



# Outdoor Access for the Military Community

## Summer 2024 Recommendations

### Background & Purpose

Sierra Club launched the Military Outdoors program in 2006 with the aim of providing opportunities for the veteran and military community to engage with the natural world.

This program focuses on enabling participants to enjoy the benefits of outdoor activities while fostering a deeper connection with the land they have served to protect. Through the Military Outdoors program, over 70,000 veterans and their families have been able to partake in outdoor adventures.

The initiative works to break down barriers that may prevent veterans and the military community from accessing the outdoors by advocating for policies to mitigate those barriers at a national level and collaborating with Sierra Club chapters and veteran-serving organizations nationwide on a grassroots level.

### Our work continues

From late 2023 to early 2024 feedback was collected via a nationwide online survey and a listening tour. From this feedback, the Sierra Club has developed policy recommendations to guide the shared vision of improving outdoor recreation opportunities for our veteran and military community.

### Four themes emerged out of the input gathered from our military community:

Access

Awareness

Collaboration & Implementation

Skills Training & Education

Report prepared by:



Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky



SIERRA CLUB



## Access

*Veterans across the country face issues accessing the outdoors, whether the barrier is financial cost to enter a park, limited transportation to safe green spaces, or a lack of physical accessibility in a space.*

*Our recommended actions:*

- Establish a new VA Grant Program connecting veterans to public lands by funding established and emerging outdoor access programs with a focus on reaching underserved veteran populations. Underserved populations include post 9-11, rural, women, and minority veterans.
- Expand and permanently fund the Military Families Outdoors Program, an important collaboration between the National Park Service (NPS) and the Department of Defense-Defense Health Agency (DOD-DHA) aimed at improving the health and well-being of over 4 million active-duty military community and their families.
- Improve equitable access at state and federally managed public lands, waters, and recreation facilities by creating a more inclusive system of adaptive equipment and assistive technologies.
- Improve and expand transit solutions to public lands and waters for the veteran and military community.
- Create a national standard for the integration of green spaces, healing nature areas, and trails in VA community-based outpatient facilities, hospitals, centers, and clinics.
- Update the Military Housing Privatization Initiative Tenant Bill of Rights by adding an additional provision that guarantees the right for active-duty military members and their families who live in privatized military housing to live in communities that offer ample access to lush green spaces, well maintained parks, and scenic trails.

## Awareness

Many veterans and military community members are not aware of the full breadth of resources and opportunities available to help them spend time outside healing and recreating with loved ones.

Our recommended actions:

- Enhance marketing efforts, by increasing representation and community engagement, especially to underserved groups. This can be achieved by evaluating marketing and outreach campaigns by organizations like Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) to identify gaps and best practices.
- Develop a centralized online platform and/or an app where veterans can find comprehensive and up-to-date information on accessible outdoor facilities and trails.

## Collaboration & Implementation

Veterans and military community members expressed concern and confusion that information and resources were scattered across different agencies and departments. Successful outreach to the military community, including conveying information and resources to them, requires collaboration among agencies, organizations, and providers to share information and resources that will help current agency efforts to reach further and have more impact.

Our recommended actions:

- Continue the important work of the VA Taskforce on Outdoor Recreation by improving long-term coordination between federal agencies and veteran serving organizations.
- Establish an Office of Outdoor Recreation to facilitate cooperation among relevant organizations and committees.
- Permanently authorize the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR) and include the Department of Defense and Department of Veteran Affairs as member agencies.



## Skills Training & Education

Unemployment is a major issue that the veteran community faces. Finding veterans rewarding work in the outdoors creates opportunities that advance individual personal success and industry success. Employment in the outdoors sector would offer a solution to that issue while also providing opportunities for veterans to enjoy the healing benefits of the outdoors.

Our recommended action:

- Improve and expand initiatives that support transitioning service members, veterans, and family members to pursue conservation and outdoor careers.

### What is the biggest change you would hope to see for getting more veterans outdoors?

“The biggest thing I would like to see is the EASE of ACCESSIBILITY. I would like to see beaches, parks, recreation centers, bike pathways, etc. create an easier way for people to find what and where things are accessible. If there is equipment like beach chairs with bubble wheels, or wheelchairs with tracks, please HIGHLIGHT that on your website, in addition to showing pictures and dimensions for the equipment. Create an easy online reservation system for the public to know the cost, how much equipment is available for usage, learning links/ videos on how to operate the equipment before a reservation is made, and which pathways/areas of the park or beach can be accessed with this equipment.”

