

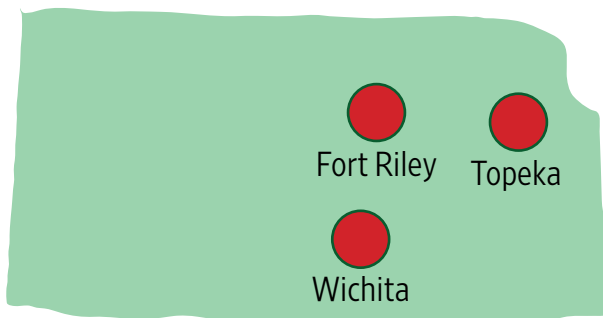
Innovative AT Practices

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From Active Duty to Agriculture: Engaging Veterans in Farming and Gardening

BACKGROUND

Assistive Technology for Kansans (ATK) connects people with disabilities and health conditions of all ages with the assistive technology (AT) they need to learn, work, play, and participate in community life safely and independently. One demographic ATK serves is veterans and active duty soldiers transitioning out of service, specifically through farming and gardening. This promising practice highlights one project that has aided veterans and active duty soldiers transitioning into civilian life in Kansas by providing them with socialization opportunities as well as knowledge and skills to gain employment.



Although ATK has led and engaged in many projects and activities related to veterans and farming, this was ATK's first in-depth effort with veterans and active duty soldiers, opening the door to other projects and activities with this population.

Gardening is a common therapeutic activity for combat veterans, and has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and stress. Many veterans, especially in rural states like Kansas, have a strong interest in gardening and farming, as well as a background in this work. ATK has experience training veterans in agricultural projects, and holds a recreation and employment grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration. ATK also holds an AgrAbility grant and a grant on inclusive gardening.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

The target demographic for ATK's gardening project is active duty military who are transitioning to civilian life due to injury from combat. ATK narrowed in on gardening as the first activity to help veterans due to its documented therapeutic benefits. Additionally, veterans have expressed interest in working on a farm after military service because it allows them to pursue a new, active hobby or interest that is quiet and peaceful compared to their time in the military.

To connect veterans to gardening pursuits, ATK developed a partnership with Fort Riley, a military base in northeastern Kansas, to build a hoop house. A hoop house is a 20-foot by 40-foot flexible green house with 5-foot-tall walls and a rounded roof that can be rolled up for ventilation. A hoop house provides a protected indoor environment that allows people to garden during all weather conditions, provides shelter from direct sun, and creates an extended growing season.

In the hoop house, ATK's staff demonstrate accessible gardening and adaptive tools and teach veterans how to use and maintain the tools. Many of the soldiers have issues with balance, memory, or organization and planning. Some have physical



A rancher (in the scooter) greeting (from left) a veteran, ATK staff, and an active duty soldier.

disabilities, including fine motor issues, mobility challenges, or head injuries. As such, staff conduct needs assessments to ensure veterans are matched with the appropriate tools. In the hoop house, soldiers select the crops, start and transplant seeds, care for plants (watering, fertilizing, pest control), and harvest. Some continue their interests in community gardens on and off the Fort. Many share their produce with fellow soldiers and their families.

As a project of the Kansas AgrAbility program, ATK provides a range of typical AT program services in the hoop house. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, the Kansas AgrAbility program is a partnership between Kansas State University, Southeast Kansas Independent Living, and ATK. The program provides on-site services to help farmers, ranchers, family members, and employees with disabilities or health conditions find AT solutions and modifications that allow them to continue in their role on the farm, ranch, or production agriculture. AgrAbility projects have a strong emphasis on serving veterans with disabilities who wish to explore agricultural pursuits.

Classes by AgrAbility staff authorized under horticulture therapy are also offered in the hoop house focusing on gardening knowledge and AgrAbility. Typically, ATK staff comes in the beginning of a class to assess the technology needs of learners. Classes range in attendance from four to 12 soldiers. Other activities organized by ATK for Fort Riley veterans include accessible bus tours to other agricultural endeavors such as a blueberry farm and a lavender operation. These occur every Friday seven months out of the year.

Attending classes and demonstrations in the hoop house exposes veterans to the possibilities around how they might garden and what tools they might use to do so. Some of them engage in gardening activities they enjoyed prior to joining the military, while others acquire new skills. About a third of the veterans who come to the hoop house want to get into agriculture to earn an income. Most just enjoy the therapeutic and social aspects that it provides.

IMPLEMENTATION

For this hoop house project to get off the ground with success, ATK's goals and opportunities came together simultaneously. ATK knew they needed to address the needs of the veteran population, and

decided to engage veterans who were transitioning out of the military. Timing their engagement around the transition to civilian life was essential for ATK, as veterans benefit from having a social network and finding new purpose. Fort Riley happened to be close to one of ATK's offices, and ATK's AgrAbility program coordinator at the time had extensive knowledge of hoop houses and gardening.

To gain access to veterans on Fort Riley, ATK had to do some groundwork to engage and convince military commanders at the Fort that their services were a good match and met the needs of veterans. Fort Riley personnel were not used to civilians coming onto the base unless they were contractors. There was also resistance from command to allow veterans to volunteer or have civilian interaction.

