



EVIDENCE BASED TIPSHEET

Hosting Community Events for Veterans with Invisible Disabilities and their Families

Service organizations use a variety of tools, such as community events, to help Veterans and their families. Community events may be used to share information about services and programs, to connect individuals with specific programs, to raise awareness, or to raise funds. Events may be directed towards individuals with health or financial challenges and their families. Community events require planning to successfully meet their goals. This planning includes providing accommodations, opportunities, and support within local and federal regulations.

Community researchers from the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital and Clinics in Tampa, who study community reintegration for Veterans with traumatic brain injury, attended almost 100 community events for Veterans. Their observations of events highlight the need for event organizers to plan ahead for making events accessible to Veterans with invisible disabilities. Invisible disabilities include brain injury, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), visual and hearing loss and other sensory losses. Persons with invisible disabilities may be sensitive to noise and may become stressed when in large groups of people. They may perceive threats to personal safety in places and circumstances where others may not.

Environmental modification for persons with physical disabilities is well known (www.ADA.gov), but less is known about how to create safe psychological environments for persons with invisible disabilities to feel accepted and respected (<https://invisibledisabilities.org/>). Based on our research, a review of best practices, and input from our Veteran Engagement Council the following suggestions may be used to help you host a successful event for Veterans with invisible disabilities, their families and friends.

TIP1 Provide environmental accommodations to enable participation

- Limit background noise to the extent possible.
- Keep event and access halls well lit.
- Consider free valet parking if parking is limited or a distance from venue.
- Provide clear, frequent signage to direct participants to venue.
- Make available family restrooms.
- Educate all participants about the potential use of restrooms by both participants and their opposite sex companions.
- Post notices about bathroom availability.
- Consider multiple ways of presenting information, e.g., visual, audio, sign language.
- Discuss with individuals and caregivers benefits of self-identifying as having an invisible disability through a wallet card, medallion on a lanyard, lapel button or wording on shirts, e.g., "Veteran with a Brain Injury."
- For large events:
 - Have pre-opening times for small groups with limited noise, low lighting, calming music.
 - Allow early access for finding room locations, taking seats, and becoming used to the physical environment.
- Consider smaller events that may be preferable for some.
- Waive entrance fee for caregivers.
- Provide accommodations for service animals, e.g. drinking stations, dog waste bags (<https://adata.org/publication/service-animals-booklet>).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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TIP2

Provide Opportunities for Participants to Connect Individually with Peers

- Allow time in your agenda before and after event for peers to meet.
- Facilitate a debriefing immediately following the event.
- Provide multiple refreshment stations close to seating areas, so caregivers can access refreshments quickly and nearby without leaving family members unsupervised.
- If appropriate, provide name tags (using large print) and introductions.
- Suggest participants share contact information with peers.

TIP3

Normalize Possible Strong Emotional Reactions or Other Limitations (e.g., impulsivity, restlessness, low concentration) at Beginning of Event

- Know and understand your audience by reading about the targeted Veteran population served, e.g., Veterans from specific theaters of operation (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Viet Nam, military and reintegration experiences) and Veterans with cognitive or emotional limitations. These links suggest books about military and Veteran experiences:
 - https://www.vetfriends.com/military_books_by_members.cfm
 - <http://www.newsweek.com/best-books-todays-wars-pens-veterans-63801>
 - <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/military>
- Include members of the target audience in event planning.
- Prior to event:
 - Inform audience of strong content (e.g., gun fire, flashing lights, sirens, or suicide ideation of characters in a play) and potential triggers (e.g., fire alarm), if applicable.
 - Tell members of audience it is all right for them to leave. Point out the exits.
 - Provide agenda with a brief event description to aid in following along and being prepared for emotion-provoking content.

TIP4

Provide Support to those who Experience Strong Emotional Reactions

- Use principles and practices of psychological safety in planning events, e.g. psychological first aid (http://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/facilitator_manual_2014/en/).
- If possible, have mental health providers attend the event.
- Train staff to anticipate audience needs (e.g., transportation, parking, event activities).
- Have support staff wear an easily identifiable shirt or vest.
- Identify support staff at exits and throughout the venue prior to the start of the event.
- Have brochures and handouts available for VA and non-VA Services for healthcare, social services, mental health services, rehabilitation services, and the National VA Crisis Line on hand (<http://spreadtheword.veteranscrisisline.net/>).materials/).

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