

Travis Manion Foundation

Veteran Wellness Case Study



A Summary of Findings in Collaboration with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families



Since February 2020, when the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) published their first findings on the impact that Travis Manion Foundation (TMF) is having on their members, the IVMF has been continuing to evaluate the mental health and well-being outcomes for this population. The 2020 study found that those members who participated in multiple initiative types at TMF experienced increased levels of positive health outcomes. Beginning in 2021, IVMF's evaluation team conducted an additional, deeper study involving specific case studies of veterans and families of the fallen who are engaged with TMF. Those case studies indicate a causal relationship between well-being outcomes and the participants' involvement in Travis Manion Foundation programming and events.

**PRIMARY FINDING:
AS A RESULT OF PARTICIPATION, TMF MEMBERS FELT MORE CONNECTED TO ONE ANOTHER AND THEIR COMMUNITY. THIS LED TO IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH, AND ULTIMATELY GREATER WELL-BEING AND THRIVING.**

HIGHLIGHTS FROM PREVIOUS STUDIES

Survey data from nearly 5,000 TMF Spartans showed that veterans and family members of the fallen who participated in more types of TMF initiatives had better health and well-being outcomes.

Specifically, those who participated in three or more TMF initiatives had significantly higher scores of **connectedness, resilience, emotional/mental health, and thriving** compared with those who participated in one TMF initiative. Spartans who participated in Character Does Matter (CDM) as mentors showed even stronger outcomes.

New Case Study

In order to build on insights gained from surveys and better understand why more active TMF members experience improvements in their emotional/mental health, a case study was commissioned to focus on the following key questions:

- How is involvement in TMF affecting the mental and physical well-being of veterans and families of the fallen?
- Can improvements in physical and mental well-being be attributed to involvement in TMF?

Interview findings demonstrated that, because of their participation with TMF, members experienced positive well-being outcomes that fit together across three themes.

Well-Being

People involved with Travis Manion Foundation develop strong relationships and increased sense of purpose, which fosters better mental and physical health for Spartans and enables them to truly thrive.

Resilience

Travis Manion Foundation members feel connected to others through the organization, which empowers them to become stronger in the face of life's obstacles.

Connectedness

By volunteering with Travis Manion Foundation, Spartans create strong relationships with one another and the mission of Travis Manion Foundation, which creates the foundation for increased well-being.

Member Spotlight

ONE FAMILY OF THE FALLEN'S STORY

One sister of a Fallen Warrior stated that she started a journey of healing and formed impactful relationships through TMF after participation in a survivor expedition.

"To have other people who had been through similar experiences and give advice and just comfort, was incredible. I met other siblings who had lost a brother similarly, and it was eye-opening. It was the most amazing week. I did more healing, more post-traumatic growth, and more movement towards resiliency in that one week than I have ever had in my whole life."

She was also amazed by the change she witnessed in her mom. "I don't even have words for it. Before we left, she would hardly ever get up off the couch, and she didn't leave her apartment, and she wasn't really eating. After that week, she started being engaged to help veterans and other families of the fallen. It was like something clicked for her."

After a few expeditions, this Spartan decided to run the Marine Corps Marathon. She noted the incredible impact on her physical health. "Before TMF, I weighed 300 pounds. Now, I weigh under 200 pounds and I ran a marathon."

"My best friend jokes all the time I'm a different person: I laugh way more, I don't have as much anxiety, and I'm pretty steady. You have a choice. In that moment of utter pain and grief, you can get stuck, or you can take positive steps to move forward. And I didn't get stuck. The activities and engagement with TMF have really helped pave the way for where I am now."

Case Study Findings

The interviews backed up the 2020 annual survey results. As a result of participation, TMF members felt more connected to one another and their community. This led to improvements in their mental and physical health, and ultimately greater well-being and thriving.

■ KEY FINDING: CONNECTEDNESS

Interview data suggests the opportunity to feel connected may be the most important program component in TMF programs. Families of the fallen shared stories that demonstrated the impact and life-changing results of having the opportunity to be with others who had lost a loved one, and to honor their fallen service member by serving others. Additionally, linking program activities with a service component, appears to enhance feelings of connectedness to other Spartans and the community.

One veteran participated in an expedition focused on leadership and personal growth. He recalls his arrival at the airport to meet the TMF group saying, **“I didn't know anybody. And then you show up, and you've got this common group of people that are there for one purpose together. You're immediately bonded. I'll never forget, I came down the escalator and everybody's in their TMF shirt. Every person hugged each other. I'm not really a hugger, yet it felt very natural, just because it felt like a family getting back together.”**

■ KEY FINDING: RESILIENCE

Members of Travis Manion Foundation gain the hope and strength required to grow from negative experiences and face difficult situations.

