

COMMON THREAD ALLIANCE
PROGRAM EVALUATION

Veterans Farms
Project Evaluation
2nd Quarter Report
April 1, 2015 – June 30, 2015

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Introduction

Veterans Farm was established in 2010 by Adam and Michele Burke as a handicapped accessible farm for disabled combat veterans. After Adam, a Purple Heart veteran, returned home from his deployments with multiple wounds of war. His vision was to create an organization that would provide an emotionally supportive and nurturing environment where veterans would receive core vocational training services and intensive case management aimed at helping them return to society as contributing members. Through the *Enhancing Veterans Farm Fellowship Program*, Veterans Farm's aim is threefold provide outreach/ train veterans for a sustainable economic career in farming, offer veterans a strong support mentoring system and provide the resources they will need to start their agriculture ventures. Veterans Farm, won a Beginning Farmers and Rancher Development Program grant to help returning combat war veterans develop the fundamentals of private farm related businesses that will be sustainable over the long term. The grant will hasten the Veterans Farm progress toward a comprehensive farm based training program that will focus on the needs of those post war veterans including those who suffer from traumatic brain injury, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other combat related injuries. In addition, the program focuses on junior military personnel who have not had the opportunity to gain extensive technical skills or training.

Background

Pursuant to the terms of the agreement with the USDA Beginning Farmers program, Bruce Waite Ph.D. through Common Thread International Inc. was engaged to perform the program evaluation. Common Thread International Inc., (dba the Common Thread Alliance) is a 501 © 3 not for profit organization which is proficient in agricultural program quality assurance and evaluation. Dr. Waite has an advanced degree in organizational development with a focus of workforce development programs for workers with barriers.

The evaluation will be structured to examine the stated program goals through a process of event observation, examination of documents and operator provided information.

The program has three general goals:

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- **Increase the number of combat war veterans served by the *Enhancing Veterans Farm Fellowship Program*.**
- **To expand and further refine upon the existing Veterans Farm innovative mentoring model.**
- **Increase access to farmland among beginning farmers through leases and purchases.**

Methodology

Veterans Farms intends to achieve their goals through the provision of 5 annual outreach events, eligibility determination, and the provision of program services leading the program applicants to the desired program outcomes. The events are scheduled quarterly at convenient locations throughout Northeast Florida. The events will run for 3 -6 hours and will be comprised of numerous speakers who will present on topics of interest to beginning farmers. From the list of attendees some percentage will express an interest in the program and as such will apply. Once the application process is complete each eligible individual will have an opportunity to participate the in the program.

Extensive outreach and recruitment is performed through various media channels including email, web announcements and social marketing. The advertisements are targeted towards soon to be or recently separated veterans.

The event activities include information-training sessions performed by various community speakers. The speakers discuss numerous topics covering practical issues on farming business, farm finance, grants and markets, and lending. Subject matter experts are recruited from a pool of existing farmers, government officials and representatives of lending institutions. Many of the presenters are also veterans.

One such event was held within this reporting quarter, which brings the year total to 2. The evaluator attended the event to observe both the number of attendees and to examine the quality of the speakers. Opinions on program quality are purely based on the evaluator's opinion and as such are not a fundamental part of this evaluation but rather are utilized simply to highlight various aspects of the program.

In addition a web-based training fashioned from recorded content from the physical workshops was introduced during this reporting period.

To determine the metrics used to evaluate the program the evaluator will examine the following measures.

Quantitative measures:

- How many events were held
- How many attendees as reflected on the sign in sheet

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- How many attendees were determined eligible
- How many attendees received a service

Performance

DATE	EVENT DESCRIPTION	# OF ATTENDEES	# DEEMED ELIGIBLE	# WHO RECEIVED SERVICE	# OUTCOMES WITHIN THIS QUARTER
3/7/2015 1 st Quarter	New beginning farmer/rancher workshop	219	171	143	143 received consultation, case management, referral, business plan training/land acquisition training. USDA resource training, agriculture training.
5/16/15 2 nd Quarter	New beginning farmer/rancher workshop	83	57	57	57 received consultation, case management, referral, business plan training/land acquisition training. USDA resource training, agriculture training.
2 nd Quarter	New Beginning Farmer Training videotaped and posted on You Tube available through secure registered login	216 * * Over half were pre-registered the others were alerted through word	39	39* * Geographic distance prohibited individuals from	39 received consultation, case management, referral, business plan training/land acquisition

