

**National Veterans' Technical Assistance Center (NVTAC)
Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) Community of Practice (CoP)
Empowering Veterans with Strengths-Based Language
Thursday, June 26, 2025, 3 p.m. – 4 p.m. ET**

NVTAC Staff

Miranda Moffat, NVTAC Outreach Coach
Sarah Chung, NVTAC Coach
Temitope Fagbemi, NVTAC Coach
Chris Taylor, NVTAC Coach
Jenn Steigerwald, Project Manager

Key Points

- **Introduction**
 - NVTAC staff reminded attendees that, while best practices would be discussed during the presentation, it is imperative that grant recipients consult with their Grant Officer's Technical Representatives (GOTR) before implementing any proposed strategies.
 - NVTAC introduced the topic and purpose of today's COP: understanding how strengths-based language (SBL) can be utilized to help veterans see themselves as capable and resourceful, focusing more on strengths than on obstacles, challenges, or shortcomings.
- **Understanding Strengths-Based Language**
 - **What is Strengths-Based Language?**
 - Definition of SBL: SBL is a communication approach that highlights an individual's capabilities, achievements, values, and potential rather than focusing on their problems, failures, or deficits. It fosters empowerment and growth.
 - SBL helps veterans see themselves as capable and resourceful, supporting their journeys toward meaningful employment and stability.
 - **Why Strengths-Based Language?**
 - SBL encourages veterans to recognize their own strength. Many veterans (and people in general) have internalized messages of failure after employment, homelessness, or justice-involvement. SBL helps shift their focus to what they have accomplished and what they are capable of.
 - Instead of focusing on negative comments or focusing on challenges, use language that focuses on the positives: "You have already overcome a lot – let us build on that!"
 - SBL builds confidence and motivation to reintegrate into the workforce. The first step to employment is for the veterans to believe that they are employable. SBL gives veterans permission to see themselves as capable. Words like persistent, disciplined, team-oriented, and resilient affirm that

their past experiences are assets, not liabilities. When veterans believe in their own potential, they are more likely to engage in employment services, skill building, and career planning.

- SBL shifts the narrative from limitations to opportunities for growth. Veterans are not defined by their housing status or employment gaps, but rather, they are individuals with potential, life experience, drive, and motivation.
 - Using SBL allows us, as providers, to help re-frame how veterans speak about issues, so instead of asking “What is wrong?” ask “What are our opportunities?” or “What is possible here?”
 - SBL aligns with person-centered services. A person-centered services approach means treating each veteran as the expert of their own life, not as a passive recipient of services. The person-centered approach avoids blame and recognizes behavior as a response to past harm or trauma.
 - SBL promotes dignity, and we should recognize that dignity is not a luxury! For many veterans, particularly those experiencing homelessness or trauma, their dignity has been compromised by systems, stigma, or repeated rejection. Dignity means being treated as a full human being with value and a voice. When we serve our veterans with respect, empathy, and affirmation, we send the message that each veteran matters.
 - SBL can work to build trust. It is important to remember that being respectful with our veterans is about more than simply being polite. It is also about creating emotional and psychological safety. Veterans who feel respected are more likely to trust service providers, open up about their needs, and participate in services. Without that foundation, engagement often becomes superficial, defensive, or completely shut down.
 - SBL promotes taking risks. People do not take risks with service providers if they expect to be judged, misunderstood, or dismissed. When we actively listen and reflect veterans’ strengths back to them, we foster the kind of safe environment in which risk-taking is possible. This is where transformation can begin—not transformation in programs, but in the relationships between providers and clients that are built on trust and dignity.
- **Shifting From Deficit to Strength-Based Language**
 - Some deficit-focused notes or comments can be detrimental to a relationship. Some things that deficit-focused language may include are:
 - The client has “anger issues.”
 - The client does not follow through.
 - The participant has been unemployed since 2017.
 - The participant lacks direction.
 - Instead, focus intentionally on utilizing SBL to change the narrative. Use things like these instead:

- The participant is actively working on managing emotions.
 - The participant is building consistency with completion of follow-up tasks.
 - The individual is reentering the workforce with new goals.
 - The participant is actively exploring new opportunities.
- **Strengths-Based Language in Documentation and Case Notes**
 - **Why it Matters**
 - It is important to remember that our HVRP case notes are not only for internal use. These are documents that can be requested and reviewed by a number of personnel for a number of reasons. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), funding sources and auditors, or even the participants themselves may be able to request your case notes and see what is included.
 - Language shapes perception. The language you use in your case notes can either reinforce shame or promote empowerment. Internalized messages can influence self-esteem and motivation. Reading deficit-focused language in case notes can either reinforce shame and inadequacy or it can reinforce empowerment and ability. People live up or down to the labels they are given.
 - **Phrases to Use Vs. Avoid**
 - Some phrases to avoid in case notes include:
 - Non-compliant
 - Unmotivated
 - Failed to engage
 - Refused services
 - High-risk
 - Use phrases like these instead:
 - Expressed concerns about the plan
 - Identifying meaningful goals
 - Taking time to build trust with HVRP staff
 - Declined services at this time
 - Facing multiple opportunities for growth
 - **Common Barriers Veterans Face**
 - It is important to understand some of the common challenges that are prevalent among those who have served in the military. Things like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from traumatic events or prolonged levels of heightened stress, employment gaps, mental health concerns, housing instability, and difficulty navigating the civilian world may be some common themes among the veterans we serve. Look for ways to convert these barriers to measurable successes through your use of SBL.

