

Quick Start Guide

For Veterans Socials



Enjoy | Support | Connect

Developed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' VOICES Team in collaboration with members of the Community Recovery Connections Team and the Veteran Stakeholder Forum as well as hosts and attendees of Veterans Socials.

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BOOSTING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Loneliness, isolation, and disconnection from the community can have devastating health implications for Veterans but are preventable. Building social support systems for and with Veterans in the community plays a vital role in enhancing Veteran health and suicide prevention efforts, as having more social support decreases the risk for suicide as well as the prevalence of physical and mental health challenges. This quick start guide was designed for Veterans and Veterans' allies who are interested in getting together socially. Establishing and hosting regularly scheduled social gatherings for Veterans, their families, and their supporters is simple, fun, and beneficial to all members of the community.

These social gatherings can come in many forms that bring Veterans and supporters in the community together, and we encourage hosts to shape them based on attendees' needs and preferences. One of the most common forms is a Veterans Social.

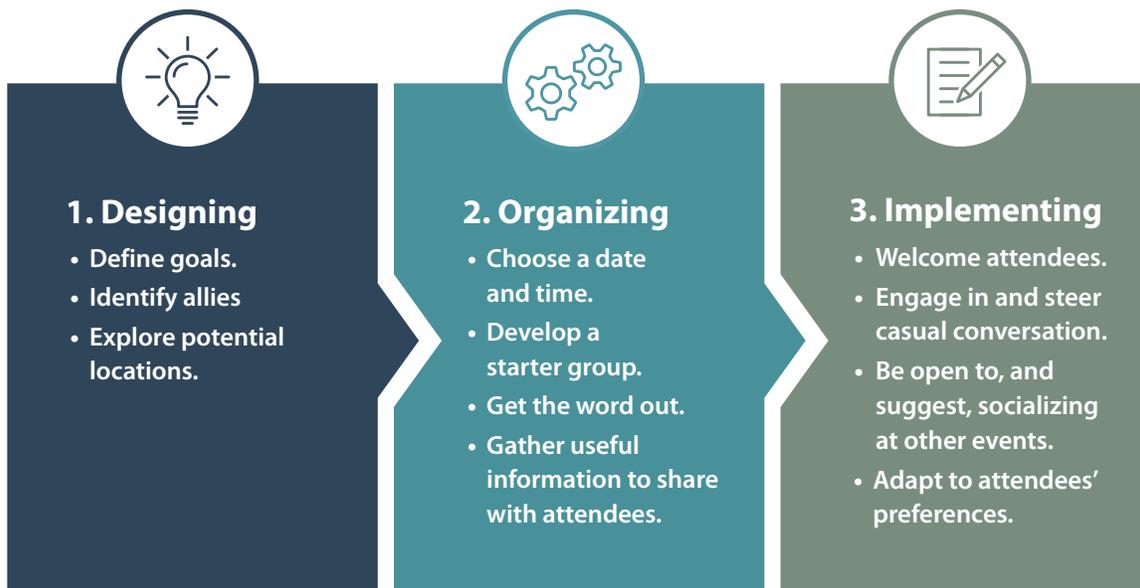
Veterans Socials serve to enhance connections and improve resource access among Veterans in the community. The Socials are designed to cultivate self-sustaining, mutually supportive communities. Socials are open to all Veterans, their family members, and allies in the community. Each Social will be a little different, reflecting the group's unique qualities.



Typically, Veterans Socials are weekly gatherings over coffee that last for about 1½ hours and involve casual conversation and the sharing of helpful resources. These Veterans Socials may later change and adapt based on attendees' preferences, becoming volunteer or recreational activities. Attendees of these Socials may choose to organize spin-off events or other meetups independently. Hosting spin-offs enables Social attendees to further expand their networks of Veteran friends and others in their community.

Visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov/socials to learn more and find helpful information and templates.

OVERVIEW



1. Designing a Social

- Define goals.
- Identify allies.
- Explore potential locations.

