Developing Programs for Veterans in Agriculture: How Maine Does It

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Farming with a disability
Identify the Population

- Veterans in Maine: 114K
  - 11% of adult population (Nat’l avg 6.6%)
- Total number of farms in Maine: 7,600
  - 1,400 farms/producers with military service
- United Farmer Veterans of Maine (UFVM) has connected with over 600 veterans either farming or interested in farming
  - Direct Mailings
  - Social media
    - Primarily Facebook (AgrAbility, Extension, MOFGA, UFVM, other farm specific groups)
- Outreach Events (trade shows, fairs, etc)
Barriers to Success

• Coming to farming late in life
  – Lack of farming experience
  – Few apprenticeship opportunities for older “new” farmers with families and other responsibilities

• Brain injury, depression, post-traumatic stress
  – Vision/Business Planning
  – Organization, Bookkeeping
  – Motivation
  – Mental/physical fatigue

• Physical limitations
Educate Veterans-2-Cultivate: Business Development & Assistive Technology Symposium (EV2C)
EV2C: Business Development

- One-on-One business mentors from SCORE (SBDC)
- Farm Financial Planning
EV2C: Workshops

- Farm Stretching
- Circle of Support
- Assistive Technology (memory, universal design)
- Veteran Farmer Showcase
EV2C

- Resource Fair
- Farmer Panel
EV2C: Make it FUN!

- Swag Bags
- Silent Raffle items
- LOTS OF NETWORKING!
- Survey cohort after the event
EV2C: Outcomes

• 70 participants
  – 27 Veteran farms represented
  – 18 Resource fair participants

• Survey results
  – 80% attended for networking opportunities
  – 80% feel it’s important to remain a veteran-only event
  – 53% stated they planned to follow up with their business mentor

• EV2C 2020: Saturday, November 14th

“More time, more vendors, more presenters, more Veteran farmers”
Boots-2-Bushels: Boot Camp for Market Gardeners & Farmers (B2B)
B2B: Competency Based Objectives

• Farmer skill and knowledge for vegetable growers in Maine
  – Long-term productivity and efficiency of soil health.
  – Best practices for crop planning
  – Best practices to optimize high-quality vegetable & fruit production to include integrated pest management

• Business skills required to run a successful farm business
  – Marketing and branding strategies
  – Farm business planning
B2B: Schedule & Location

- 9 Month program: January – September
- VA hospital community garden
- 16 participants including one civilian*
- Jan-Apr: Twice monthly classroom instruction
  - Cooperative Extension and MOFGA educators
- Apr-Sep: Field production
  - 25 member CSA, 16 weeks of food shares
- Field trips to other producers
B2B: Educational Support & Funding

- UMaine Cooperative Extension and MOFGA educators with Maine AgrAbility - veteran outreach coordinator facilitates program

- 2020 funding
  - Disabled American Veterans (DAV)
  - VA Recreation Therapy Department

- 2021 – 2024 (potential funding)
  - VA Farming and Recovery Mental Health Services (VA FARMS) pilot program
B2B: Foster Unit Cohesion

• Private Facebook group
  – Novice to 11+ years farming experience
• Accountability – checking in on each other
  – Passing the word, phone tree
• Share ideas, tips and techniques
• Enable group bulk purchases
• Peer-to-Peer mentoring
• Field work will include workshops & activities
  – Yoga, cooking, mindfulness, tai chi, etc.
FB Comments

“It's my goal to share this with my community - after 40+ countries of travel I find that the greatest impact each of us can make is a positive contribution on a community level.” Feb. 7, 2020

“…having animals and land to be stewards of helps my husband stay connected and gives him a sense of purpose that he’s struggled to maintain since retiring.” Jan. 19, 2020
My FAVORITE FB comment thus far:

“My husband has budgeted for seeds, will be buying them this week, is determining what will probably sell, planning the plots for the greenhouse/high tunnel, and wants to sell CSA's..... Who is this "new man"? Thank you Boots to Bushels class, sponsored by Agribility [sic]” Feb. 6, 2020
Farming is hard: it's even harder if you are coming to it late in life, and/or struggle with depression, brain injury or PTS

Success in the military: grit, determination, resilience, creativity translate well to farming

Farm business and entrepreneurial skills can be learned

Veteran-centric education and training programs create space for veterans to learn and help each other

Important to foster non-veteran farm community integration

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