Assessing and Improving Community Support for Veterans

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Introduction

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.

Each year, roughly 250,000 men and women separate or retire from the U.S. military, joining the ranks of earlier veterans as they return to civilian life in communities across the country. Many of the 18 million American veterans are leaders and contributors to society, exercising and building on the skills and experience they gained while in uniform. However, some veterans struggle with the transition to civilian life and need additional resources and support.

The communities where veterans make that transition 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’s investments in those local partners (LPs) improve their efficiency and effectiveness, helping to ensure that veterans land softly in the communities to which they come home. In turn, BWF learns from the LPs and their communities about the evolving needs of veterans and their families. That collaboration helps BWF navigate the maze of veteran-serving organizations to find, fund, and shape excellent programs to support the veteran population and to make sure that all current and former service members, their families, and caregivers have the opportunity to thrive.

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 public and non-profit service organizations can join forces to ensure that they are offering coordinated services to the same veteran, reducing duplication, and identifying new opportunities to collaborate. The collective impact approach also lets veterans become part of the solution for other veterans—either once they are on their feet or when they first engage with their community—thereby providing veterans with another outlet for service. The conditions of a successful collaboration include a shared common agenda; shared measurement systems; mutually reinforcing activities; continuous communication; and a strong backbone organization that provides infrastructure to plan, manage, and support the work of the collaborative.1

Collective impact presents opportunities for both effectiveness and efficiency, allowing community-based collaboratives to address the needs of their local veteran and military-affiliated populations. To strengthen those efforts, the Bob Woodruff Foundation has provided individual assessments to our local partners. Those assessments—known as Checkpoints—identify each collaborative’s level of maturity with the collective impact approach by evaluating three key characteristics: the composition of its membership, the sophistication of its data use, and the maturity of its collaborative processes. The individualized Checkpoints also include recommended resources for improvement in those areas (see the Appendix).

**Purpose of This Paper**

This BWF white paper summarizes those Checkpoints and describes the collective impact maturity of community-based collaboratives.

The goal is to show how communities are improving their effectiveness—and to indicate where they still have the opportunity to improve—in order to ensure that their local veterans have the opportunity to thrive after military service.

BWF developed and published this analysis 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 investment and improvement will have the biggest return on investment—that is, the greatest impact on the veteran and military affiliated populations.

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

The insights presented here are intended to serve as valuable tools to guide stakeholders, funders, policymakers at various levels, and local leaders in how to target support and resources for cross-sector collaboration. Support and resources that benefit veterans, their families, and their caregivers ultimately build resilience in our communities. Resilient communities that possess the tools to adapt to uncertain times and provide necessary services to their most vulnerable members are always critical to individual well-being. They are especially vital during a global pandemic.

**Key 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 by examining their membership composition, data sophistication, and collaborative maturity. This paper provides key findings about how collaboratives are faring and about how communities can help them become more successful:

- 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.
Key Findings, cont’d.

- 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.

Collective Impact and the Bob Woodruff Foundation’s Local Partners

The Bob Woodruff Foundation manages the largest national nongovernmental network of organizations that are stakeholders in veterans’ wellness. BWF identifies, supports, and provides strategic learning, funding, and technical assistance programs to community-based veterans’ collaboratives across the country. Those BWF local partners meet and learn together regularly as a national community of practice.

American communities differ, and thus the approach to community collaboration also differs among BWF’s local partners. Within each collaborative, one member serves as the backbone organization that guides the collective effort in its community, but those organizations may differ from community to community. In some communities, the backbone organization is a nonprofit group. In other communities, it may be a museum or a government agency or a Community Veteran Engagement Board (CVEB).² Although some veterans come home to a community that is prepared for their particular needs, other veterans may return to a community that is largely unfamiliar with military culture.

By taking a “big tent” approach, community-based collaboratives bring together their collective knowledge and expertise both about the community in which a veteran is transitioning to civilian life and about the specific needs that veterans or their families or caregivers may experience during that transition. Between them all, a collaborative’s members work together to create positive, helpful, collective impact that supports veterans and helps them continue to succeed after their military service.

BWF does not prescribe the form that collaboration should take. But the foundation and our more than 100 local partners all share the intent to serve local veteran and military-affiliated populations as effectively as possible, with an efficiency that reflects the limited resources available. For those reasons, BWF and our local partners are committed to the collective impact approach and to fundamental consistencies—such as shared measurement, continuous communication, and a common agenda—regardless of the community, and BWF has invested to help communities learn about and improve their collective support for local veterans.

