



Engaging Veterans in Close the Gap Campaigns

Advocates have a unique opportunity to engage veterans in campaigns to close the Medicaid coverage gap. Currently, more than seven percent of all veterans are uninsured. Fifty four percent of uninsured veterans— plus hundreds of thousands of their spouses – live in states that have chosen not to draw down federal funds to improve Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act (ACA).¹ This memo provides tips and tools for consumer health advocates interested in engaging the veteran community on closing the coverage gap.

How will veterans and their families benefit from closing the gap?

- **1.2 million veterans and their family members remained uninsured in 2014.** This includes 706,000 veterans and another 503,000 of veterans’ family members.²
- **In 2017, fifty four percent of uninsured veterans are projected to be living in states that have not expanded Medicaid.** Of these veterans, 4 in 10 will be in the coverage gap and ineligible for financial assistance for coverage under the ACA.³
- **Thirty eight percent of uninsured veterans in non-expansion states would gain coverage if the coverage gap were closed.** Being covered by Medicaid would not preclude them from using the VA system if they qualify, and would offer them access to greater health care choices at a lower cost.
- **Not all veterans are able to access Veterans Administration (VA) services.** While the VA health delivery system provides low-cost care to veterans, many veterans do not qualify or are not able to use VA services for a number of reasons. For example, eligibility is based on a variety of factors such as service-related disabilities and income level. In addition, many veterans may not live near VA facilities or lack confidence that they qualify for the care they need. Also, veterans’ families do not qualify for services through the VA.

Advocates can engage the veterans’ community in their Close the Gap campaigns

Veterans are compelling spokespeople for closing the gap because their service is closely tied to society’s core values. The idea that veterans should be taken care of when they come home from service and that our country owes a responsibility to them for their sacrifice is deeply

¹ Haley, J., Gates, J., Buettgens, M. and Kenney, G. “Veterans and Their Family Members Gain Coverage Under the ACA, but Opportunities for More Progress Remain,” Urban Institute (2016)

² Ibid

³ Ibid

embedded in our culture and attitudes. Making the connection between that value (veterans shouldn't be uninsured) and action (closing the coverage gap) creates a powerful narrative for your campaign.

For this reason (and others) veterans can be compelling spokespeople and bring a unique story to the table. Much as with other spokespeople in a campaign, veterans can testify at hearings, tell their story to the press, and speak at events.

Before approaching veterans, it's important to familiarize yourself with the values, structure, policies, and expectations of the military to ensure you can approach them in a culturally-competent manner. Here are some tips and best practices for engaging the veteran community on this issue:

- **Keep your message politically neutral, and focused on the concrete benefits of the expansion to veterans and their families.** During active duty, service members are prohibited from being involved in politics. As a result, many veterans avoid overtly political activity. When engaging veterans on this issue, stay politically neutral and focus on how veterans and their spouses will benefit from Medicaid.
- **Find a trusted community contact to help you engage the larger veteran community.** Veterans themselves are the best messengers to other veterans, since they already have one another's trust. A good strategy is to find one veteran who is interested and engaged in the campaign, who can educate the broader veteran community about how they stand to benefit from closing the gap. You might start by trying to engage veterans who are public figures, such as friendly state legislators. These veterans are already comfortable taking a stance on political issues, and they can then serve as a liaison to the broader veteran community.

Places to engage veterans or service members

- Find chapters of these organizations in your state:
 - [American Veterans](#) (AMVETS)
 - [American Military Retirees Association](#)
 - [Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America](#)
 - [United Service Organization](#)
- Explore groups affiliated with colleges and universities:
 - Find out if any colleges near you have offices that support students who are veterans.
 - [Student Veterans of America](#)
 - Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) chapters
- Nonprofit and government agencies in your state or community:
 - County Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) – VSOs are tasked with understanding laws, and how they affect veterans and their families.
 - Your local community health centers' consumer advisory boards may have veterans.

- Organizations serving individuals with mental health, substance use disorders, or people who are homeless often serve veterans or have staff or board members who are veterans.
- Local [Veterans of Foreign Wars](#) community centers
- [Rotary Club](#), [Elks Lodges](#), [Kiwanis Club](#) and other service-oriented organizations.

Beyond engaging veterans in the coverage gap directly, consider that veterans are a powerful constituency, especially among moderate and conservative legislators. Support from veterans or even college students and others who are enlisted or training for military service is important. Consider engaging this constituency through a combination of tactics: presenting at group meetings, posting flyers and palm cards at offices or organizations that serve this population, and one-to-one conversations about the benefits of closing the coverage gap.

Further resources:

To find out how many uninsured veterans and veterans' family members could gain coverage from closing the gap in your state, read [The Urban Institute's analysis](#).

To locate a Veterans Affairs Office by state, [visit the VA website directory](#).