ATK staffers spent a significant amount of time getting command comfortable with their organization and staff. They got to know people who worked in rehabilitation on the base and professionals in the U.S. Department of Defense. AgrAbility and ATK also received support from retired officers who were starting a farmer-veteran coalition and exploring a veterans' organization. These retirees were influential in getting ATK access to staff at the Fort. Another contributing factor was the presence of an AgrAbility staff person who spent several days a week for a few years on the base helping to build a relationship by meeting with occupational and horticultural therapists, Soldier Family Activity Center staff, and others.

There were some procedures unique to working on a base that ATK had to follow for the hoop house initiative to be implemented. The hoop house needed to be recognized as a legitimate activity for the soldiers. If it was considered recreation, the soldiers would not be able to attend regularly. The commanding officer had to declare it a priority so that ATK could schedule soldiers routinely. Internally, ATK served veterans in the hoop house the same as all other AT customers who receive their services.

The continued success of the hoop house has largely been due to ATK's dedication and consistent presence on the base. ATK staff reported that many veterans tend to be wary of outside entities. As one staffer put it, "Everybody says they want to be there for veterans, but a lot of the veterans we have worked with have experienced that people are there initially and disappear quickly." The ongoing

nature of the program, its constant presence, and the demonstration by ATK staff that they understand veterans' unique needs have built trust in the program over time.

IMPACT

In the 12 years that the hoop house has been operational, over 600 veterans have been served on Fort Riley. Exposure to accessible and adaptive tools in the hoop house has taught veterans that their disability is not a barrier to agricultural and gardening work, and has increased their confidence to pursue their agricultural interests.

Employment has also increased for veterans participating in this program. As an example, ATK staff highlighted a soldier injured in combat who set up her own hoop house and now sells vegetables. Others have had similar success. More broadly, the hoop house has led ATK to help develop a farmer-veteran coalition to aid veterans in figuring out what their roles in agriculture might be. ATK has also expanded to working with veterans in beekeeping operations, small produce businesses, and livestock businesses.

Due to their presence in the hoop house and beyond, ATK provides many resources and referrals to other services. Veterans find out about mental health services, get educated on how to develop a business plan through the farmer-veteran coalition, learn about alternative programs to finance AT, and have access to many other resources.

The social interaction that comes out of participating in hoop house activities is invaluable. Veterans leaving the military often find themselves cut off from their military friends and have difficulty adapting to civilian life. The hoop house provides a safe space to talk and form relationships with others going through similar transitions.

HUMAN AND FISCAL RESOURCES

The hoop house was purchased through the community garden grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration. However, the most valuable resources used to develop, implement, and maintain this initiative were connections, staff time, and volunteers. A therapist on Fort Riley provided support and helped veterans think about their options as they transitioned into civilian life. ATK

staff met with soldiers and reviewed the essential tasks they needed to perform in the hoop house, identifying possible barriers and providing a range of solutions. Volunteers are also needed to help with hoop house repairs. Being part of the University of Kansas, ATK has access to students who contribute in a volunteer capacity. For example, when a storm damaged the hoop house and plastic needed to be repaired, student volunteers were recruited to help. Kansas State University is near Fort Riley, providing another source of student volunteers.

Strengthening the relationship with leadership at Fort Riley is also necessary to maintain a presence on the base. ATK and AgrAbility do that by participating in hoop house activities with soldiers, arranging bus tours, and providing AT presentations through the Soldier Family Activity Center.

REPLICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

If an AT program is considering implementing a similar initiative in their state or territory, ATK staff recommends thinking through some essential issues: What do the veterans need in your area? What are their interests and what are your program's strengths?

Take a broader look at gardening, production, agriculture, ranching, or fishing. Programs should



Inside the hoop house during a bus tour.

work with veterans as they do with any other group: Consider what their needs are and what is naturally available in your area.

Rather than going on base as ATK has done, staff recommends looking for other ways to reach veterans. ATK went on base because they had allies at Fort Riley who could overcome obstacles to bring the project to fruition. However, working with a military base may be difficult and time-consuming for other AT programs if they do not have established relationships.

AT programs can work with active veterans' or progressive farming associations to set up classes. Agribusinesses such as the Farmers Union and local co-ops are interested in helping veterans. An AT Program or AgrAbility project (or both) could

collaborate with these types of partners to provide different activities that could attract veterans or active duty soldiers leaving the service. Some ideas include providing accessible hunting and camping equipment at an event co-sponsored by a Fish and Game chapter and a local farm credit agency. Another option is sponsoring an accessible fishing and boating afternoon with a local veterans' organization.

A critical point to keep in mind when working with veterans is to follow through. ATK has received feedback from veterans that many organizations try to help them but do not follow through on their promises. "If you say you're here to help and start with a PowerPoint they're out the door - they want to sit down and talk with you, it needs to be a conversation and you need to invest time into it."



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QUESTIONS?

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The Innovative AT Practices Series are topical case studies that describe innovative or high-impact activities conducted by state AT programs that result in increased access to and acquisition of AT.

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