



GOT YOUR SIX

April 29, 2015

Advancing the Asset-Based Definition of American Post-9/11 Veterans

Survey Analysis Report

To: Got Your 6

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On behalf of Got Your 6, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research conducted an online survey among 1,000 adults nationwide. The survey was conducted between March 24 and April 1, 2015, and is representative of the national 18+ adult population per census estimates. The year-over-year results in this report reference a previous study among a random sampling of the same population, conducted April 22 to May 6, 2014.

Executive Summary

Altering impressions of any person, institution, or product at the national level—especially impressions of a group as recognizable in American culture as post-9/11 military veterans—is no easy feat. As highlighted by our inaugural annual survey one year ago, post-9/11 veterans are, not surprisingly, broadly popular. Despite this popularity, the American public is open to accepting a new, “asset-based” characterization of them that breaks the current “damaged hero/charity” cycle and redefines post-9/11 veterans as valuable community leaders who need the opportunity to continue to serve once they come home. Moreover, last year’s study showed the asset framework to be a more compelling and authentic way for people to view post-9/11 veterans.

Against that backdrop, this survey highlights the type of incremental progress that is commensurate with the task at hand. Unlike a presidential campaign or a national marketing push, Got Your 6 did not spend the billions of dollars in paid communications often required to move public opinion in big numbers over a short time. The organization did, however, use its resources effectively while engaging key allies in the media and entertainment sectors to drive the message and THE mission, resulting in gradual-yet-positive steps forward.

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On the whole, the positive shifts observed in these data are small and within the margin of error; individually, most do not meet the threshold for statistical significance. However, the totality of positive movement across almost all of the “civic asset” measures specifically should not be ignored. Moreover, there are substantial shifts on several measures.

■ Figure 1: Movement on Civic Asset Measures

	2014	2015
Over the next few years, more than one million service members will re-enter civilian life. This is a big opportunity because it is an influx of skilled leaders who could positively impact the country's economy.	70	74
OR Over the next few years, more than one million service members will re-enter civilian life. We need to honor their service, but this influx of veterans could put a strain on the country's economy.	30	26
Communities should have higher expectations for post-/11 veterans than they do for their non-veteran peers because veterans have gained skills and experience through their military service.	52	60
OR Communities shouldn't demand as much from post-9/11 veterans as they do from their non-veteran peers because veterans have already done their duty. ¹	47	40
Their military service provides post-9/11 veterans with skills and training that make them successful leaders and positive contributors to their communities.	63	65
OR Their military service often creates difficulties and obstacles that post-9/11 veterans have to overcome to be successful leaders and positive contributors to their communities.	37	34
Has a positive impact on their community. (Percent reporting “describes a post-9/11 veteran better than an average civilian”)	31	34
Is a valuable asset to their community. (Percent reporting “describes a post-9/11 veteran better than an average civilian”)	32	35

Perhaps more importantly, Got Your 6 is delivering a compelling message that holds the potential—over time—to create larger-scale change in perceptions of post-9/11 veterans. This survey was designed not only to measure progress, but also to gauge the potential for continued advancement. Undoubtedly, Got Your 6 has the opportunity to achieve sustained success in the mission of evolving perceptions of veterans toward an asset-based frame.

- *People readily accept what Got Your 6 is saying.* Following the introduction of the Got Your 6 message paragraph, nearly half (49 percent) report that this information changed their way of thinking about post-9/11 veterans in a positive direction. Nearly one-quarter (22 percent) of the population say it changed their way of thinking a lot in a positive

¹ Note: Wording of the first two statement pairs was changed slightly from 2014.

manner. To put that in perspective, public polling generally shows veterans holding a favorability rating bordering on 90 percent favorable. The Got Your 6 message convinces many people who already have a positive impression of veterans to become even more positive, and in a different way. In addition, after hearing the message, 80 percent say they would have a conversation with a veteran that goes beyond saying thank you and asks what is next for them.

- *Further, there are huge shifts toward the asset frame on key measures once people hear Got Your 6’s message.* The following table highlights big post-message testing changes in the way people perceive veterans.