After being involved in an explosion and trapped under a house for over four hours, this male veteran struggled when medically retired. His father and grandfather had spent their careers serving, and he felt ashamed and embarrassed that he could not continue to serve as they did. However, through telling his story, he started the healing process: **“I didn't know the impact that my story would have on others, just by talking about perseverance and everything, because I hadn't tapped into that yet. But [the TMF community] kept telling me, 'more people need to hear about your story. Share your story and talk to your students about how you were able to overcome.'...That gave me a different viewpoint. My life didn't end in the military, it's just a new beginning to something else.”**

■ KEY FINDING: WELL-BEING

The feelings of connectedness and sense of purpose provide opportunities for increased well-being, including mental health, physical health, and thriving.

A family member of the fallen participated in an expedition and found the mix of physical activity, the companionship of others that understood her pain, and the service to others really helped her path to increased well-being: **“after he died, it was all about survival and grieving. Then, when TMF came to my life, it was more about really entering into life again and being challenged. And being physically challenged and mentally challenged has really, really helped me grow immensely.”**



Member Spotlight

A VETERAN'S STORY

After participating in Character Does Matter, one veteran began a journey of serving others and found a greater sense of purpose.

“When I do service, when I'm speaking with young people, when I'm supporting other veterans, I get this greater sense of pride in myself, but also this sense of community that I missed for a long time. That's one of the major reasons why I continue to support TMF is because I now have this veteran community that I didn't even know existed. Now, seeing other veterans that I'm connected with, we call ourselves the Spartans and I have Spartan brothers and sisters all across the US that support me and take care of me and watch out for me, I'm part of a bigger family now.”

The veteran notes that he has distilled the CDM principles into his own family as well.

“I thought me being tough and hard, growing up as a teenager and going into the military, that was me showing grit and showing positive character. I realized now that that's not the case, being resilient and showing that grit in other ways and being vulnerable are better ways of showing character. To see that in my sons and to see them put their character in action in these service projects ... means the world to me.”



EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The case study was conducted using two rounds of interviews of past TMF participants:

- First round interviewees were selected based on data collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. Several of the potential interviewees were unable to participate.
- The second round targeted Spartans that were still active in TMF programming.
- A total of eleven Spartans were interviewed. Of those, nine were veterans and two were families of the fallen. Three were female and eight were male.
- Participants selected represented diversity with regards to gender, ethnicity, military connectedness, and initiatives in which they had participated.

Interview questions explored participation in TMF activities in more detail, centering around the reasons for participating and the outcome areas discovered through prior surveys. For example, Spartans were asked at what point they felt like they were a “member” of TMF, and what keeps them engaged with TMF. They were also asked to elaborate on the impacts they reported in their survey responses, and to share any other changes they have experienced since participating.

TMF INITIATIVES

- **Character & Leadership Program**—veterans and families of the fallen serve as mentors to youth
- **Personal Development Opportunities**—educational workshops on leadership and well-being; expeditions for veterans and survivors focused on serving and personal growth
- **Community & Volunteer Engagement**—community 5k runs and other fitness events to unite members; community service projects to meet local needs

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About Travis Manion Foundation

The work of Travis Manion Foundation (TMF) is rooted in the belief that veterans and families of the fallen are among America’s greatest civic assets, and that the path toward bridging the civilian-military divide and uniting our communities begins by empowering our military community. Their vision is to create a unified and supportive community, inspired by our nation’s service-members, where individuals hone their character to serve a purpose higher than themselves. To achieve this, TMF trains, develops, and highlights the role models that lead these communities. They design programs, training opportunities, and events that invest in and empower veterans and families of the fallen by helping them to identify their personal character strengths. Armed with this knowledge, they pass on their values to the next generation, and serve and connect with the greater community.

About the Institute for Veterans and Military Families

Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) is the first national institute in higher education singularly focused on advancing the lives of the nation’s military, veterans and their families. Through its professional staff and experts, and with the support of founding partner JPMorgan Chase Co., the IVMF delivers leading programs in career and entrepreneurship education and training, while also conducting actionable research, policy analysis, and program evaluations. The IVMF also supports veterans and their families, once they transition back into civilian life, as they navigate the maze of social services in their communities, enhancing access to this care working side-by-side with local providers across the country. The Institute is committed to advancing the post-service lives of those who have served in America’s armed forces and their families. For more information, please visit ivmf.syracuse.edu.