



National Veterans'
Technical Assistance Center

Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP): Empowering Veterans with Strengths-Based Language

Community of Practice

June 26, 2025

Reminder



HVRP best practices will be shared during this session. The National Veterans' Technical Assistance Center (NVTAC) encourages all grant recipients to utilize best practices that may improve their service delivery. Before implementing a practice discussed during this session, please review your award statement of work and contact your Grant Officer's Technical Representative (GOTR) to discuss if it is an allowable cost or activity or if it requires an amendment to your approved plan.

Understanding Strengths-Based Approaches

What is Strengths-Based Language?

- **Definition:** 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.
- Strengths-based language helps veterans see themselves as capable and resourceful, supporting their journey toward employment and stability.

Why Strength-Based Language? (1 of 2)

- **Encourages veterans to recognize their own strength**
 - Many veterans (people) have internalized messages of failure after unemployment, homelessness, or justice involvement.
 - Strength-based language helps shift their focus to what they've accomplished and what they're capable of.
 - "You've already overcome a lot—let's build on that" is more impactful.
- **Builds Confidence and motivation to reintegrate into the workforce**
 - The first step to employment is *believing* that you're employable. Strength-based language 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.
- **Shifts the narrative from limitations to opportunities for growth**
 - Veterans are not defined by their housing status or employment gaps—they are individuals with potential, life experience, and drive.
 - "What's wrong?" to "What's possible?"

Why Strength-Based Language? (2 of 2)

- **Aligns with Person-Centered Services**
 - Person-centered services treats each veteran as the expert of their own life, not a passive recipient of services.
 - Person-centered approaches avoid blame and recognize behavior as a response to past harm.
- **Promotes Dignity (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 lead with respect, empathy, and affirmation, we send a powerful message: “You matter.”
- **Builds Trust (Respect isn’t just about being polite)**
 - It’s 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.
- **Promotes Taking Risks**
 - People don’t take those risks 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 that makes risk-taking possible. That’s where transformation begins! (not in programs, but in relationships built on trust and dignity).

Shifting From Deficit to Strength-Focused

Deficit-Focused

- Has anger issues
- Doesn't Follow through
- Unemployed since 2017
- Lacks Direction

Strengths-Focused

- Working on managing emotions
- Building consistency in follow-up tasks
- Reentering the workforce with new goals
- Exploring new opportunities

Strengths-Based Language in Documentation and Case Notes

Why It Matters

- Case notes are not just internal they may be reviewed by:
 - DOL (Department of Labor)
 - Funders and auditors
 - Participants themselves (via records requests)
- Language shapes perception: It can either reinforce shame or promote empowerment.
 - Internalized messages influence self-esteem and motivation
 - Language in case notes language can reinforce either:
 - Shame and inadequacy
 - Empowerment
 - *People live up or down to the labels we give them*

Phrases to Use Vs. Avoid

Avoid

- Non-Compliant
- Unmotivated
- Failed to engage
- Refused services
- High risk

Use Instead

- Expressed concerns about the plan
- Identifying meaningful goals
- Taking time to build trust
- Declined services at this time
- Facing multiple challenges

Common Barriers Veterans Face

- Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Employment gaps
- Mental health challenges
- Housing instability
- Civilian navigation disconnection

Core Principles of Strengths-Based Work

Core Principles of Strengths-Based Work (1 of 2)



- Every person has strengths
 - All veterans, regardless of circumstances, bring value, resilience, and skills.
 - Strengths may come from formal roles, life experience, or personal traits.
 - Our job is to uncover and affirm those strengths, even when they aren't obvious.
- Language shapes identity
 - Words influence how participants feel, engage, and pursue goals.
 - Positive, person-first, and future-oriented language builds trust and motivation.
 - Avoid labels that define people by their challenges.

Veterans internalize the way they are spoken to and about. When we frame their story with respect and hope, we help them rewrite how they see themselves

Core Principles of Strength-Based Work (2 of 2)



- Focus on potential
 - HVRP isn't about "fixing" veterans it's about revealing possibility.
 - We highlight future growth, not just past struggle.
 - Guide veterans to envision what could be, not just what has been.
- Context matters
 - Behavior must be understood in light of circumstance, not judged in isolation.
 - Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches; strength shows up differently for each person.

Veterans may internalize the way they are spoken to and about. When we frame their story with respect and hope, we help them rewrite how they see themselves.

Reframing Labels with Compassion

- Labels like “difficult” or “manipulative” often reflect our discomfort, not the participant’s intent.
- Reframing helps us move from judgment to curiosity and builds stronger relationships.
- Strengths-based language affirms veterans’ dignity, supports healing, and encourages engagement.
- Veterans may already carry labels from institutions (military, legal, shelter systems).
- Our language can either reinforce stigma or disrupt it with respect and compassion.
- Reframing shifts focus from “*what’s wrong*” to “*what’s working.*”

When we reframe, we create space for empathy and effectiveness. It’s not about ignoring behavior but understanding what’s behind it, and how it reflects a deeper strength or survival strategy.