- **Core Principles of Strengths-Based Work**

- Let us look at some of the core principles that inform our work when we strive to communicate from a strengths-based perspective.
- **Core Principles**
 - Every person has strengths. All veterans, regardless of their circumstances, bring value, resilience, and skills to every aspect of their lives. These strengths may come from formal roles, life experience, or personal traits. It is our job as HVRP providers to uncover and affirm those strengths, even when they may not be obvious, even to the veterans themselves.
 - Language shapes identity. The words we utilize in person, in our case notes, or when we communicate internally with other staff members can influence how participants feel about themselves, how they engage with HVRP staff, and how they approach their pursuit of goals. Using a positive, person-first, and future-oriented approach to the language we utilize can help to build trust and motivation. We must always attempt to avoid labels that define people by their challenges. For example, referring to someone as a “homeless veteran” is a form of an identifying label. Instead, look at homelessness as something that has happened TO someone and say “a person who is experiencing homelessness” or “housing instability.”
 - Focus on potential. HVRP is not about “fixing” veterans. It is about revealing possibility. We must highlight future growth instead of focusing on past struggles. Help to guide veterans and assist them with envisioning what could be, not only what has been.
 - Context matters! Behavior must be understood with each individual’s circumstances in mind, not judged in isolation. We have to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches to our interactions with our participants; strengths show up differently for each person.
- **Reframing Labels with Compassion**
 - Labels like “difficult” or “manipulative” often reflect our discomfort, not the participant’s intent. If we reframe how we approach each veteran, it can help us move from judgment to curiosity and build stronger relationships with those whom we serve. SBL affirms veterans’ dignity, supports healing, and encourages engagement, despite the labels our veterans may already carry from other, outside institutions, such as the military, legal situations, or shelter systems.
 - Our language can either reinforce these negative stigmas or disrupt them with respect and compassion through shifting focus from “what is wrong” to “what is working.”
 - Remember, when we reframe, we create space for empathy and effectiveness. It is not about ignoring behavior but understanding what is behind it and how it reflects a deeper strength or survival strategy.

- Avoid common labels and reframe some of the conspicuously negative connotations that accompany them. Instead, reword our thoughts into strength-based terms.
 - Instead of “difficult,” say the veteran “advocates for needs.” This changes the narrative to the veteran being “hard to work with” to the veteran being someone who speaks up, asks questions, and may be resistant to systems that have not previously worked for them.
 - Instead of “withdrawn,” say the veteran is cautious in new spaces. This shows that the veteran may take time to assess safety and trustworthiness in new environments or with new case managers.
 - Instead of “manipulative,” say the veteran is “resourceful.” This may suggest that the veteran uses creative thinking to meet their own needs when options are limited.
 - Instead of “aggressive,” say the veteran is “assertive.” The veteran may express needs firmly and may lack tools for regulation, but the veteran has passion and urgency.
- **Unique Strengths of Veterans Experiencing Homelessness**
 - **Military to Civilian – Transferable Skills**
 - Veterans do not always recognize how their own journeys reflect employability. HVRP staff can play a critical role in drawing out those assets, validating veterans’ lived experience and helping them confidently tell their story to employers.
 - Some common strengths gained from nontraditional pathways include the ability to lead under pressure, the development of a mission-focused mindset, the ability to collaborate with teams from varying disciplines and professional backgrounds, and a strong sense of discipline and accountability.
 - As service providers, we must challenge the belief that only formal education or jobs are valid work experience. Veterans have built skill sets that translate into valuable contributions in the workplace. Part of our role is helping veterans and employers see these connections clearly.
 - **Core Strengths of Veterans**
 - When we use an SBL approach to communicating, we should focus on some of the common strengths that veterans possess, particularly in our work to help them find employment. Elements such as strong leadership skills, a strong sense of discipline and structure, the ability to work within teams, and being mission focused all help our veterans in the workplace. Remember, employers consistently value candidates who can work well on teams and keep long-term goals in focus. These strengths should be emphasized when preparing veterans for interviews or career pathways.