Figure 1: Statement Pairs, Pre- and Post-Messaging

	Initial	Post-Messaging
Over the next few years, more than one million service members will re-enter civilian life. This is a big opportunity because it is an influx of skilled leaders who could positively impact the country’s economy. OR	74	78
Over the next few years, more than one million service members will re-enter civilian life. We need to honor their service, but this influx of veterans could put a strain on the country’s economy.	26	22
Communities should have higher expectations for post-/11 veterans than they do for their non-veteran peers because veterans have gained skills and experience through their military service. OR	60	70
Communities shouldn’t demand as much from post-9/11 veterans as they do from their non-veteran peers because veterans have already done their duty.	40	30
Post-9/11 veterans are leaders and civic assets who have unique and valuable skills that can help strengthen our communities. OR	49	63
Post-9/11 veterans are heroes who have sacrificed for our country. They deserve our thanks and need our support.	51	37
The best way to help post-9/11 veterans succeed is to provide them with opportunities to continue to lead and contribute to their community. OR	45	48
The best way to help post-9/11 veterans succeed is to provide them with services like health care, housing, and job opportunities.	55	51

Of course, challenges remain. Many people enter the conversation about post-9/11 veterans from the “damaged” viewpoint. Forty-four percent still see the image of the man who appears homeless and say he is likely to be a veteran. Large majorities continue to believe misinformation about post-9/11 veterans—83 percent say they are more likely than their civilian matched peers to suffer mental health issues, the same number as a year ago. By a 55-45 percent margin, people believe that providing post-9/11 veterans with access to services and

programs is a better way to help them than giving them opportunity to continue to serve in their community. These are hardened views that will take time to reverse.

And while Hollywood continues to represent a big opportunity, it presents challenges as well. People are divided on whether or not post-9/11 veterans are portrayed accurately on television and in film. The good news is that those who view veterans as civic assets are more likely to think Hollywood is portraying veterans accurately; however, there are still big segments of people who tilt toward the charity frame who also think depictions of post-9/11 veterans are accurate.

Overall, while there is much work to be done, Got Your 6 has budged the boulder and there is ample opportunity to continue to push it up the hill.

Strategic Recommendations

This survey also tested the Got Your 6 message in a manner designed to provide insights into focusing and refining communications. As noted above, the data suggest that the overarching message is very compelling and shifts opinions on core measures; it is confirming of what Got Your 6 is saying and doing. Therefore, we offer the following strategic suggestions in the spirit of emphasizing—but not changing—certain aspects of the message and strategy:

- **Highlight the reciprocal positive benefits for post-9/11 veterans and communities.** On measures throughout this survey, people validate the notion that “we all win” when we give post-9/11 veterans the opportunity to lead in the community. The top two slogans tested capture this dynamic directly: “Empowering veterans, strengthening communities” and “Veterans strengthen communities” elicit the most positive response of all eleven slogans tested. While we want to get to the community benefits and spell them out clearly for people, the positive outcomes for veterans themselves should lead—among people who say they would make a financial contribution to an organization that engages post-9/11 veterans to lead in their communities, more than twice as many would do so “because it will have a positive impact on the lives of post-9/11 veterans” than “because it will make a positive impact in my community.”
- **Focus on moving the discussion past charity, but give people the space to act on their charitable instincts.** Whether driven by social desirability or not, Americans care about improving outcomes for their veterans. Indeed, more people say thanking veterans for their service is a better reason to make a financial contribution than is it having a positive impact on their community. And people believe the best way to help post-9/11 veterans succeed is to provide them with services over opportunities to lead. It is not necessarily important to acknowledge this directly, but we recommend making sure people know that while charitable behavior is appreciated, there is much more we can do to really help veterans in an impactful way.
- **Opportunity is an operative word.** The word “opportunity” appears four times in the message paragraph; in each instance, it produces a double-digit spike in response, including in two of the top three most-selected passages. This addresses people’s desire to “provide” for post-9/11 veterans while moving away from providing charity to providing opportunity that helps both veterans and the community.

- **Avoid framing the community benefits too broadly.** People clearly believe post-9/11 veterans can have an impact on their community. However, trying to tie veteran leadership to reducing childhood obesity may be a bridge too far and may set post-9/11 veterans up for failure.
- **Work to dispel the mental health myths, but not in a vacuum.** Despite some progress, this remains the highest hurdle to clear—more than three-quarters think post-9/11 veterans are more likely to suffer from mental health issues or commit suicide than their civilian matched peers. Changing this dynamic is at the center of getting people to see veterans as potential community assets; in some ways it is a prerequisite. But given the lower bar on some of the economic and other measures, there is value in tackling these misrepresentations as a set. Further, once people have accepted that post-9/11 veterans are economically successful, for example, the more likely they are to reject the notion of rampant mental health challenges among the post-9/11 veteran community.
- **Continue to feature post-9/11 veterans heavily in communications.** Alongside the critical Hollywood piece of the communications, things that feature veterans directly, like the Storyteller series, are impactful as post-9/11 veterans and veterans organizations are the most trusted messengers.
- **Key Target Audiences.** The following targets are based on a meta-analysis of key measures in the survey, including but not limited to those who shift toward the asset-based frame after hearing messaging, those who said the message impacted them in a positive way, and those who say they would “definitely” undertake one of the actions to create opportunity for veterans.
 - Women
 - People under age 50
 - College-educated
 - Middle class and higher income (those with a household income above \$50,000)
 - Moderate Republicans

