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Evaluation of Los Angeles County's 2019 "Spark the True You" Mental Health Campaign

In 2019, the Los Angeles Sparks women's professional basketball team, in partnership with the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) and Military and Veteran Affairs (LACMVA), conducted a promotional campaign involving a series of events and associated materials under the title "Spark the True You" (STTU). The campaign's goals were to destigmatize mental illness by normalizing the experience of mental health problems; to educate, assist, and activate a community of support for military women, women veterans, and their families; and to highlight the value of women veterans to their communities.

The RAND Corporation project team evaluated the reach and impact of the events as part of a contract funded by LACDMH and administered by the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA). This report describes the outcome of this evaluation. It begins with a brief background

on the topic of women veterans, their reintegration into communities following separation from the services, and the mental health challenges they sometimes experience. This is followed by a description of the STTU effort and RAND's methods for evaluating it. Evaluation results are presented and discussed, along with recommendations for any future similar efforts.

KEY FINDINGS

- STTU attendees included substantial percentages of women veterans and family members of service members or veterans.
- Roughly half of participants did not recognize campaign branding.
- Most participants reported that STTU events and materials provided new information about mental health or how to connect to care.
- A minority of survey participants held stigmatizing beliefs about people experiencing mental health challenges.
- The vast majority of survey participants said that they would seek professional help for a serious emotional problem.
- Most survey participants could recognize signs of mental health problems in others and knew how to provide support.

Challenges Faced by Women Veterans

Women veterans face a host of challenges. Following separation from the military, the process of transitioning back to civilian life and reintegrating into communities can be difficult, with many veterans reporting problems fostering or maintaining relationships, finding work or keeping up with school, meeting home or work obligations, or feeling part of, or taking part in, their communities (Sayer et al., 2010), as well as a feeling of lost identity or purpose (Demers, 2013). Some women veterans describe not thinking of themselves or being seen as “veterans,” a label that typically conjures images of male combat veterans (Thomas et al., 2017). Many women veterans experience posttraumatic stress disorder or depression or have experienced military sexual trauma (Crompvoets, 2011). Rates of suicide are 1.8 times higher among women veterans than nonveterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, 2018). These mental health issues may complicate reintegration and be exacerbated by the stress of the reintegration process.

“Spark the True You”

LACMVA and LACDMH embarked on the STTU campaign with the goal of expanding its reach to support women veterans and their well-being. The campaign launched with an event on March 22, 2019, at Bob Hope Patriotic Hall in downtown Los Angeles, referred to as the STTU “Tip Off.” Patriotic Hall houses a variety of services for veterans and their families on an ongoing basis. The event was open to the media and included the Sparks head coach Derek Fisher, the Sparks guard Karlie Samuelson, and Sparks President and Chief Operating Officer Danita Johnson. The event included speakers, information about employment opportunities and veteran programs, and wellness activities. Targeted attendees were active duty women, women veterans, and their families. An event in May, “A Convening of Women Veteran Thought Leaders,” gathered information from 30 individuals about what and where the STTU campaign areas of focus should be and how

to integrate these foci into the remaining planned events. Eight other events during the RAND evaluation period covered stress management, self-care, families as sources of both stress and support, rehabilitation, homelessness, and diet and exercise, and there was a job fair with career and education support services.

STTU was also integrated into Sparks games. Veterans could request tickets to games and free transportation (via bus) for themselves and family members through the Sparks. STTU announcements were made during games, and a STTU video was shown at halftime. A staffed LACDMH and LACMVA table with veteran and mental health resources and information was set up near a food concession during games. A peer-to-peer women veteran engagement program, including refreshments, was conducted prior to games for those transported to the game via the STTU bus. At-game STTU activities began when the Sparks home season opened on May 31, 2019, and concluded September 8, 2019 (the STTU video was first shown on June 30).

In addition to the games and events, advertisements on local television, posts on social media (including athlete and influencer public service announcements), and street advertising were used to promote awareness of STTU and its messages. An STTU website (a microsite of the Sparks site) describing the campaign and events was also created.

