you and your leadership team as you explore start-up possibilities and program opportunities.

The TU believes that the VSP program will help save lives, save marriages, provide physical rehabilitation and aid in the recovery of our nation's wounded warriors, and engaging veterans in TU's conservation mission will strengthen Trout Unlimited.

***“I understood the serenity, the focus, and the silent satisfaction that he found in fishing. My husband was enjoying life, he was enjoying people, and he was surrounded by the most beautiful landscape we had ever seen. It was a sight for my eyes to behold, and I witnessed what a quiet river and a fishing rod could do for your soul. “Jessica, wife of US Army wounded warrior and participant in 2014 VSP Couples Trip***

## **FAQs:**

### ***How many veterans should be involved to conduct a successful program?***

You can start with just one or two. In no time at all you'll have a room full as the word spreads about the fun they are having.

### ***What types of facilities are likely to be interested in our program?***

VA Medical Centers, VA Outpatient Clinics, Military hospitals and Military bases, local DAV and VFW chapters, veterans homes and homeless shelters, college and university veteran programs and clubs, and more.

### ***Has TU developed a possible agenda or "course" for chapters to utilize?***

Yes. We have developed a six week Adaptive Fly Fishing 101 program to help you get things started. It covers the basics of casting, fly tying, the gear we use, basic entomology, the fish we are after and the way we fish. The course has proven to be very helpful in determining the interests of many groups, leading to further activities upon its completion.

### ***Will TU be able to provide equipment to meet the needs of the veterans?***

12 major companies provide equipment for VSP programs at a significant discount through [TU's fundraising program](#). These vendors include: Abel; All Terrain; Big Sky Carvers; Costa; Creative Castings; Dewitt Plastics; Orvis; Scientific Anglers; Spirit River; Waterwisp; Waterworks/Lamson; and Winston Rod Co. Additionally the VSP staff keep a number of L.L.Bean rods, reels and wading staffs on hand that you may be able to request from time to time.

### ***Will TU be able to provide funds for my chapter to support our VSP program?***

TU national sends money to state councils and local chapters in the form of a rebate each year to the tune of \$300,000 annually. These funds are intended to help subsidize a myriad of chapter and council activities and functions, including your VSP program. Additionally, we expect that you will find that the cause of serving our active military and veterans will raise funds from donor sectors previously unreached by TU locally. If you choose to affiliate with Project Healing Waters they provide a yearly budget to participating TU chapters.

### ***How does a TU VSP chapter program the accounting for VSP fundraising and donations?***

If affiliated with Project Healing Waters there are certain requirements that must be met and it is strongly encouraged that you keep all fundraising associated with your VSP/ PHWFF program separate from your general chapter fund. PHWFF requires regular reporting on all fundraising activities your chapter may undertake for your local program. If you VSP program is independent of PHWFF, you will handle all funds associated with your VPS program exactly the way you would handle other donations that your chapter receives.

### ***Are we required to undergo any particular training for working with recovering or disabled veterans?***

When working with disabled vets, we strongly urge TU leaders to reach out to VA Medical facilities, local adaptive sports organizations, etc... and arrange for some training in working with the disabled and those suffering from TBI or PTS. It is worth asking your TU member volunteers to go through a few hours of training, and please do simple reference checking and background screening on your volunteers. The specific needs of some veterans are unique to their disabilities, and education and training will help. Additionally, please see our [How to Help Disabled Anglers guide](#).

### ***Will we be required to enter into any contract or Memorandum of Agreement with TU or any other party?***

Currently, the only national level MOA that we have in existence is with Project Healing Waters. If you choose to work with PHWFF, you must sign a [MOA](#) to establish a cooperative relationship. If you enter into a partnership that requires you sign any MOA or contract, you are required per [a board policy](#) to pass such contract by [the VP for Volunteer Operations](#) first.

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<sup>i</sup> \*The TU Vision Statement: By the next generation, Trout Unlimited will ensure that robust populations of native and wild coldwater fish once again thrive within their North American range, so that our children can enjoy healthy fisheries in their home waters.