Goals and Your Audience

Socials should be open to all Veterans and may also attract a wide variety of attendees in your community. You may choose to tailor the events to attendees who have a common interest (e.g., bowling, fishing, getting an academic degree, volunteering with a community organization). Tailoring the Social will influence other aspects of its design, such as which community members or organizations to contact; the event’s name, location, and scheduling; and how to advertise. And although a specific topic may help attract attendees with common interests, it may also narrow the group of people interested.

Connecting With Your Allies

Consider contacts you have in your community when thinking through potential locations for your Social.

Collaboration with other groups and organizations is important in bolstering community involvement. Contact local organizations that have overlapping missions (e.g., [Veterans of Foreign Wars](#), [AMVETS](#), [Disabled American Veterans](#), [The American Legion](#), [Team Red, White & Blue](#), [Elks Lodge](#), [The Mission Continues](#), [Dryhooch](#)).



You can also contact other Veterans Service Organizations (<https://www.va.gov/vso>), VA facilities (<https://www.va.gov/find-locations>), Veterans Service Officers, Vet Center Outreach Specialists (https://www.va.gov/find-locations/?facilityType=vet_center), and hosts of other Veterans Socials.

Exploring Potential Locations

You can use the [Social Planning Worksheet](#) to think through locations in the community and identify advantages, disadvantages, and tactics to overcome potential obstacles. Some considerations and suggestions for choosing a location include the following:

- Brainstorm with community allies about unique opportunities and challenges.
- Identify where Veteran-friendly organizations are located in your community.
- Look for areas where Veterans reside or travel.
- Find a location accessible by public transportation.
- Choose a location that can accommodate attendees with limited mobility.
- Consider navigation ease (e.g., parking, nearby landmarks, ease of locating using a GPS).

The maps available at <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/maps.asp> show the numbers of Veterans in each state, county, and congressional district and may help you make decisions about where to hold your Social.



HOSTS WHO ARE NOT VETERANS

The hosts of Veterans Socials are usually, but not always, Veterans themselves. Hosts who are not Veterans are most effective when they have spent time talking to Veterans and understand Veteran issues. It is recommended that hosts who are not Veterans collaborate with a Veteran co-host when starting a Social in their community.

2. Organizing a Social

- Choose a date and time.
- Develop a starter group.
- Get the word out.
- Gather useful information to share with attendees.

Establishing Allies Before Starting a Social

Contact potential allies and leaders in the community to collaborate with on implementing a Social. Use the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) to answer any questions they may have. Identifying community allies can help in finding a suitable location and drawing attendees, and it could yield valuable resources for attendees and hosts.

Scheduling the Social

Depending on the time of day it is held, the Social may be better suited to attendees with different needs. Some attendees (e.g., those with full-time jobs or family responsibilities) tend to have more flexibility in scheduling during evenings and weekends, while other attendees (e.g., those who are retired) may prefer to meet during the day. Another consideration in scheduling is frequency. While Socials can take place monthly, they typically occur on a weekly basis. Weekly Socials help attendees build rapport more quickly and are more likely to be sustained over time.

Developing a Starter Group

Once you are ready to launch the Social, identifying four people to be part of a “starter group” of attendees — four people who can commit to attending — will increase the likelihood of your Social’s success. The purpose of the starter group is to create an energetic and inviting atmosphere that encourages other attendees to join and continue attending. In a sense, the starter group helps build momentum for the Social. The group can include the local Veterans Service Officer, VA Veteran Peer Specialists, hosts of other Socials, friends, and Veteran allies in the community.

Getting The Word Out

Determine how widely to promote the Social (e.g., on social media, through an email list, at a VA facility, through Veteran organizations or clubs).

Using many methods to promote the event maximizes the number of possible attendees. Collaborating on or co-hosting Socials with community allies and local organizations, businesses, VA facilities, and colleges can help you reach a broader audience and increase community investment in serving Veterans. Further, members of the starter group can help spread the word to Veterans they know and through the organizations they belong to.