Reframing Labels with Compassion

Common Label

Reframed Strength-Based Term

Interpretation in Context

Difficult

Advocates for needs

Speaks up, asks questions,
may resist systems that haven't
worked for them

Withdrawn

Cautious in new spaces

Taking time to assess safety
and trustworthiness

Manipulative

Resourceful

Uses creativity to meet needs
when options are limited

Aggressive

Assertive

Expresses needs firmly, may
lack tools for regulation but has
passion and urgency

Unique Strengths of Veterans Experiencing Homelessness

Military to Civilian – Transferable Skills

- Veterans don't always recognize how their own journeys reflect employability. HVRP staff play a critical role in drawing out those assets, validating their lived experience, and helping them confidently tell their story to employers.
- Common strengths gained from nontraditional paths:
 - Leadership under pressure
 - Mission-focused mindset
 - Team collaboration
 - 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

- Leadership
- Discipline and Structure
- Teamwork
- Mission Focus

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 (1 of 2)



➤ Leadership

- Veterans often lead teams under high-stress, high-stakes conditions.
- Skilled in decision-making, delegation, and accountability.
- Brings a calm, confident presence to work environments.

➤ Discipline

- Trained to follow protocols and complete tasks thoroughly.
- Demonstrate commitment to routines, schedules, and reliability.
- Often brings a strong internal drive to meet or exceed expectations.

Veteran Strengths That Drive Workforce Success (2 of 2)



➤ **Teamwork**

- Veterans are trained to operate in units where collaboration is critical.
- Understand how to communicate across teams and support peer success.
- Value mutual accountability and a shared sense of purpose.

➤ **Mission Focus**

- Veterans are goal-oriented and committed to seeing tasks through.
- Able to stay focused and be productive despite obstacles or changing circumstances.
- Thrive in environments where roles are clear, and objectives are measurable.

Trauma-Informed and Person-First Language

- Person-first language sends the message: *“You are more than your current circumstances”*
- Prioritize the individual over their circumstance or condition
- Reduces stigma and reinforces dignity
- Reinforces that people are not defined by homelessness, unemployment, or disability
- Set the tone for services that is empowering
- Aligns with HVRP’s goals

Applying Strengths-Based Language to HVRP

Applying Strengths-Based Language to Workforce Reintegration

- Reframing work history gaps and justice involvement
 - Helping veterans identify transferable skills
 - Supporting resume and interview prep with strength-based framing
- Examples of strengths-based prompts
 - “What have you overcome?” Versus “What skills did you use to get through that?”
 - “Tell me about a time you led or supported a team.”

Practical Applications

Applying Strength-Based Language to Workforce Reintegration

- Reframe Work History Gaps
 - What not to say (deficit-based language)
 - “Hasn’t worked in years.”
 - “Unemployed since discharge.”
 - “Gap due to homelessness/mental health/substance use, etc.”

Strengths-Based Reframe

- “Focused on personal development and recovery, now ready to re-engage in the workforce.”
- “Dedicated time managing health, now equipped with increased resilience and self-awareness.”
- “Volunteered at a shelter and mentored peers and demonstrated leadership and commitment.”
- “Completed vocational training during gap period and showed continued persistence and growth mindset.”
- HVRP staff can ask: “What did you learn about yourself during that time that will help you succeed at work?”

Reframing Justice Involvement (1 of 4)

- What not to say (deficit-based language)
 - “Has a criminal record.”
 - “Recently released from prison.”
 - “Convicted felon.”

Reframing Justice Involvement (2 of 4)

- Strengths-based reframe
 - “Successfully completed 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.”

Reframing Justice Involvement (3 of 4)

- Example for resume building
 - Before:
 - “4-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.”

Reframing Justice Involvement (4 of 4)

- Coaching employers with strength-based messaging
 - 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

Recap

- Strength-based language reinforces dignity, autonomy, and employability
- Encourage staff to:
 - Practice self-reflection: How does your language impact participant outcomes?
 - Share positive narratives in team meetings
 - Celebrate small wins with participants
 - Incorporate strength-based check-ins during team meetings
 - Encourage success boards or shared wins to reinforce culture
 - Be specific about what the veteran is doing, not just what they haven't done

Resources

- [Strength-Based vs. Deficit-Based Language-](#)(U.S. Department Office of Justice Programs)
- [The Strength at Home Friends and Family Intervention](#)

Do you have any examples and/or tips on how you use strength-based language to reframe?



Questions?

Thank you!

Email: NVTAC@dol.gov

Website: nvtac.org