RAND’s Evaluation of “Spark the True You”

The specific goals of RAND’s evaluation of STTU were to describe (1) the characteristics of those attending the events, (2) attendees’ awareness of the campaign, and (3) attendees’ attitudes and experiences related to mental health and use of mental health services. To accomplish this, RAND conducted an online survey of individuals who attended STTU events, received tickets for Sparks games through STTU, or preregistered for STTU events. RAND received a list of email addresses associated with ticket recipients and individuals registered for events from LACMVA and Sparks staff. RAND also visited six of the STTU events to collect additional

emails from onsite registrants willing to provide them. Lists of registrants and attendees were compiled monthly to include any games or events occurring in that period, and survey invitations were then issued in monthly rounds, with the goal of surveying attendees shortly after the STTU event or Sparks game they attended. RAND's contractor, 3C Institute, sent emails to each list after deduplication to ensure that individuals did not complete the survey multiple times. Invitations were issued from June 26 through December 20, 2019. To capture events occurring before the start of RAND's evaluation, the initial (June) survey was sent to anyone registering for tickets or events prior to that date (i.e., including events in May or earlier, as well as in June). Participants were also able to complete the survey on iPads that were available at the July 27 and August 4 events and at the STTU resource table at Sparks games throughout the field period.

The survey took five to ten minutes to complete, and attendees were offered \$10 as an incentive. A total of 128 persons completed the survey—89 of the 343 email invitees (a response rate of 26 percent) and 39 who completed the survey via iPad.

Findings

“Spark the True You” Attendees Included Substantial Percentages of Women Veterans and Family Members of Service Members or Veterans. Attendees Tended to Be over 30, Nonwhite, and Well Educated.

Characteristics of the sample of attendees responding to the RAND survey are displayed in Table 1. When interpreting these and other findings, the possibility should be kept in mind that individuals with particular characteristics might have been more likely to respond to the RAND survey. We can describe only those who responded to our survey, not others who might have been present at STTU events but did not participate. However, these descriptive statistics are our best indicator of the likely characteristics of STTU participants. They suggest that those reached

Forty-eight percent of women veterans also reported being a family member of a veteran or service member.

by STTU mostly fall in its target populations of women veterans and family members of service members and veterans. Women veterans made up 36 percent of those surveyed, and family members of service members and veterans were 42 percent. These roles overlapped among many in our sample: 48 percent of women veterans also reported being a family member of a veteran or service member. The sample of women veterans skewed somewhat older and more nonwhite than would be expected based on statistics for women veterans residing in the city of Los Angeles. Participating women veterans were mostly between the ages of 30 and 65, and 20 percent were 65 or older. Only 3 percent of attendees were under age 30. In contrast, 25 percent of women veterans in Los Angeles are under age 35 (City of Los Angeles, 2020). Black and Asian American attendees were over-represented and white attendees underrepresented compared with their percentages among Los Angeles women veterans. Just over a third of the women veteran portion of the sample were married, and 36 percent had children under 18 living with them. Ninety-five percent had some education beyond a high school diploma, including 50 percent who had a bachelor's degree or higher. Eleven percent reported that they were looking for work. We do not have data describing education and unemployment among women veterans in Los Angeles, but compared with all veterans in the city, the group responding to our survey has considerably higher educational attainment (City of Los Angeles, 2020). Notably, evaluation

TABLE 1
Background Characteristics of the Survey Sample

Characteristic	Percentage Overall	Percentage Among Women Veteran Participants (n = 40)	Characteristic	Percentage Overall	Percentage Among Women Veteran Participants (n = 40)
Age			Education		
18–24	1	3	High school degree	9	5
25–29	5	0	Some college	21	13
30–49	41	53	Associate's or technical degree	21	33
50–64	35	25	College degree	25	30
65+	19	20	Master's or equivalent or higher degree	25	20
Gender			Employment^a		
Man	28	0	Full time	28	30
Woman	71	100	Part time	9	8
Other	1	0	Self-employed	20	18
Latino or Hispanic			Looking for work	11	23
Race^a			Disabled	15	20
White	24	23	Retired	28	30
Black	48	55	Homemaker/keeping house	3	3
Asian	13	5	Student	4	8
American Indian/Native	4	8	Veteran status		
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0	Female veteran	36	100
Other	15	15	Male veteran	18	0
Marital status			Family member/caretaker of service member or veteran	42	48
Married	36	38	Saw a provider for mental health or substance use services, past 12 months	50	63
Cohabiting	4	0	<hr/>		
Never married	36	30	^a Percentages add to more than 100 because more than one option could be selected by a participant.		
Divorced	18	28			
Separated	5	3			
Widowed	2	3			
Children under 18 at home					
0	77	64			
1	13	21			
2+	10	15			

participants overall were more likely to have used mental health care in their lifetimes than would be observed in a general population sample: 50 percent had received care in the past 12 months, compared with 15 percent of U.S. adults (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). The percentage of women veterans using past-year mental health services in our sample was 63 percent.

Roughly Half of Participants Did Not Recognize Campaign Branding, and Many Campaign Events Were Sparsely Attended. Sparks Games Attracted the Most Participants, and the Majority of Game Attendees Were Exposed to the Campaign.