Using BWF’s Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool to Assess Key Characteristics for Collective Impact

An important tool that the Bob Woodruff Foundation has developed is the Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool (LPSAT), a survey instrument for community-based collaboratives. The LPSAT serves many functions: It enables communities to assess their own maturity and areas for growth. It provides an understanding of the overall health and sophistication of nationwide collective impact efforts to serve the veteran and military-affiliated populations. It highlights the most promising and effective avenues of investment and ways of allocating limited resources to serve those populations. And it lets BWF, other funders, and important stakeholders better understand the resources and actions necessary to build a successful collaborative.

To establish a baseline understanding of what veterans need, and of how well communities are identifying and deploying resources to address those needs, BWF used the LPSAT to survey 88 local partner collaboratives between October 2019 and January 2020. Those collaboratives represent communities that include more than 11.5 million veterans, almost two-thirds of the U.S. veteran population. The LPSAT survey consists of three sections: background information about the organization responding to the survey and about the collaborative to which it belongs, a self-assessment of the collaborative’s impact, and a section of open-ended questions to identify specific concerns and provide information about how BWF might best support the collaborative and its community. 3

Using local partners’ responses to the LPSAT, the Bob Woodruff Foundation assessed each collaborative’s progress in the areas of membership composition, data sophistication, and collaborative maturity—three elements that are especially critical for maximizing collective impact in communities. For each of those three elements, BWF characterized a collaborative’s developmental stage as either 1) exploring and in development, 2) evolving and being refined, or 3) stable and well-established. Those developmental stages indicate a collaborative’s progression toward effective collective impact to serve its veteran and military-affiliated populations. (The stages are described in more detail in Figure 1. The outcomes for surveyed local partners are shown in Figure 2.)

3 For details about local partners’ responses to the survey, see Bob Woodruff Foundation, Community Collaboration for America’s Veterans: Insights from the Bob Woodruff Foundation’s Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool (June 2020), https://bobwoodrufffoundation.org/community-collaboration-lpsat-2/.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Exploring and in development</td>
<td>■ Collaborators are assembling the core elements of their effort.</td>
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<td>■ New questions and opportunities are emerging.</td>
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<td>■ Some uncertainty remains about what will work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evolving and being refined</td>
<td>■ The collaborative’s core elements are in place.</td>
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<td>■ Outcomes are becoming more predictable.</td>
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<td>■ The collaborative is refining its aspirational strategies and activities.</td>
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<td>Stable and well-established</td>
<td>■ Collaborators have significant experience and an increasing amount of certainty about what works.</td>
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<td>■ The collaborative is evaluating its impact and improving its efforts.</td>
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BWF’s local partner collaboratives range widely in size. One-fourth of LPs have 11 to 25 members, but an equal share have 10 or fewer members, and almost 10 percent have more than 100 members (see Figure 3). Members represent a range of fields and services. Most commonly, the membership of a local partner collaborative includes representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), local non-profits that serve veterans, social service agencies, and health care organizations that serve the general population. Members also often include other federal agencies that serve the veteran and military-affiliated populations, such as the Department of Labor, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Health and Human Services, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. In addition, LPs benefit from including individual veterans who serve as leaders, national non-profit organizations that serve veterans, the small-business community, non-veteran volunteers, local governments, organized philanthropies, the faith community, representatives from the fields of K-12 or secondary education, and others.

BWF’s assessment of membership composition considered the number and range of types of members, as well as their level and consistency of participation and collaboration.

**Membership Composition**

The first characteristic that BWF assessed in each local partner collaborative is the range of different types of members it has and their level of engagement in the collaborative. Members consist of organizations such as individual stand-alone non-profit and for-profit organizations, local governments, state governments, and federal agencies. Each veteran is a complex person with a range of needs—some related to their time in the service or to their and their family’s transition to civilian life, and some similar to the needs of non-veterans.

Veteran-serving collaboratives are best able to provide services when they have as many community partners as veterans have needs.
BWF’s Findings

Of the three characteristics assessed in BWF’s Checkpoints, local partners showed the most progress in membership composition. More than one-third of LPs have reached the highest stage, with stable and well-established membership composition (see Figure 2, on page 5). Similar shares of LPs have membership composition at the second stage (evolving and being refined) or at the first stage (exploring and in development). Building the composition of its membership is the fastest and most cost-efficient way for a collaborative to make sure that veterans are being supported. By ensuring the availability of as many resources as possible through their members, local partner collaboratives respond to the needs of veterans while also actively expanding their capacity to build long-term and sustainable collaboration, thus establishing a firmer foundation for increasing their impact and deepening partnerships across communities.

