



BOB WOODRUFF
FOUNDATION

Executive Summary

Assessing and Improving Community Support

Our Goal: To show the veteran-service landscape how communities are improving their effectiveness to serve veterans and their families, and indicate to these collaborative communities where they have opportunities to improve to ensure that veterans have the opportunity to thrive after service.

The communities to which veterans return after military service play an important role in their success as civilians. Thus, the Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF) has invested significantly to increase local communities' capacity and abilities to ensure the wellness of veterans. BWF has identified more than 100 local partners—collaboratives composed of organizations that serve veterans—in communities across the nation.

BWF encourages our local partners to adopt a “collective impact” approach. In that approach, organizations and individuals representing different sectors work together to address a specific issue, using a structured form of collaboration that creates a common language and common effort to address the complex needs involved in achieving a particular goal. For example, some veterans may want and need mental health care, employment, housing, opportunities to socialize and connect with their community, and resources for urgent necessities. Few organizations can meet those varied needs on their own. In the collective impact framework, a mental health clinic, an employment agency, an affordable-housing group, physical fitness organizations, a foodbank, and other organizations can join forces to ensure that they are offering coordinated services to the same veteran, reducing duplication, and identifying new opportunities to collaborate.

During these uncertain times, policymakers, service providers, local communities, and funders need to be especially discerning about the resources and information they use.

BWF developed and published this analysis and discussion guide to inform difficult decisions about how to focus limited resources, by providing a clear picture of how community-based collaboratives are developing, what lessons are transferable between communities, and which areas for improvement will have the biggest return on investment—that is, the greatest impact on the veteran and military-affiliated populations.

Priority Findings

Community-based collaboratives across the United States have committed time and resources to ensure that veterans and their families succeed after military service. BWF analyzed those collaboratives' progress toward collective impact on veterans and their families by examining their membership composition, data sophistication, and collaborative maturity. This paper provides key findings about how collaboratives were faring before the COVID-19 pandemic and about how communities can help them become more successful, such as:

- **Having a membership composed of engaged, committed, and diverse organizations and individuals is critical for a collaborative's success.**
- Although a diverse and engaged membership is the first aspect of collective impact that many community-based collaboratives achieve, only one-third of BWF's local partners have built such a robust membership composition.
- Using data to identify veterans' needs, set goals for a collaborative, track its performance, and measure its impact is important for the collaborative's effectiveness. Roughly one-fifth of local partners have achieved the necessary data sophistication to perform those tasks.
- **To be effective, collaboratives must have a culture of sharing information, and the most effective collaboratives have a data system that enables them to do that.**

- Expensive data systems do not automatically ensure data sophistication. The majority of collaboratives that have complex or expensive data systems still struggle to use their data well.
- **When well-established collaboratives fall short, it is typically either because they are addressing only a narrow subset of veterans' needs (despite serving all of the veterans who come to them with those needs), or because they are addressing a wide range of needs but cannot serve every veteran who has those needs.**
- Fewer than 5 percent of collaboratives have fully achieved all three collective impact goals of diverse membership composition, data sophistication, and collaborative maturity.

Recommendations and Conclusions

- Consistent with the collective impact framework, new and developing collaboratives should continue to ask themselves not only “who is at the table?” but also “who is not at the table?”
- To improve their data sophistication and to design the most effective information systems for their work, collaboratives must actively gather and use information about their operations and services and about their partners and clients. The tactics for more efficient data management vary, but may include breaking down available information to look at it in new ways, such as identifying insights, gaps, or other needs to improve a collaborative's operations or its provision of services to veterans.
- Collaboratives seeking to improve their collaborative maturity should focus on improving their cohesiveness by fostering regular communication among community partners, sharing information across organizational lines, and reinforcing long-term collaboration by revisiting their design and implementation processes together.

Some well-established collaboratives are making significant contributions to the veteran and military-affiliated populations in their community, despite shortcomings in membership composition, data sophistication, or collaborative maturity. However, such collaboratives typically fall short in one of two ways: Either they are narrowly focused (addressing only a subset of veterans' needs, although they serve all veterans who come to them with those needs), or they are overstretched (addressing a wide range of needs but lacking the capacity to serve all veterans with those needs). In addition, the problem of limited resources continues to challenge many community-based collaboratives. But the most effective and efficient way for them to serve the complexity of veterans' needs is to become stable and well-established in the areas of diverse membership composition, data sophistication, and collaborative maturity.

BWF is not suggesting that some collaboratives are better candidates for investment or engagement than others. Although some collaboratives are clearly more sophisticated and capable than others, that observation is meaningless by the most important measure: impact on veterans. Unlike many other aspects of life, in which consumers face myriad choices, veterans generally cannot select another community collaborative from which to receive services. Instead, BWF is committed to improving community-based collaboratives, by facilitating collaboration and collective impact as well as by providing the resources and expertise to improve our local partners and thus, ensure that veterans have the opportunity to thrive in civilian life regardless of where they choose to settle.

ABOUT THE BOB WOODRUFF FOUNDATION

The Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF) was founded in 2006 after reporter Bob Woodruff was hit by a roadside bomb while covering the war in Iraq. Since then, the Bob Woodruff Foundation has led an enduring call to action for people to stand up for heroes and meet the emerging and long-term needs of today's veterans. To date, BWF has invested over \$76 million to Find, Fund and Shape™ programs that have empowered impacted veterans, service members, and their family members, across the nation.

Our team at the Bob Woodruff Foundation brings together a diverse range of backgrounds, experience and leadership—this expertise, coupled with constant engagement with our veterans and their families, has made BWF the trusted, nonpartisan voice and leading impact investor meeting the comprehensive needs of the post-9/11 veteran community. For more information, please visit bobwoodrufffoundation.org or follow us on Twitter at [@Stand4Heroes](https://twitter.com/Stand4Heroes).