

# Understanding Barriers and Opportunities to Reduce Tobacco Use and Exposure to Secondhand Smoke Among Maine Veterans

Hart Consulting Inc.

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Services



MaineHealth  
Center for Tobacco  
Independence

The MaineHealth Center for Tobacco Independence (CTI) works across the state of Maine to address tobacco use and exposure through education, prevention, policy, treatment and training initiatives.

CTI administers statewide tobacco treatment and prevention contracts on behalf of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC), Maine Department of Health and Human Services. These Maine CDC contracts support the Maine QuitLink, Tobacco Treatment Training Initiative and Tobacco Prevention Services – the latter of which is part of the broader Maine Prevention Services.



# The Issue: Veterans and service members use tobacco products more than nonveterans

- ▶ In the United States, current serving military personnel smoke cigarettes at a higher rate than the general population.<sup>1,2</sup>
  - ▶ Among military veterans, 29.2% of veterans reported current tobacco product use.<sup>3</sup>
  - ▶ Cigarettes were the most commonly used tobacco product among veterans, at 21.6%.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ The high prevalence of tobacco use among military and veteran personnel has a significant financial impact. During 2010, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) spent an estimated \$2.7 billion on smoking-related ambulatory care, prescription drugs, hospitalization, and home health care.<sup>3</sup>

1. Institute of Medicine. [Combating Tobacco in Military and Veteran Populations external icon](#). Washington: The National Academies Press, 2009

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Quick Stats: Current Smoking Among Men Aged 25–64 Years, by Age Group and Veteran Status—National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), United States, 2007–2011 pdf icon[PDF – 863KB]. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 2012;61(45):929

3. Odani S, Agaku IT, Graffunder CM, Tynan MA, Armour BS. Tobacco Product Use Among Military Veterans – United States, 2010–2015. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2018;67:7–12. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6701a2external icon>

# The Issue: Many Veterans use tobacco products in Maine

- ▶ US Census estimates from 2015 - 2019, show there are 103,772 veterans living in Maine, 9.5% of all people over the age of 18.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ Nationally, 29.2%<sup>2</sup> of veterans use tobacco.
- ▶ If we apply those rates to Maine, that means there are more than 30,300 veterans who use tobacco in Maine.

1. [U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts, 2015 – 2019 estimate.](#)

2. Odani S, Agaku IT, Graffunder CM, Tynan MA, Armour BS. Tobacco Product Use Among Military Veterans – United States, 2010–2015. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2018;67:7–12.

# Discovery Project Areas of Focus

- ▶ The Center for Tobacco Independence and other stakeholders
  - ▶ Understand the issues for veterans and tobacco use
  - ▶ Veterans' interest in stopping tobacco use
  - ▶ Key messages for helping veterans stop using tobacco
  - ▶ Best places to put messages for veterans about supports for stopping tobacco use
  - ▶ Advice on how to work with veteran social clubs to eliminate indoor smoking

# Evaluation Components March - October 2021

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Web Scan of State and Federal Interventions

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Focus Groups with Veterans

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Interviews with Key Contacts for Disseminating Information

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Findings and Recommendations



# Web Scan of State and National Tobacco Cessation Interventions



# There are Many Tobacco Cessation Programs

- ▶ Tobacco cessation programs offered a range of resources
  - ▶ Group discussions with veterans
  - ▶ Telephone lines and texting lines
  - ▶ One-on-one counseling
  - ▶ Medication support
  - ▶ Resources on the health, behavioral, physical, and familial impacts of tobacco use
- ▶ The tobacco cessation programs/resources tailored to veterans are provided nationwide (ex. YouCanQuit2, QuitVET, TRICARE services).
- ▶ Many states offered information on health-related effects of tobacco use among the veteran population and provided links to the national programs.

# Veteran Access to Tobacco Support Programs Varies

- ▶ The state and federal programs had different eligibility rules.
  - Open access
  - Veteran specific programs
  - Military service specific requirements (years served, active deployment, etc.)
- ▶ The programs with the strictest requirements were those that provided ongoing counseling and free tobacco cessation medications.
  - ▶ Many of these programs were covered under TRICARE or at the state and national level for veterans using the VA healthcare.
  - ▶ Some services covered under TRICARE were not available for beneficiaries who were eligible for Medicare Part B.