The survey opened with a question about the campaign title and logo. All survey participants needed some contact with STTU to have been enrolled in the evaluation. However, only about half (49 percent) reported familiarity with the phrase “Spark the True You” or recognized an image of the campaign logo. Evaluation participants saw a list of all recent STTU events and indicated which ones they had attended, as well as the number of Sparks games from the current season they had attended. The events that reached the greatest percentage of survey participants were the games, the STTU “Tip Off” event, and the “Convening of Women Veteran Thought Leaders” event. Only 1 to 5 percent of survey participants attended each of the other events, and in total all these events accounted for 35 percent of participants (see Table 2). Although our survey responses do not directly reflect numbers attending nongame events, observations of our survey staff were consistent with the conclusion that those events were sparsely attended, with rough head counts ranging from 3 to 60 individuals.

Follow-up questions (results not shown Table 2) determined that more than two-thirds (69 percent) of game attendees noticed the STTU video played at halftime, and 53 percent noticed the LACDMH and LACMVA table set up at the event. Only 7 percent of game attendees reported that they attended the peer-to-peer engagement program prior to the game.

TABLE 2

Type of “Spark the True You” Outreach to Which Survey Participants Reported Exposure

Type of Outreach	Percentage Exposed
STTU “Tip Off”	14
“A Convening of Women Veteran Thought Leaders” event	17
Another STTU event ^a	35
Sparks game(s) ^b	32
No STTU event or game ^c	10
STTU video	11
STTU television advertisement	10
STTU social media post	30
STTU website	14
STTU street advertisement	2

NOTES: Late in the field period, the earliest events were no longer listed (because we did not believe that survey participants would accurately recollect what took place at those events). Thus, exposure to these early events may be undercounted among survey participants. Percentages sum to more than 100 because participants could be exposed through more than one form of outreach.

^a 1 to 5 percent of survey participants reported attending any other specific event listed on the survey. This was too few to allow us to report on these events individually.

^b 13 percent had attended just one game at the time of survey, 11 percent had attended two or three games, and 7 percent had attended four or more games; 2 percent did not report the number of games attended.

^c To have received an invitation to the survey, these individuals must have registered their intention to attend an event or game and provided an email to the Sparks. However, they did not select an event or game on the survey instrument. At least some of these reports were respondent errors, because the data came from iPad surveys collected only at games or events. We included these individuals in the estimates generated for this report.

We also asked survey participants about whether they had seen “LA Sparks videos, ads, and social media posts related to mental health and/or the veteran or military community.” As Table 2 shows, 30 percent of survey participants recalled seeing a Sparks social media post on these topics. The STTU website and television ads were less commonly reported sources of campaign exposure, at 14 and 10 percent, respectively.

Most Participants Reported That “Spark the True You” Events and Materials Provided New Information About Mental Health or How to Connect to Care. However, the Most-Common Forms of “Spark the True You” Exposure—Games and Events—Were the Least Likely to Be Viewed as Informative.

As noted above, a key goal of the campaign was education. The main information intended to be conveyed concerned (1) the types of resources available to women veterans in Los Angeles, (2) how to obtain mental health care, and (3) wellness techniques that can be used to improve mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health. Survey participants described the extent to which they received new information in these categories from each aspect of the campaign (each participant answered items specific to those parts of the campaign to which they reported exposure). Most agreed or strongly agreed that they learned something new from each of the various aspects of the campaign (see Table 3). The most-positive ratings were for the STUU video and television ads. More than 90 percent of respondents said that the STTU video provided them with new information about how to connect to mental health care or that the STTU television ads provided new information about positively influencing the health of family or community. This suggests that the

quality of messaging and message content was good and effectively addressed information gaps among those who were reached. Sparks events and games did less well at conveying new mental health information, but the majority of participants (62 to 69 percent) still reported gaining knowledge in each area. There was also some potentially important variability in what information was best conveyed by which materials. Connections to mental health resources and mental health care were better made by the video and the STTU website than by other materials or by events.

A Minority of Survey Participants Held Stigmatizing Beliefs About People Experiencing Mental Health Challenges. Overall, Levels of Stigma Appeared to Be Slightly Lower Among Participants Than Levels Observed in a Prior Study of California Adults, and Support for Those with Mental Health Problems Was Somewhat Higher.