- **Veteran Strengths that Drive Workforce Success**
 - Leadership: Veterans often have experience with leading teams under high-stress, high-stakes conditions. They may be skilled decision-makers, good at delegating responsibility, and accountable for their own performance and tasks.
 - Discipline: Veterans are trained to follow protocols and see tasks through to completion. They may demonstrate a strong commitment to routines and schedules and provide a high level of reliability. Veterans may often bring a strong internal drive to meet or exceed expectations.
 - Teamwork: Veterans are trained to operate in units where collaboration is critical. They have to understand how to communicate across teams and support their peers to ensure that their missions are accomplished. This builds a sense of mutual accountability and a shared sense of purpose.
 - Mission Focus: Veterans are often goal-oriented and committed to seeing tasks through. They may be able to stay focused and be productive despite obstacles or changing circumstances (improvise, adapt, and overcome), while also being adept and working in environments in which roles are clear and objectives are measurable.
- **Trauma-Informed and Person-First Language**
 - Person-first language sends the message that veterans are more than their current circumstances. It prioritizes the individual over their current situations through reducing the effects of negative stigmas by reinforcing dignity. It reinforces that people are not defined by situational conditions such as homelessness or unemployment, or permanent conditions such as physical or mental health challenges or disabilities.
 - It also helps us, as providers, to set a positive tone for services that are empowering and encouraging, aligning with HVRP's goals.
- **Applying Strengths-Based Language to HVRP**
 - Now that we have discussed SBL, we should think about how we can apply these principles to our work in HVRP. Think about how we can reframe work history gaps and justice involvement. Can we help our veterans identify transferable skills? How can we support resume and interview prep from an SBL perspective?
 - Examples of strengths-based conversation prompts include:
 - “What have you overcome?”
 - Not “What skills did you use to get through that?”
 - “Tell me about a time you led or supported a team.”
- **Practical Applications**
 - To continue, let us take a look at a few more ways in which we can use SBL in our daily practice.
 - **Applying SBL to Workforce Reintegration**
 - Reframe work history gaps.

- Do not use such phrases as:
 - “The veteran has not worked in years.”
 - “The veteran has been unemployed since their discharge from the military.”
 - “There are gaps because of the veteran’s homelessness/mental health/substance use/etc.”
 - Instead, say things such as:
 - “The veteran was focused on personal development and recovery and is now ready to re-engage in the workforce.”
 - “The veteran dedicated time to managing their health and is now equipped with increased resilience and self-awareness.”
 - “The veteran volunteered at a shelter and mentored peers, demonstrating leadership and commitment.”
 - “The veteran completed vocational training during that time, showing continued persistence and a growth mindset.”
 - HVRP staff can ask: “What did you learn about yourself during that time that will help you be successful in the workplace?”
 - Reframe justice involvement.
 - Do not say:
 - “Has a criminal record.”
 - “Recently released from prison.”
 - “Convicted felon.”
 - Instead, say:
 - “Successfully completed a re-entry program and is highly motivated to contribute positively to a team.”
 - “Demonstrated accountability and has shown sustained commitment to personal growth.”
 - “Has overcome significant obstacles and brings a strong sense of responsibility and determination.”
 - Example for resume building:
 - Before: “Four-year employment gap due to incarceration.”
 - After: “Completed a state accredited vocational program and mentored peers while navigating a period of self-care. Now prepared to apply those transferable skills in a professional setting.”

- **Recap**

- Strength-based language reinforces dignity, autonomy, and employability for our HVRP participants. Encourage your HVRP staff to practice self-reflection on how each person’s language can positively or negatively impact participants’

outcomes. Incorporate SBL into your daily practice, and discuss positive narratives during team meetings, celebrate small wins with program participants, incorporate strength-based check-ins during team meetings, and encourage success boards and shared wins to reinforce a culture of positivity. Remember, be specific about what the veteran is doing, not just what they have NOT done.

- **Question**

- Do you have any examples and/or tips on how you use strength-based language to reframe interactions with your veterans?
 - Answer: I find this beneficial because I think it does work. The more you use it, the more it becomes second-nature. It is a balance between remembering what the veterans feel is real and focusing on their strengths. We use the individual employment plan (IEP) to focus on these strengths. Part of their resources may be our organization and other case managers that they work with. While sometimes it may be difficult to use SBL with people who are struggling with depression, SBL can help them overcome those feelings, even though we cannot help them change how they talk about themselves.
 - Answer: When I sit in with veterans for the first time, either on the phone or in person, we go through the intake and barriers, focusing on what they have overcome, using SBL. When I read it back to them, they light up when they realize someone was actually listening. It encourages them and makes them feel like they do have hope and they are progressing. In the short-term/long-term goals, we discuss how the veterans can look over those goals to realize how far they have come.

Conclusion

Our HVRP participants have experienced a significant number of challenges in their individual journeys, all of which may lend to lowered levels of self-worth, defeatist approaches to job-seeking, and other negative stigmas. Through strength-based language, we can start to help them change their internal narratives by focusing on their accomplishments and strengths rather than the conditions of their present situations. As providers, it is our responsibility to help lift our participants rather than use language that exacerbates their self-views.

Resources

- [Strength-Based vs. Deficit-Based Language | Office of Justice Programs](#)
- [Targeting relational aggression in veterans: the Strength at Home Friends and Family intervention - PubMed](#)
- [Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)

You can review the presentation recording here: [Will insert when available on YouTube]