Key Findings

Perceptions of veterans remain literal; positive views are defined by the “hero” framework. Before the introduction of any information in the survey, 69 percent in an open-ended question think of a post-9/11 veteran as someone that has “served in the military after 9/11,” “served the country,” or something else generically descriptive in nature. Fourteen percent offer something affirmatively positive—up slightly from a year ago—with the entirety of this positive response falling into the hero category (patriotic, brave, should be honored, sacrificed for the country). Twelve percent said something negative (unchanged from 2014), largely concentrated around mental health and PTSD.

These findings are exacerbated when the question shifts to Hollywood, with slightly more people viewing the portrayal of post-9/11 veterans on television and in film as more negative than positive. The Hollywood dynamic is entirely defined by two competing depictions of post-9/11 veterans—simply put, in today’s entertainment world, they remain either heroic or damaged, or both.

“Damage” remains prevalent in the way people see veterans. At the beginning of the survey, we showed respondents three images – the same they saw last year – and asked them to assign a list of traits to each picture. The central finding from last year holds constant—people are more inclined to believe that a homeless-looking man (without any features or clothing identifying him as military) is more likely to be a veteran than to have a mental health issue or a criminal past.

Figure 3: Image/Trait Exercise

Please decide if each characteristic describes the person in the picture.
(Percent Responding Yes)



Is a military veteran.....16	Is a military veteran.....23	Is a military veteran...44.....46
Has experienced homelessness.....4	Has experienced homelessness.....6	Has experienced homelessness.....84.....87
Has a mental health issue.....6	Has a mental health issue.....4	Has a mental health issue.....36.....32
Has a criminal past.....6	Has a criminal past.....6	Has a criminal past.....19.....18

2014:

Centered on mental health and other negative constructs, misinformation about post-9/11 veterans remains rampant. However, acceptance of the positive claims about post-9/11 veterans has increased. When presented with a series of statements about post-9/11 veterans, Americans continue to believe that the negative attributes are overwhelmingly true. The “fact” that veterans suffer from mental health issues tops the list, with 83 percent citing it as true, unchanged from 2014. Breaking this notion represents the continued central challenge, as mental health comes through not only in the above image exercise, but also as the number one volunteered response in the open-end where people were asked to define post-9/11 veterans.

However, there are signs of advancement on countering some of these beliefs. First, most people remain relatively uncertain about these claims, answering that they think it’s “true, my best guess,” as opposed to saying it’s “true, I am certain.” Second, there has been an uptick in most of the positive attributes from last year.

It is worth noting the differences between veterans and those with a veteran in their household on these traits. While veterans and family members are both as likely as the general population to buy into the falsehoods regarding mental health, veterans themselves are much more likely to acknowledge the positive traits regarding stability and success than those with a veteran in their household.

■ **Figure 4: True-False Battery, Percent Responding “True”**

	2014 total	2015 total	Veterans	Vet Household	No Vet in Household
Suffer from mental health issues	83	83	80	83	83
Commit suicide at higher rates	75	77	77	76	77
Higher rates of substance abuse	61	61	57	58	64
More likely to be unemployed	60	61	56	60	63
Stay at jobs longer, get promoted more quickly	51	55	68	51	55
More likely to have stable family life	33	40	49	35	41
Less likely to be homeless	38	38	47	30	41
Make more money	26	30	36	23	33

Please read the following statements about post 9/11 veterans. From what you know, please indicate whether you believe each statement is true or false, and how certain you are about your answer.

Movement on the positive traits listed above comes not only from veterans, but also those in both the Northeast and West regions of the country, younger people (particularly those under 40 and younger women), and those considered middle class or higher income (\$50,000 or above). Educational attainment doesn't have a strong impact here. There were positive shifts among both those with college degrees and without over the past year, however, there was particular strong movement among women without a college degree.

There are initial positive indicators of changing the “damaged” perception of post-9/11 veterans, including in terms of mental health. In addition to some of shifts on economic and family life measures in the true/false battery detailed above, the following table shows similar improvement on additional perceptions of post-9/11 veterans. This includes more positive movement on the economic traits above, but importantly, it also reveals small-yet-consistent improvements on mental health-related measures.