In addition to increasing knowledge, a major goal of the campaign was to destigmatize mental illness. Although mental illness stigma is widespread (Corrigan, 2005), military culture emphasizes self-reliance and toughness, and veterans may be particularly likely to see mental illness as evidence of weakness (Nash, Silva, and Litz, 2009) or lack of societal value. We asked survey participants about

TABLE 3
Knowledge Gains from the “Spark the True You” Campaign by Type of Outreach

Percentage of Spark STTU Event Attendees Agreeing They Received New Information About . . .	Type of Outreach				
	Event(s) and/or Game(s) (n = 95)	Video (n = 14)	Television Advertisement (n = 13)	Social Media (n = 39)	Website (n = 18)
Mental health resources	66	86	77	76	83
How to connect to mental health care	62	93	62	70	89
How to elevate physical, spiritual, mental, or emotional health	69	71	85	62	89
How to positively influence the physical, spiritual, mental, or emotional health of family or community	69	79	91	64	82

NOTE: Because only two people reported seeing street advertising, we do not report on perceptions of this.

two stereotypes of those experiencing mental health problems that are commonly used to assess mental illness stigma. Responses are shown in Table 4, along with responses to the same items in a prior study of a representative sample of California adults (conducted in 2014) by way of comparison. Overall, just 10 percent of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that a person who has experienced mental illness will never be able to contribute much to society. Among California adults, 14 percent agreed with this item (Collins et al., 2015). Twenty-three percent of our sample agreed that a person with mental illness is a danger to others. In the prior survey, 26 percent of California adults endorsed this belief (the data are available from the authors of this report on request). A fairly substantial majority of STTU survey participants, 85 percent, said that they plan to take action to prevent discrimination against those with mental illness. Somewhat fewer, 71 percent, hold this intention statewide. This suggests that survey participants, and perhaps by extension individuals reached by STTU events, may be more supportive of people experiencing mental health problems, compared with adults in California. It is possible that attendance at STTU events or exposure to STTU materials created this disparity. Alternatively, STTU might have attracted individuals more supportive of those experiencing mental health problems.

To explore these patterns in STTU’s target population of women veterans, we compared agreement with these three items for these women to those of all other survey participants. We observed only one difference. Women veterans were more than 50 percent less likely to see those with mental illness as dangerous, compared with other survey participants. As with responses of all survey participants, we cannot tell, given our survey design, whether these differences existed prior to STTU participation, as a consequence of participation, or a combination of these things. However, we are not aware of any aspect of STTU that addressed violence or other ways in which those with mental health challenges might be perceived to be dangerous.

The Vast Majority of Survey Participants Said That They Would Seek Professional Help for a Serious Emotional Problem, but More Than One in Four Said That They Would Delay Doing So to Hide the Problem from Others. Treatment Delay Was Almost Double That Observed Among California Adults Overall.

Along with destigmatizing mental health problems, STTU sought to normalize the experience of them. A central aspect of normalization is seeking

TABLE 4
Endorsement of Stigmatizing Beliefs About Mental Illness and Desire to Address Discrimination Among “Spark the True You” Participants

Statement	Women Veterans (% agree)	All Others Surveyed (% agree)	All Persons Surveyed (% agree)	2014 Survey of California Adults (% agree)
A person with mental illness is a danger to others ^a	13	30	23	26
People who have had a mental illness are never going to be able to contribute much to society	8	11	10	14
You plan to take action to prevent discrimination against people with mental illness	90	83	85	71

NOTE: California adults were representative of the state’s population and differ from Sparks survey participants in demographic characteristics, such as age, race, and ethnicity, in addition to veteran status.

^a Responses of women veterans are statistically different from those of others surveyed

professional help when a mental health problem arises and sharing the experience with others to obtain their support. Those experiencing challenges to their mental health often avoid or delay seeking care so as not to be stigmatized by others (Wong et al., 2018). This also appears to be true of veterans (Kulesza et al., 2015).

Among participants in our survey, 92 percent said that they would seek professional help for a serious emotional problem, a percentage nearly identical to that in the California adult population (see Table 5). This would seem to suggest that stigma does not influence help-seeking in these groups and that mental illness is normalized. However, a more complicated picture emerges from responses to our other items. More than one in four STTU participants said that they would put off seeking treatment out of fear of stigma, nearly one in three said that they would hide a mental health problem from their family and friends, and more than one in two said that they would hide such a problem from coworkers or classmates. These rates of potential treatment delays and hiding a mental health problem from family or friends were higher than in the general population of California adults.

It appears that STTU participants are particularly worried about stigma in their close personal networks. It is possible that this is because women

veterans who participated in STTU (rather than STTU participants overall) are particularly concerned about how their social networks would view them if they had a mental health problem. To determine whether this might be the case, we compared their survey responses with those of other participants. We observed only one difference. Women veterans were more likely to agree that they would hide a mental health problem from their coworkers or classmates. Indeed, more than two in three women veterans agreed with this item. It seems likely that this is result of the military culture noted above, rather than STTU participation, but our design does not allow us to conclude this with certainty.