# Veterans Receive Healthcare/Insurance from Many Providers

## Healthcare Providers

- ▶ VA is a healthcare provider and has specific eligibility requirements
  - ▶ *Community Based Outpatient Clinics* - Bangor, Calais, Caribou, Lewiston, Lincoln, Portland, Rumford, and Saco as well as three (3) part-time Access points in Bingham, Fort Kent and Houlton
  - ▶ *Togus Healthcare System, based in Augusta*
  - ▶ 5 *Vet Centers* satellite offices with limited services, located in Bangor, Caribou, Lewiston, Portland and Sanford
- ▶ Many veterans use non-VA providers for health services

## Insurance

- ▶ TriCare is the health insurance provider for veterans and service members
- ▶ Employer provided health insurance (if employed)
- ▶ Medicaid (if eligible)
- ▶ Medicare (If eligible)

# Focus Groups with Veterans and Service Members



# Focus Groups

\*In person, # on the phone

Club or Group	Description of Participants	# of Participants	Date Held
Gardner Elks Club*	Civic Club - Veteran Members	9	05/05/21
National Guard	Active Members and Veterans	3	07/20/21
American Legion Women's Network*	Women Veterans - Statewide	45	08/07/21
University of Maine Augusta	Students and Staff Veterans	6	08/18/21
University of Southern Maine	Student Veterans	8	08/23/21
Cabin in the Woods*	Veterans in Supported Housing	3	08/25/21
New Gloucester AMVETS*	Veterans	6	08/25/21
Southern Maine Military Community Network	Veterans and People Who Work with Veterans in Southern Maine	7	09/01/21
Western Maine Military Community Network#	Veterans and People Who Work with Veterans in Lewiston Area	12	09/22/21
Disabled American Veterans*	Veterans from Hampden/Bangor and Boothbay Harbor	13	10/13/21
<b>Total</b>		<b>112</b>	

# Veteran and Service Members Tobacco Use

- ▶ Tobacco use is a problem
- ▶ Tobacco use was encouraged during service
  - ▶ Some older veterans were provided cigarettes by the military during their service
  - ▶ To get a break from work
  - ▶ To cope with stress and boredom

*“I know very few veterans that don’t smoke.”*

*-Focus Group Member, 2021*

*“When I came into the Air Force I didn’t smoke, but after a few years I took up smoking because I was the only one who didn’t get a break during the day. ... I figured I wanted to get a break.”*

*-Focus Group Member, 2021*

# Tobacco Use Among Groups of Veterans

*“I think it depends on the age too. If you are talking to a veteran that’s 50 or older, they’re probably more likely to be smoking than a veteran who’s in their thirties.”*

*-Focus Group Member 2021*

*“I didn’t start to smoke until people started shooting at me.”*

*-Focus Group Member 2021*

- ▶ Older veterans and men are more likely to use cigarettes
  - ▶ Focus group participants noted Vietnam era veterans as most likely to use cigarettes
  - ▶ Younger veterans were more likely to vape or use smokeless tobacco products
- ▶ Veterans and service members who had/have hands on jobs or are deployed were more likely to smoke cigarettes

# Interest and Reception of Tobacco Cessation Resources

- ▶ Veterans may be interested in stopping, but only when they are ready
  - ▶ Messages, ads, and promotions will not change veterans' minds about using
  - ▶ Veterans will access the resources when they have made the decision to stop using
- ▶ Use respect and nonjudgement
  - ▶ Military members and veterans like to be given options, but not told what to do
- ▶ Veterans helping veterans is best practice

*"I would rather a veteran helping me than a normal civilian because it's more relatable."*

*-Focus Group Member, 2021*



## Some Messages Work Better Than Others

- ▶ Health risks messaging based on fear are not always received
  - ▶ The dangerous nature of service can negate the fear of later in life health risks
- ▶ The cost of smoking cigarettes does not stop lifelong users
- ▶ Family, children, and friends could be used to persuade veterans to quit
  - ▶ Quit for your kids messaging is impactful
- ▶ Couple wellbeing and tobacco cessation
  - ▶ Incorporate all areas of wellbeing (weight, nutrition, mental health) then add in the benefits of tobacco cessation in the context of overall wellbeing
- ▶ Incentivize/promote benefits of not using tobacco

# Messages Tailored to Veterans

- ▶ Veterans and service members are not quitters
  - ▶ Use phrases like “stopping use” instead of “quitting”
- ▶ Messages should be tailored to veterans and military service members
  - ▶ Posters and fliers with patriotic images, colors, and language. Emphasize free.
  - ▶ Special tabs and pages for veterans on websites that offer resources to speak with other veterans
- ▶ Testimonials from veterans are impactful
  - ▶ Reinforcing the importance of veterans connecting with veterans and establishing a supportive community
- ▶ Participants liked the idea of a veteran specific mentoring program

# Veterans See and Hear Fewer Tobacco Cessation Ads

- ▶ Some participants have seen or heard recent ads for stopping tobacco use, others said they were not seeing them any more
- ▶ Veterans and service members were mixed in awareness of the Maine QuitLink
  - ▶ Participants were interested in learning more about the resource and encouraged adding veteran and military service member specific tabs and resources
  - ▶ Other participants noted that more resources should be put into promoting the resource