Of the 31 collaboratives that have fully stable and well-established membership composition, 17 are stable and established only in that category. That finding confirms that collaboratives often focus on building their membership before attempting to achieve more complex aspects of collaborative success, such as data sophistication.

The number of community partners in a local partner collaborative correlates with successful membership composition, whereas the collaborative’s budget is less of a factor. Most LPs with stable and well-established membership composition include more than 25 member organizations working together. The budgets allocated for collaboratives’ efforts vary widely among the LPs with stable and well-established membership, from zero to $500,000 per year. That suggests that the effectiveness of a collaborative’s work can stem from the diversity of organizations involved and does not require dedicated funding, as long as individual member organizations are committing time and other resources to the collective effort.

In only two cases are local partners still in the exploring stage of strengthening their membership composition while being in the stable and well-established stage in their data sophistication and collaborative maturity. Although those two LPs are outliers in that respect, they show that it is possible, though not ideal, for a collaborative to provide support for veterans without having a diversity of highly engaged members. In both of those cases, the local partner is an organization that provides wraparound services and is largely self-funding, reducing the need to have a diversity of organizations to provide the same benefits and resources to veterans. However, that go-it-alone approach is less effective and less efficient; thus, it would absorb outsized resources from funders while providing less benefit to veterans.

CASE STUDY: PINE BELT VETERANS TASK FORCE

Membership Composition: Stable and well-established
Data Sophistication: Exploring and in development
Collaborative Maturity: Exploring and in development

The Pine Belt Veterans Task Force, established in 2017, is based in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. It operates without paid staff or formal goals to guide its work and without a data management system to measure outcomes. Collaboratives that lack goals to direct their work and a data-collecting framework can face challenges in allocating resources effectively and in fully understanding the community they serve.

The Task Force has broad diversity in its membership, including representation from the faith community, social service agencies, local government, and other veteran-serving non-profits. That broad membership composition has positioned the Pine Belt Veterans Task Force to meet the evolving needs of its community. The members meet every other month, with the Board convening in opposite months.

Those meetings provide the opportunity for collaborative members to share general updates on programs and services, discuss challenges and possible solutions, and shine a rotating spotlight on one organization within the collaborative. However, establishing well-defined goals and collecting data to evaluate progress would improve the overall efficacy of the collaborative and its planning processes during the bi-monthly meetings.

Besides helping a collaborative understand the needs of its community, data are essential to demonstrate the collaborative’s impact to potential funders. The absence of data has inhibited the Task Force from approaching funders because of an inability to make informed decisions about how to allocate the prospective funding to specific resources. As a starting point, the Task Force has planned a drive-through resources fair for veterans that will provide veterans with postage-paid questionnaires in order to gather baseline data about the services and resources needed in the community. Those data will be an invaluable tool to help the collaborative’s members determine where to focus their efforts in the future.
Recommendations

A diverse and committed membership is an important requirement for collaboratives to achieve the efficiencies and effectiveness of collective impact. It is also the most accessible goal for new collaboratives. Local partners and other veteran-serving collaboratives should start their collective effort by building physical collaboration—that is, by engaging and recruiting the organizations that will be working together. To improve in this aspect of collective impact, collaboratives should aim to add as many community partners as possible that can respond to the myriad needs of their area's veterans, families, and caregivers. The combination of broad diversity and increased number of members creates a collaborative that can collectively serve as many needs—directly or through referrals—as possible. Such growth is limited only by the geography of the collaborative's defined service area and the ability of the organizations to collaborate across that distance.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen local partners doing that quickly and on a large scale in response to an unprecedented need for services.

CASE STUDY: THE WARRIOR ALLIANCE

Membership Composition: Evolving and being refined
Data Sophistication: Stable and well-established
Collaborative Maturity: Evolving and being refined

Throughout the current pandemic, BWF’s local partners have evaluated their membership composition rapidly and on a large scale in response to an upsurge in need. In many cases, veterans who previously needed services now have much greater needs, and veterans who previously never asked for assistance are now in dire need of help. Local partners that are also suffering because of the pandemic are increasing their composition by adding partners in their community. In addition, they are collaborating on a broader scale by working with other collaboratives, both inside and outside their state. One example of such a collaborative, The Warrior Alliance (TWA) based in Atlanta, GA, expanded its efforts to increase support for the veteran and military-affiliated populations affected by COVID-19.