Most Survey Participants Could Recognize Signs of Mental Health Problems and Knew How to Provide Support, but One in Four Lacked Information About How to Support Others.

A third major STTU goal was to activate a community of support for women veterans and service members. To provide support, individuals need to be able to detect emerging mental health issues and know what to do to help someone experiencing

TABLE 5
How Sparks Survey Participants Said That They Would Respond If They Had a Mental Health Problem

Statement	Women Veterans (% agree)	All Others Surveyed (% agree)	All Persons Surveyed (% agree)	2014 Survey of California Adults (% agree)
If you had a serious emotional problem, you would go for professional help	93	93	92	93
You would put off seeking treatment for fear of letting others know about your mental health problem	23	27	27	15
You would try to hide your mental health problem from family or friends	40	25	32	22
You would try to hide your mental health problem from coworkers or classmates ^a	68	43	53	48

NOTE: California adults were representative of the state's population and differ from Sparks survey participants in demographic characteristics, such as age, race, and ethnicity, in addition to veteran status.

^a Responses of women veterans are statistically different from those of others surveyed.

mental health challenges. As indicated in Table 6, most STTU participants said that they could do both of these things. Indeed, perceived ability to recognize signs of a mental health problem was higher among STTU participants than among California adults. However, there is room for improvement in knowing how to provide support. Seventy-six percent of STTU participants agreed that they knew how to do this, on par with the 76 percent of California adults who did so. While promising, this leaves nearly one in four adults who failed to agree, and thus may feel unable to assist someone they recognize as in need.

We found no differences in either of these beliefs among women veterans and others participating in the survey.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The STTU campaign did attract the targeted audience of women veterans, although our data suggest that this was in small numbers. The most-successful methods of outreach appear to have been Sparks games and social media posts. Most participants perceived STTU events and materials as providing new information about the key topics targeted by the campaign, including mental health and how to connect to care. However, the most-successful methods of outreach (Sparks games and social media posts) were the least informative—although they still provided new information to the majority of those surveyed. The STTU approach was to provide mental health information prior to and during breaks from game time—at the peer-to-peer events, the LACDMH

Most participants perceived STTU events and materials as providing new information about the key topics targeted by the campaign, including mental health and how to connect to care.

and LACMVA resource table, and via the video. Very few evaluation participants attended the peer-to-peer events, but a fairly substantial percentage saw the resource table, and many found the video to be useful. In addition, it is possible that women veterans unfamiliar with STTU and not specifically invited to the games were reached and helped through these materials. This would not be reflected in our evaluation, which focused on game attendees who applied for free tickets or transportation through STTU. Similarly, the STTU ads seem to have provided useful links to information—links that might not have been made without the campaign.

Other STTU events appear to have been less successful. According to the small numbers of

TABLE 6
Most Sparks Survey Participants Said That They Are Able to Recognize Mental Health Problems in Others, but One in Four Lacked Information About How to Support Them

Statement	Women Veterans (% agree)	All Others Surveyed (% agree)	All Persons Surveyed (% agree)	2014 Survey of California Adults (% agree)
I know how I could be supportive of people with a mental illness if I wanted to be	80	74	76	76
I can recognize the signs that someone may be dealing with a mental health problem or crisis	78	89	85	68

Although the STTU campaign sometimes struggled to reach individuals, it successfully provided new information about how to improve mental health and access relevant resources among those it did reach.

individuals we observed attending the events we staffed, during the hours we staffed them, it appears that those events reached few people, limiting their potential impact. It is unclear whether this was due to inadequate outreach, the programming itself, or a poor match between the two. For example, STTU events included a job fair. Although unemployment is an issue for women veterans in Los Angeles, few of our survey respondents were looking for employment. It seems more likely, however, that outreach was the issue. RAND was sometimes unable to establish the dates, times, and places of events until shortly before they took place. The same might have been true of potential STTU event attendees.

Overall, we found that although the STTU campaign sometimes struggled to reach individuals, it successfully provided new information about how to

improve mental health and access relevant resources among those it did reach.

Social marketing campaigns, such as STTU, can effectively reduce the stigma of mental illness and increase the use of treatment by those in need (Collins et al., 2019). They may also increase community support for those affected and provide important connections to resources (Collins et al., 2020). Although the reach of STTU seems to have limited its impact, the use of sporting events in outreach appears to have been one of the more successful aspects of the campaign. In future campaigns, it may be wise to focus on sporting events as venues for dissemination of messages and move away from attempts to hold separate wellness events, where partnerships with teams may provide few immediate benefits.

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