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DATE	EVENT DESCRIPTION	# OF ATTENDEES	# DEEMED ELIGIBLE	# WHO RECEIVED SERVICE	# OUTCOMES WITHIN THIS QUARTER
	and direct email	of mouth		traveling to the training site	training. USDA resource training, agriculture training.
June 12, 2015 Quarterly Totals		299	96	96	
2 Quarter Totals		518	267	239	

Qualitative measures:

- Observations of the events
- Examination and discussion of the marketing activities
- Informal interviews with attendees
- Informal interviews with Veterans Farm staff
- Informal interviews with speakers

On May 16, 2015 Veterans Farms presented the second New Beginning Farmer/ Rancher development workshop. This was the only event held during the second quarter. The event was held at the Jacksonville Equestrian Center located at 13611 Normandy Blvd. in Jacksonville Florida, in a large indoor training area. The facility was climate controlled and well suited to the activity. There was plenty of available parking and the facility was fully accessible. The event was well attended and presented a full three hours of various speakers, speaking on farming related topics. Additionally, the Veterans Farm staff was available before and after the speakers to provide individual information to attendees. The speakers included participation from Florida Organic Growers, The Farm Credit of Florida, Wealth Watchers Inc., USDA AMS, USDA RDS, and the NRCS. In addition there were speakers from LWS Grants Consulting, Gateway Business Advisors and Eat Your Yard Jax. There was a comprehensive array of topics that included topics on marketing, farm finance, financial planning and grant writing. Several speakers also addressed some technical topics such as organic certification and urban farming. The speaker organizations were on hand before and after the event to provide individual consultation also. The speakers seemed well informed on their topics and well received by the audience. There were 83 individuals who were registered and signed in but many other people were in attendance so the apparent attendance was somewhat higher.

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During and after the event I spoke to between 5-8 participants and asked each for feedback on the program content, how they received notification of the event and if they intended on following through with the program. One person had already finished some portion of the program and commented that they felt the program was "excellent". Most had heard of the program through various media and all stated that they thought the content was helpful. This information was gathered on an informal basis and as such was intended to obtain some qualitative sense of the impact on the program.

The general impression was that the content had the desired impact and there was a high level of enthusiasm.

As with the first event, the event was marketed using a combination of email, social marketing, web based marketing and posters/flyers distributed to multiple stakeholder groups and public media.

As with the first event, the speakers were provided with projection equipment where they could provide additional information using power point and other graphics. Handouts of each program service were also available to the attendees. There was free food and refreshment provided to the attendees.

I observed each of the presentations and on the whole the information appeared to be well presented and complete on the part of each speaker. The list of topics covered appeared to be holistic and succinctly targeted to the needs of both veterans and beginning farmers.

Information provided by Veterans Farms, which indicated that out of 83 individuals who registered 57 had their eligibility, tested and were deemed eligible. This would appear to represent an enrollment rate of 69% generated by the event.

Additionally, I interviewed about 20% of the presenters. The majority expressed an impression that the event met their expectations and that they thought the event was a success.

Additionally during this quarter Veterans Farms videotaped the workshop and posted it on the Veterans Farm website where it is accessible after an individual completes a cursory registration. The imperative for this is based in the number of apparently eligible and interested veterans who live too far away to effectively travel to the facility or the physical presentations.

The initial efforts to migrate to virtual style training appear to be successful with a total of 216 persons who have viewed the courseware for a significant amount of time to be considered as participation in the training activity. From that domain 39 persons have contacted Veterans Farms to be considered for service and 13 have

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traveled to the farm for services. According to the Veterans Farm Executive Director, many persons from this venue have commented that they have transportation and housing barriers that prevent them from coming from other parts of the county to attend. There is however a high interest in the program and what it has to offer.

In evaluating both the quantifiable data as presented by Veterans Farm and the qualitative observations by the evaluator it appears that the program is exceeding expectations in both its desirability on the part of Veterans who wish to become farmers and the number of persons who have made the commitment to attend.