Formed in 2018, The Warrior Alliance is a service navigator for veterans and military personnel in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Before the pandemic, it had a modest number of community partners that enabled it to respond to many of its target populations' needs at some level. But TWA was still improving how those partners worked together and how the collaborative operated as an entity.

In March 2020, members of TWA met to discuss and ultimately coordinate a COVID-19 response. That effort grew beyond the original service area of Atlanta to encompass the entire state of Georgia, as TWA added partners such as the National Guard and the Department of Labor to expand the services it could provide and the number of veterans and military personnel it could reach.

The partners are “response-ready,” with a three-part strategy of “triage, mobilize, and respond.” To triage, or determine the needs of veterans across Georgia resulting from COVID-19, TWA used its already well-established data capabilities to design a survey assessing those needs. Through its greatly expanded network, the collaborative distributed the survey across the state; responses were used to create a “heat map” that all of the collaborative’s partners use to serve veterans. As needs are identified, a volunteer contingent formed by TWA stands ready to mobilize, deploying to areas where it can increase the capacity to fill veterans’ needs. TWA also responds to immediate requests from veterans and their families for specific help.

Throughout the pandemic, The Warrior Alliance has used its greatest strength—data sophistication—to improve its membership composition in order to have a specific collective impact on the needs of veterans. In the process, it is likely to improve its collaborative maturity as well.
Another key aspect of collective impact is the extent to which a collaborative uses data to inform its programs and evaluate its performance. Data sophistication is especially important because shared measurement is the lifeblood of an impactful collaborative. This measure has seen the most noticeable growth among BWF’s local partners in the past three years. In 2017, most LPs had ideas about what data they wanted to collect and how they wanted to use the data, but few were doing so for the measurable benefit of their collaborative or for the benefit of the veterans and families they serve.

**BWF’s Findings**

To assess data sophistication, BWF aggregated local partners’ responses to questions in the LPSAT about how often they use data to identify veterans’ needs, set goals for the collaborative, track the collaborative’s performance, and measure its impact. Roughly one-fifth of LP collaboratives have stable and well-established data systems, and another one-fifth are in the initial, exploring stage of data use (see Figure 3 on page 5). The majority of collaboratives are in the middle stage: They have data systems in place but are still improving and refining those systems.

The challenges of establishing a data system that is shared among organizations are considerable. In some cases, member organizations have independent data systems and are unsure how to link them and share information. In other cases, established organizations may not see a clear benefit to sharing data with the collaborative, in the absence of some encouragement or incentive. Some collaboratives are unsure about how to allocate the costs of an information system equitably among member organizations, and others are unable to afford a data system. Some are concerned about ensuring confidentiality for the veterans they serve, and still others are concerned about the legality of sharing information, given the restrictions of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

Overall, most local partners are still working to improve their data collection and use of information. Our findings suggest that many LPs first focus on achieving a diverse and engaged membership and then turn their focus to improving their data sophistication. Anecdotally, we also observe that having a diverse and engaged membership can improve a collaborative’s data sophistication.

**CASE STUDY: LACEY VETERANS SERVICES HUB**

**Membership Composition:** Stable and well-established  
**Data Sophistication:** Evolving and being refined  
**Collaborative Maturity:** Stable and well-established

The Lacey Veterans Services Hub, created in 2014, serves the military and veteran community adjacent to Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State. The Hub describes its operating approach as a “hybrid model” incorporating its nearly 70 engaged member organizations. Many of the Hub’s services—including assistance with VA benefits, housing, employment, education, nutrition, financial aid, and legal counseling—are coordinated and provided in-house. Other specialized services, such as dental and vision care, are coordinated with outside partners.

An integral factor contributing to the strength of the collaborative has been consistent support, both in active membership and financial resources, from the City of Lacey, WA, Lacey Mayor Andy Ryder, a vocal champion of the Hub, leads outreach efforts to ensure that local government leaders understand the needs of the area’s 32,000 veterans. That support is invaluable for the Hub’s staff and volunteers because it frees them to focus on performing the work of the collaborative.

In addition to strong local government participation, the membership of the Hub includes representatives from county, state, and federal government programs; the faith community; health care service organizations; numerous social service agencies; and many other non-profit organizations.