*"I can't remember the last time I've seen or heard an ad for quitting smoking. I only watch a few stations on TV and they're specialty channels."*

*-Focus Group Member, 2021*

# Where Should Resources be Placed?

*“A lot of veterans do not get their care from the VA, they get it in the community. So, I think it needs to be a little more focused on community health care places.”*

*-Focus Group Member,  
2021*

- ▶ Healthcare settings but not exclusively the VA
  - ▶ Participants noted that many service members and veterans do not receive care from the VA
- ▶ Public places
  - ▶ Food Banks, Public Housing, Shelters, Gas Stations, VIP/NAPA, and Grocery Stores
- ▶ Online, television, and over the radio
  - ▶ Maine.gov, Social Media (Facebook and Instagram), sports channels and specialty channels
- ▶ Veteran Service Organizations, Armory, Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC)
  - ▶ In bathrooms and on doors for easy access for veterans ready to stop their tobacco use

# Indoor Smoking at Veteran Social Clubs

- ▶ Social clubs are not likely to go smoke free
  - ▶ Participants consistently noted that indoor smoking is embraced by social clubs and the older veteran generation
- ▶ There may be opportunities in the future
  - ▶ Younger veterans and women members are dwindling
  - ▶ Veterans cited indoor smoking policies as reasons they do not go to their local VSO
  - ▶ Partnerships between tobacco prevention organizations and VSOs could be useful in the future when VSOs have too few members to operate

*“Most of them don’t want to stop smoking and it appeals to veterans because they can go hangout with other veterans in a social setting and have a place to smoke whereas they can’t do that anywhere else.”*

*-Focus Group Member, 2021*

# Establish Contacts for Dissemination of Information



# Interviews with VSO Leaders

- ▶ 13 interviews with leaders in the veteran community
  - ▶ Veteran service professionals
  - ▶ 3 public health professionals
  - ▶ 2 professionals that worked specifically with woman veterans
- ▶ Interviewees worked with veterans in a variety of settings
  - ▶ Retired veterans
  - ▶ Veterans seeking job training and employment
  - ▶ Homeless veterans
  - ▶ Veterans pursuing higher education

# VSO Leaders Very Interested in Sharing Information/Resources

- ▶ Interviewees agreed that tobacco use among veterans is a problem
- ▶ Many veterans and retired service members do not receive services through the Veterans Administration
  - ▶ Suggested sharing resources through many channels
- ▶ Veterans helping veterans is best practice
  - ▶ Veterans are more willing to talk and listen to other veterans than nonveterans
  - ▶ Value in training veterans as peer counselors to aid tobacco cessation
- ▶ Interviewees were eager to help share materials
  - ▶ Identified a need for providing tobacco cessation information to veterans
  - ▶ Seamless opportunities to add to their newsletters and local content



# Veteran Service Organizations with Outreach Opportunities in Maine

Name	State	Local
American Legion, Department of Maine	✓	✓
Disabled American Veterans (DAV) in Maine	✓	
Easterseals	✓	
Maine Bureau of Veterans Services (MBVS)	✓	✓
Maine Department of Labor - Hire a Vet Program	✓	
Maine Military Community Networks		✓
Maine National Guard	✓	
University of Maine System, UMA and USM Veterans Program		✓
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs - Togus Healthcare System	✓	✓
Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)	✓	✓
Volunteers of America Northern New England		✓

# Social Media Opportunities

- ▶ Facebook Pages for Maine Veterans
  - ▶ Maine Veterans Outreach
  - ▶ Maine Women Veterans
  - ▶ Maine Veterans Project
  - ▶ Helping Maine Veterans
- ▶ Hire A Vet Campaign Maine
- ▶ Other sites used by VSOs

# Findings and Recommendations



# Discovery Project Findings

- ▶ Tobacco use among veterans is seen as a problem
  - ▶ Veterans and service members use tobacco products more than the general population
  - ▶ Veterans, service members, and VSO leaders agreed that tobacco use among veterans is an issue in their community
- ▶ Veterans are receptive to tobacco cessation messages
  - ▶ When veterans are ready they will use the resources
  - ▶ Resources tailored to veterans work best
- ▶ Veterans are far more receptive when working with other veterans
- ▶ Social clubs are unlikely to change their policies around indoor smoking
- ▶ State and local veteran service organizations are willing to share resources

# Recommendations

- ▶ Materials and resources should be tailored to veterans including specific links and website pages
- ▶ Efforts should be focused in making resources easily accessible and improving the awareness of resources
- ▶ Messages and resources should be placed in a variety of settings including but not limited to the VA
- ▶ CTI and partners should consider a peer support program that train veterans to work with other veterans on tobacco cessation
- ▶ Work in partnership with social clubs and reach out to be a resource when the organizations are ready
- ▶ Reach out to local and state level organizations to disseminate information and establish ongoing partnerships