Figure 5: Post-9/11 Veteran Image Battery, “Describes a post-9/11 Veteran Well” (Mean Score on 100-point Scale)

	2014	2015
Is a hero	n/a	67
Has potential	n/a	67
Is a valuable community asset	n/a	59
Is a role model for children	59	57
Has a blue collar job such as plumber, electrician, or contractor	48	45
Has a college education	44	40
Is a teacher	34	34
Has a white collar job such as businessman, accountant or lawyer	35	33
Is a small business owner	32	30
Suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD	54	46
Is unemployed	41	36
Has a mental health condition	41	35
Is damaged	n/a	35
Is homeless	30	27
Has been to jail	22	18

Despite misinformation, small gains have been achieved on the notion that post-9/11 veterans are leaders and can impact their communities. Three quarters of Americans see the re-entry of more than 1 million veterans into civilian life as an opportunity, because they are skilled leaders. And six in ten say communities should have higher expectations for post-9/11 veterans because of their unique skills and experiences; this number jumps ten points after messaging.

Across the board, Americans report that post-9/11 veterans make stronger leaders and better assets than their civilian counterparts. More than four in ten (44 percent) say the phrase “is a strong leader” describes post-9/11 veterans better than civilians. There have been small positive shifts on this trait, as well as “has a positive impact on their community,” from last year, although they are offset to some degree by counter-movement on other related measures.

Figure 6: Comparative Imagery, Percent Responding

	Post-9/11 Veteran Better	Both	Civilian Better	Veteran: Civilian Ratio	2014 Vet: Civilian Ratio
Is a strong leader	44	47	8	5.5	4.9
Is a valuable asset to their community	35	56	9	3.9	4.6
Has a positive impact on their community	34	57	9	3.8	3.4
Is a leader in their community	31	56	13	2.4	2.9
Has a negative impact on their community	12	62	26	0.5	0.6

For each characteristic, please indicate whether it better describes a post-9/11 veteran, or an average civilian of the same age who did not serve in the military by checking ONE of the boxes.

On the whole, across all of these measures, the positive shifts tend to be driven primarily by the following groups:

- Veteran households
- Those without a college education, particularly non-college men
- People over 50
- Moderate Republicans and Republican men
- Higher income

Major shift toward asset frame after messaging. When people were asked to highlight phrases that stand out as the most convincing reasons to engage and empower post-9/11 veterans, phrases highlighting their unique skill sets and opportunities to put them to use, rise to the top. Four in ten (42 percent) highlight that veterans “were trained to be leaders, team-builders and problem-solvers.” A quarter (24 percent) say we need to not give charity or pity, but provide “the opportunity to realize their true potential.”

Prior to messaging, people were split on what frame best describes post-9/11 veterans. Forty-nine percent said they were leaders and civic assets with valuable skills, and 51 percent said they were heroes who deserve our thanks and support. After messaging, there was a net 23-point shift in favor of the asset frame. And when presented with the best way to help veterans, 55 percent initially said it was best to provide them with help and services, compared to 45 percent in favor of giving them opportunities to become leaders and contribute to their communities. After messaging, these two frames are nearly at parity.

After the messaging, half (49 percent) report that their way of thinking about veterans had changed in a positive way. Those that changed their way of thinking include younger people, particularly younger men and those age 18-29, and those with a college education, particularly college-educated men and younger college grads.

Top-tier proposals for post-9/11 veterans center around volunteer service and jobs.

Almost every proposed plan to give post-9/11 veterans opportunities to strengthen their communities was met with widespread (two-thirds or higher) support. The only exception is using veterans to stem the rise of childhood obesity; just 49 percent of the population says it would be very or somewhat beneficial. The most well-received proposals include:

- Expanding incentives for local businesses to hire veterans (51 percent very beneficial/84 percent very or somewhat beneficial)
- Deploying trained teams of veterans in response to natural disasters (50 percent/83 percent)
- Putting veterans in leadership positions at volunteer organizations like Habitat for Humanity or the American Red Cross (43 percent/83 percent)
- Uniting veterans and civilians together through community gatherings and activities (43 percent/81 percent)

This exercise was split-sampled; half were asked if these ideas would be beneficial to post-9/11 veterans, and the other half were asked if it would be beneficial to communities. It is worth noting that there was little difference between the two; they are all seen as mutually beneficial.

Veterans, their families, and veteran organizations are the most trustworthy messengers on veterans’ issues. Half of the population would trust post-9/11 veterans (52 percent) and

veterans' organizations (49 percent) on how to engage and empower them after returning home from service. Another third (36 percent) would trust military families. As is often the case, this trust diminishes as the messenger gets further away—just 17 percent choose military leaders.