The Hub’s intake process integrates data about clients’ housing, employment, and education status; medical and behavioral health conditions; alcohol and substance abuse; the presence of disabilities; and the incidence of domestic violence. The Hub recognizes several challenges in its collection and use of data. First, individual veterans may not be comfortable sharing all of their underlying issues, which can make it harder to identify and fully address root problems. Second, once a client has been enrolled in appropriate programs and services provided by partner organizations, information about that client may not be shared fully with the Hub and other partners because of HIPAA regulations or partners’ privacy and security requirements. Third, some programs may not track data about their service delivery.

As the Hub continues to test and refine its operating model, one of its priority targets will be to enhance the collection, management, and use of client data across the entire collaborative. Successfully attaining that goal will be a critical step in the continued evolution of the Hub’s innovative approach to delivering services.
In some instances, a member organization contributes its data expertise to help improve the entire collaborative’s data collection and use. In other instances, a growing collaborative is compelled to improve the data interactions between its members because the increased number of relationships and the complex flow of information become too burdensome without intentional data management. However, improving data sophistication is a considerable challenge for many collaboratives. Some collaboratives learn and adapt quickly, while others make slower progress in data collection, management, and use. The LPs that are still in the evolving stage of data sophistication range in age from 1 year old to more than 30 years old.

Some collaboratives track only partial information, which limits their ability to adjust their plans and services to address gaps between veterans’ needs and available resources or services. For example, they may be recording a veteran’s personal information and immediate need but not asking about demographics, lifestyle, or additional needs. In some communities, certain member organizations ask some of those questions, while other members ask a different set of questions. That disconnect increases the burden on veterans, while also creating disparate data sets that do not link to or complement one another and thus cannot be used in a comprehensive or enduring way.

Local partners that have stable and well-established data sophistication typically use data to determine veterans’ needs, set goals for the collaborative, track referrals among partners, understand how the services they provide affect veterans, and understand the impact of their collective efforts. Some LPs that have evolving data systems do some or all of those activities, but not proficiently or consistently. Others are more likely to use data to set goals, but on the whole, fewer LPs use data to assess their collaborative impact, assess individual services, or track referrals to ensure that veterans receive the necessary services (see Figure 4).
The collaboratives with stable and well-established data sophistication are not exclusively older groups or those with larger budgets. Nor does the use of a sophisticated data management system ensure success. Although about 40 percent of LPs (see Figure 5) use a database or client management system (CMS), only one-fourth of those LPs have achieved stable and well-established data sophistication. Instead, the LPs that have achieved an advanced level of data sophistication use a variety of data platforms and have pursued success by integrating data use into their collaborative work culture.

**FIGURE 5: How Collaboratives Track Their Clients**

- CMS: Warrior Serve, 2%
- CMS: Salesforce, 3%
- Multiple/Separate Systems, 5%
- Word Processing, 9%
- Database, 22%
- CMS: Unite Us, 14%
- Spreadsheet, 24%
- None, 22%
- Multiple/Separate Systems, 5%

Purchasing a database or CMS does not automatically ensure its successful use. Such technology improves the management and use of data, but collecting information, entering it into the chosen platform, and processing the data for use must be regular activities that become a cornerstone of the operations and culture of the collaborative for each person working in it. If organizations operate a complex data platform but do not use the information they obtain to set goals or identify gaps in their services, they are not using their data system to the best advantage.

**Recommendations**

In the natural progression of a collaborative’s development, the need for both efficient and effective data management increases with the size of the collaborative, because the need to track an increasing amount of information has a direct effect on the collaborative’s success in operating itself and providing services. Having a limited number of member organizations allows a collaborative to maintain rudimentary data files; as the collaborative grows, however, its need for a coordinated and more complex system increases. Smaller collaboratives can use a less complicated data system as long as they emphasize the necessity of sharing information and follow the principles of a shared data system. Specific supports for developing and evolving a shared system—what the collective impact approach calls “shared measurement”—can be found in the resources of BWF’s national partner, the Collective Impact Forum.4

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. Designing and implementing those practices requires a commitment by all of a collaborative’s members to the importance of data. Members also need to understand that a successful data strategy requires collecting, understanding, and using data, instead of relying on a complex data system that gets few to no inputs. Some local partners that are enthusiastically committed to collecting and using data to improve their performance do so without a complex data system. Some LPs conduct surveys and focus groups to obtain information about veterans’ outcomes and their programs’ performance but do not maintain a complicated data system.

LPs can achieve their intended goals by making decisions based on the available information, but they could also benefit considerably from managing data more efficiently. The tactics for more efficient data management vary. They 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.