You also can create flyers to post in the community where Veterans reside or visit, to give to staff at the Social venue, and to share on social media. For an [example](#) and [template](#) to help you design your flyer, visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov/socials.

Preparing for the First Social

Being prepared to guide Veterans toward resources that can enhance connections and overall wellness will solidify the Social as a useful and enjoyable event. When hosting, use the [Key Contacts Template](#) as a structure for gathering important information (e.g., area businesses offering Veterans discounts, local Veteran organizations). You can add your own information (e.g., co-hosts, community resources) to the Key Contacts Template as you gain community allies. In addition, the [National Resources Form](#) contains helpful contact numbers and websites that address various questions and concerns Veterans may have.

Other considerations include arriving early to block off enough space for the Social and contacting members of the starter group to confirm their attendance.



QUICK STEPS

Invite community allies to be a part of the starter group and contact them a few days before the first Social to confirm their attendance.

If you are holding the Social at a place of business, speak with staff at the location in advance. This will help you anticipate and avoid challenges such as those involving space usage. You also can ask about reserving space for your Social.

3. Implementing a Social

- Welcome guests.
- Engage in and steer casual conversation.
- Be open to, and suggest, socializing at other events.
- Adapt to attendees' preferences

Once the Social is running, being aware of and fulfilling your role as host is essential to developing and sustaining the Social. Understanding the basic roles of the host is a good place to start.

Host's Responsibilities

- **Welcoming attendees.** Greet every attendee and tell them if you are a Veteran (e.g., "Hello, I'm Jessica. I'm a Veteran. Are you also a Veteran? ... Welcome!"). As a host, you may benefit from facing the entrance so that you know when attendees arrive.
- **Building social connection.** As conversations progress, attendees tend to share more information about themselves. However, the host should not pressure attendees to disclose more information than they're comfortable sharing with others.
- **Serving as a leader.** You set the tone for an accepting environment free of discrimination and prejudice that feels comfortable to attendees of all backgrounds.
- **Keeping the event open to newcomers.** All Socials should be open to first-time attendees, including Veterans and their friends, family members, significant others, supporters, and caregivers. If attendees say that they want to stop new attendees from joining the Social, the host should explain that keeping the Social open helps engage Veterans in the community. However, attendees are encouraged to make plans to get together outside designated Socials.
- **Taking notice and staying calm.** Anticipating challenges can prepare you to address and mitigate difficult situations. Stay aware of current events (e.g., social unrest, tragedies, loss) that may affect attendees so that you can acknowledge attendees' feelings, steer social interactions, and support attendees' well-being.
- **Combating stigma and misconceptions about health care services on the whole.** It is important to allow attendees to express their grievances and talk about challenges. If attendees mention difficulty accessing health services, claims, or benefits, be supportive and examine the barriers

in a collaborative manner. This fosters a culture of togetherness and may help attendees get valuable services.

- **Sharing information.** Come prepared with commonly requested information (e.g., on housing, benefits, enrollment, financial assistance). This may involve connecting with community allies who can give presentations or provide information attendees are interested in. Creating a list of important contacts (using the [Key Contacts Template](#)) or providing attendees with the [National Resources Form](#) can help in guiding attendees to the services they're seeking.
- **Being crisis ready.** Have contact information for the Veterans Crisis line and be prepared to give out the information to address a mental health crisis if one occurs. The crisis line can be reached by calling **988 then press 1** or **texting 838255**, or chatting online at <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help-now/chat/>. If emergency services are needed, call 911 immediately.

Finally, as a host, you can help establish lasting friendships by adapting to attendees' preferences (e.g., venue or time, topics for discussion, activities to engage in) and encouraging attendees to participate in activities outside the Social, such as recreational outings and volunteer efforts.

It Takes a Community

Veterans and their allies in the community can make meaningful and lasting changes by supporting one another socially. The simple actions outlined earlier create a space for Veterans to build friendships by connecting with neighbors and community leaders as well as people with similar interests. By starting a Veterans Social in your community, you are joining a local, statewide, and national effort to build support systems for and with Veterans.

Visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov/socials to learn more.

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