

Five Years of blood, sweat and community funded impacts

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Five years ago, we created Support The Enlisted Project (STEP) because it felt like the right thing to do. In that time, I personally have grown much, but more importantly, I learned how to build a community of team members that together could change the lives of thousands of our young military and veteran families. So much of my life was measured on my individual accomplishments, but in building STEP I was forced to energize others to provide the resources. This is one of the greatest success stories I know of, and so much of it seemed to be out of my control. Maybe this is why I am so proud of the entire community that built STEP. Below is a piece of my 5-year anniversary speech delivered to our proud partners and supporters, and I wanted to share it with you, because I am so proud of them.

"Five years ago, a group of inspired community leaders, in order to better serve our young military families, created Support The Enlisted Project (STEP).

This group, six board members, one employee and two volunteers, were at the infamous fork in the road, where they took the path less traveled.

These nine people may have sparked the flames of STEP, but it must be known that it was STEP's proud supporters and partners that fanned those flames to build the burning torch of inspiration STEP is today.

This supportive community gave of what they had to build the STEP that has brought immediate relief and permanent stability to 2566 of our local military families. Families who were on the brink of financial collapse; Families who were losing their houses and cars; Families who lost their water and electricity; Families that were out of food; Families who were out of diapers; Families that were out of hope.

I want this country to know, that our community came together for a cause. I have no doubt in my mind, that it was STEP's supporters fanning those flames, their love, their passion and their commitments that gave these families the solution to their problems, and returned to them their hope.

Now, 5 years ago, when we started to build STEP, we asked three simple questions:

1. Are these services actually needed in our community?
2. Will the local military leadership support us supporting their young families?
3. Can we fund this without Federal or State dollars, but just with private investors?

Very quickly we determined the answers were yes, yes, and yes.

Yes – these services are needed! We found nobody else was or is doing this. In fact, personal referrals generate 90% of STEP's applicants, coming from their friends and coworkers, military supervisors and 131 other support agencies across Southern California. This is a true testament to the need for STEP when this many referral partners send their most critical and vulnerable populations to us. That is humbling.

Yes - we have been met with open arms, invited in and supported in every way to every military base in Southern California. So much so that military leadership is working to find ways to expand our programs aboard their bases.

Yes - we have been able to raise more funding each year to support our programs, raising more than \$1 million each of our last two years.

Serving our families has always been our priority - We have been building and honing our Emergency Financial Assistance program over the past five years. This program is unique, innovative, and has been proven to change people's financial habits and cultures 88% of the time, with a recidivism rate of only 9%!

Not in my wildest dreams would I have predicted this level of effectiveness over a 5-year period and 3,765 applications.

Most notably, I am proud to say that we manage to halt an average of 7 evictions and homeless cases each month - that is 355 and counting, active duty and transitioning veterans that we have kept off, or gotten off, the streets - which is no place for our military families to live.

As you read our forthcoming 2017 Annual Impact Report you'll see that this year we have strengthened our balance sheet again, increased our outreach through strategic secondary programs and doubled the amount of donated goods we moved from our donors to our military families.

We also worked to improve the quality and quantity of our counseling, which was accomplished mainly by bringing on an additional staff social worker.

And, the change I am most proud of was our upgrade by Charity Navigator to a 4-star rating! This was fueled by our program expense ratio averaging 81.1% over the past three years.

Our community has funded STEP in so many ways. They have funded our programs, provided boxes of diapers, driven our trucks and inventoried our baby clothes - they choose to come along side me and STEP to make a difference in the lives of those whose daily sacrifices are often unimaginable. Thank you all for choosing to make a difference with STEP.

This is your anniversary and I send my gratitude and congratulations to each one of you."

When I moved from STEP's Board Chairman to become its CEO, I really never thought I would still be in this role today, almost four years later. But as the programs grew and evolved; I saw we were truly making a difference in the lives of our young military families and I wanted to help grow that. So, thank you to my board and all the supporters for giving me the opportunity to serve in this capacity – and for letting me do my part every day to help our young military families from a period of financial crisis to a lifetime of self-sufficiency.

Thank you.