

Fast forward

Veterans can re-engage with civilian life by helping others, explains Tony Wright



Forward Assist is a charity that offers support and guidance to former servicemen and women experiencing difficulties adjusting to civilian life. Its 'veteran specific' projects are designed for those with mental or physical health problems, the unemployed, or those who have experience of social exclusion, or involvement with the criminal justice system.

The civilian community's belief that the military takes care of its own after service life

is misleading, and many serving and former services personnel go on to develop alcohol and drug dependency issues and have difficulty accessing specialist support.

A large percentage of our referrals are people disenfranchised from mainstream services and lacking family support. A disproportionate number are unemployed and live a solitary lifestyle.

Forward Assist, based in the north-east of England, believes that by promoting 'active citizenship', former servicemen

and women can become stakeholders within their chosen communities and, in doing so, utilise their transferrable skills. Our mantra is: 'They have served their country, now let them serve the community.'

We have created a Citizenship Reloaded course, lasting eight weeks, that gives veterans the chance to do good and re-engage with society through supervised projects that support those less well off than themselves.

The course will be rolled out locally this year and then,

depending on the feedback, will be adapted accordingly to those making the transition from military to civilian life, those transitioning from custody to community, and those veterans who have felt abandoned since they transitioned years ago and feel that they have been left to get on with it and suffer in silence.

If we receive funding we will roll out the training nationally, and we can be commissioned via our trading arm to deliver it on an as and when basis.

Forward Assist also runs the



Forward Assist
in Little Rock

Forward2Employment course, providing educational and employment placement opportunities for serving personnel and veterans of all ages to increase self-esteem and personal aspirations. As a result, veterans and members of the armed forces community are more able to gain the respect of their civilian counterparts, significant others and peers.

Our staff and volunteer mentors seek out and 'plug in' former service personnel to sympathetic and appropriate services, while offering diversionary activities that are linked to the acquisition of vocational skills and accredited qualifications.

We 'chaperone' veterans to initial appointments, recognising the challenge of returning to civilian life.

Forward Assist is a small charity with big plans for the future. As a result of regular consultations, we have developed a service that is truly needs led, with all the activities and services on offer having been requested by the veterans themselves.

During 2013, the organisation became an Open College Network Accredited Training Centre and delivered mentor training for 13 veterans incarcerated in HMP Northumberland.

Other activities offered by Forward Assist last year included fishing in rural

France, cookery tuition, creative writing, a digital photography course with an associated exhibition, and a boat renovation project.

Forward Assist also facilitate an annual football tournament which takes place on Armed Forces Day and involves more than 144 individuals. Two veterans gained their Level One Football Coaching Qualification following last year's tournament.

We have established a Rock and Ice Climbing Academy and veterans have learnt the basics of indoor climbing at local facilities. Trips have included outdoor climbing in the Cairngorms, the Lakes and Northumberland, and we have an excursion planned for the French Alps this April.

We are also training veterans to become urban beekeepers and our first batch of honey is anticipated for 2014.

In order to improve communication skills, we have developed a 10-week project teaching veterans the fundamentals of parliamentary debate with students from Newcastle University. Last year, this culminated in a visit to the Houses of Parliament, where one veteran from the group made a closing speech in the House of Lords during an organised debate.

For more information visit
www.forward-assist.com

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Forward thinking



Tony Wright joined the Royal Marines in 1978 and was medically discharged in 1981 after injuring his shoulder during basic training. As an early service leaver he has first-hand knowledge of how difficult it is for former servicemen and women to assimilate back into the civilian community.

He returned to the education system aged 30 and has since worked in a range of statutory and voluntary welfare settings, qualifying as a social worker in 1996. His experience includes management of residential care, community support outreach teams, and the intensive supervision and support of prolific and priority adult offenders in both the probation service and the voluntary sector.

More recently he has worked as a Home Office adviser based within Government Office North East and is an expert at developing effective interventions for adults facing chronic exclusion. He also sits on a parliamentary justice unions steering group for veterans in the criminal justice system.

In 2011, Tony spent six weeks in the US as part of a Winston Churchill travelling fellowship to research, to compare and contrast the services available to American veterans with those in the UK.

Since then, he has developed the Veterans International Exchange Programme in partnership with US associates, and last October he arranged for six veterans to visit a Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) in Little Rock Arkansas.

These courts were set up nearly six years ago in Buffalo, New York, in an attempt to rehabilitate veterans instead of incarcerating them. They are now located in more than 90 communities across the States.

VTCs leverage the court system to keep veterans with a diagnosis of substance abuse or a behavioural health disorder in treatment long enough to permanently change their behaviour. They involve cooperation and collaboration with prosecutors, defence counsel, treatment providers, probation officers, and law enforcement personnel.

Representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA), and other veteran affiliated groups in the US are also generally involved.

Tony is now actively campaigning for the introduction of US style Veterans Treatment Courts here in the UK.