-Amber Kulesza,  
Disabled Air  
Force Veteran,  
Chief Adventure  
Officer (CAO) of  
AmbersAdventures,  
LLC



# MILITARY COMMUNITY INPUT

**48** states represented by survey feedback

**716** survey respondents

**42** percent of survey respondents women

**71** participants in four listening sessions

## FROM THE SURVEY

### Recommendations to make outdoor activities more accessible:

1. Increase/improve access for all levels of disability
2. Better public or alternative transportation
3. Reduce prices/more free or discounted options
4. More affordable & easy group activities (e.g. 5K walk, hiking, family events)
5. More advertising/communication

## LISTENING SESSIONS

### Areas identified for improvement:

**Access:** affordability of opportunities, transportation, availability of physical accommodations, outdoor safety (training, buddy system)

**Awareness:** One VA department for outdoors activities, distinct website, branding, and communication hub, clear and clean communication, awareness of the VA patient advocates that are easy to find

**Skills Training & Education:** More outdoor jobs for veterans, resume assistance, training/certifications for outdoor jobs

## What impact has being able to spend time outside had on you?

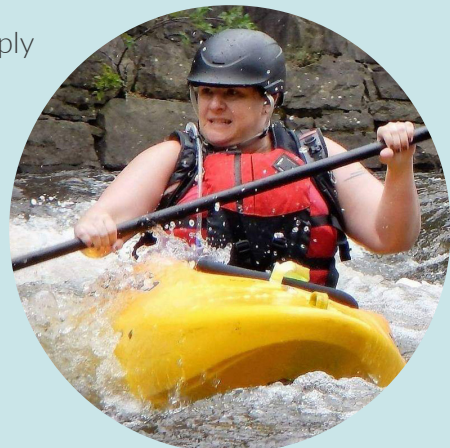


“When my Veterans Administration physical therapist recommended kayaking as recreational therapy, I used a walker, a service dog, and a full-time caregiver. Unfortunately, disabilities resulting from a traumatic brain injury and spinal cord injury severely debilitated me after eleven years of military service. **What I immediately loved about sitting in a little plastic boat running rapids on a wild and scenic river was the feeling of freedom and normalcy.** The anxiety from the disease afflicting me melted away.”

-Antoinette Lee, MBA, Kokatat and Badfish SUP Brand Ambassador

“Spending time outdoors has profoundly impacted me, deeply rooted in my upbringing. I grew up hiking, fishing, and camping with my family, which instilled in me a love for nature, a sense of adventure, and an obligation to serve by caring for our communities and the surrounding environment. These experiences have provided me with a strong foundation of resilience and peace. **Even beyond the limits of my service-connected disability, I continue to engage with the outdoors, finding solace and strength in nature.** It helps me maintain my physical and mental wellbeing, offering a sanctuary where I can reconnect with myself and the world around me.”

-Tammy Barlet, Coast Guard Veteran



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### Access

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- Expand and permanently fund the Military Families Outdoors Program (MFOP), a recently established grant opportunity managed by the National Park Service and the Department of Defense-Defense Health Agency. This program provides funding ranging from \$100,000 to \$5 million to state, local, and tribal governments, educational institutions, and nonprofits to generate programming and initiatives on public lands and waters that improve the overall health and wellness of over 4 million active-duty military community and their families via a wide range of outdoor recreation activities on public land and waters.
- Improve equitable access at state and federally managed public lands, waters, and recreation facilities by creating a more inclusive system of adaptive equipment and assistive technologies.
- Improve and expand transit solutions to public lands and waters for the veteran and military community. This could include federal agency collaboration to conduct a transit access study aimed at closing public transportation gaps to public lands and waters from military bases, off-base military communities, and veteran centers.
- Create a national standard for the integration of green spaces, healing nature areas, and trails in VA community-based outpatient facilities, hospitals, centers, and clinics.
- Update the Military Housing Privatization Initiative Tenant Bill of Rights by adding an additional provision that guarantees the right for active-duty military members and their families who live in privatized military housing to live in communities that offer ample access to lush green spaces, well maintained parks, and scenic trails.



# Outdoor Access for the Military Community

## Summer 2024 Recommendations, continued

### Awareness

- Increase access to health benefits of national parks and public lands among military and veteran communities by enhancing marketing efforts, representation, and community engagement efforts. Develop a centralized online platform and/or an app where veterans can find comprehensive and up-to-date information on accessible outdoor facilities and trails.

### Collaboration & Implementation

- Continue the important work of the VA Taskforce on Outdoor Recreation by improving long-term coordination between federal agencies and veteran serving organizations.
  - Establish an Office of Outdoor Recreation to facilitate cooperation among relevant organizations and committees.
  - Permanently authorize the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR) and include the Department of Defense and Department of Veteran Affairs as member agencies.

### Skills Training & Education

- Improve and expand initiatives that support transitioning service members, veterans, and family members to pursue conservation and outdoor careers. This can involve the utilization and expansion of existing programs like DOD SkillBridge, the Transition Assistance Program (TAPS), and the Military Spouse Employment Partnership to provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge to translate their military expertise and unique backgrounds into lucrative positions within the conservation, outdoor, and growing green infrastructure sectors.
- Organize virtual and in-person job fairs and workshops to highlight the various opportunities available with federal and state land management agencies, as well as with both for-profit and non-profit organizations. These events would serve as platforms to explore potential career paths, network with industry professionals, and gain valuable insights.

To read the full report, go here: <https://sc.org/SCMORReport2024>