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Collaborative Maturity

The third key characteristic that BWF assessed is the extent to which members of local partner collaboratives are meeting, planning, sharing resources, engaging with the broader community, and coordinating to achieve the collaborative’s defined goals for improving the lives of veterans, service members, their families, and caregivers. Such collaborative maturity is essential because it indicates that local partners are empowered through collective impact to address veterans’ needs more effectively in their community. Ineffectiveness in collaborative maturity could cause veterans to fall through the cracks between a collaborative’s members, could mean that veterans’ needs would be met only partially, or could leave veterans to bear the burden of coordinating assistance from multiple service providers themselves while they deal with their compounding needs.

BWF’s Findings

Despite the importance of collaborative maturity, only nine BWF local partners—10 percent of those surveyed—have reached the stage of being stable and well-established in collaborative maturity (see Figure 3 on page 5). Those LPs are generally larger collaboratives, which include more than 25 members and serve areas with more than 50,000 veterans. Notably, those successful local partners have many connections throughout their community and a large population of veterans to engage continuously. The twin challenges of recruiting organizations that can meet veterans’ needs and establishing a workflow for overlapping and complex issues make collaboration and the collective impact framework especially important. Larger collaboratives are often forced to develop their collaborative maturity; if they cannot or choose not to develop, they will fail by being unable to manage the many moving parts of their collaborative.

Collaboratives that apply the collective impact model and that have achieved a stable and well-established collaborative maturity share the following traits:

- Establishing goals and objectives for serving veterans,
- Having the knowledge and expertise to address veterans’ needs,
- Having the necessary resources to address veterans’ needs,
- Measuring outcomes related to their goals and objectives for serving veterans,
- Communicating regularly among member organizations,
- Coordinating members’ outreach efforts to veterans,
- Referring veterans between members,
- Having members that work together regularly,
- Sharing learned information among members, and
- Sharing learned information with other collaboratives.

Collaborative maturity is the most challenging characteristic to achieve and the one that the fewest local partners have accomplished so far. Community-based collaboratives that do not have collaborative maturity forgo efficiencies and effectiveness, even though they have a positive impact on veterans, families, and caregivers. As with the other characteristics, achieving collaborative maturity provides a collaborative with the insights and opportunity to assess its performance and continually evolve.
Recommendations

Improving collaborative maturity presents potentially the greatest opportunity to increase a collaborative’s impact on the veteran and military-affiliated populations. But considerable work remains to be done. BWF’s local partner network has both grown and improved over the past three years, and BWF will continue to assist LPs, provide training and resources, and facilitate and promote a collective impact approach to ensure that veterans and their families have the opportunity to succeed in and contribute to communities across the United States.

The key difference with local partners that have stable and well-established collaborative maturity lies in how well the community partners work together to respond to veterans’ needs. Local partners that are seeking to improve their collaborative maturity should focus on improving their collaborative’s 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. Such long-term collaboration is what sets collective impact apart from traditional approaches to collaboration.

Collaboration can occur for short-term efforts or projects, whereas collective impact is a long-term investment in which planning for a prolonged and undefined time period is fundamental to creating resilient and enduring solutions. Therefore, a local partner or other veteran-serving collaborative looking to improve its collaborative maturity must work on designing its shared long-term goals as well as on designing the accompanying long-standing team strategy for the collaborative and the responsibilities of its members.

CASE STUDY: HOME FRONT MILITARY NETWORK

Membership Composition: Stable and well-established
Data Sophistication: Stable and well-established
Collaborative Maturity: Evolving and being refined

The Home Front Military Network (HFMN), based in Colorado Springs, was created through the merger of two older veteran-serving organizations: Peak Military Care Network (formed in 2012) and The Home Front Cares (established in 2004). HFMN is in the evolving stage of its collaborative maturity, while providing services that address the range of veterans' needs across the state of Colorado. Its commitment to that shared work and service is evident in its stable and well-established membership composition and data sophistication.

HFMN created their collaborative identity through team building, and using and sharing data, and communicating across organizational lines. Such commitment to the collaborative’s success allows the Network to provide all services to veterans at some level. Although not completely satisfying all needs of the veterans in its service area, the HFMN is addressing all of those needs. As the merger progresses, BWF looks forward to seeing the Home Front Military Network’s collaborative maturity advance as it improves the working interactions among its partners and further increases its use of data to improve services for veterans.
Community-based collaboratives are working diligently to address veterans' needs, but they differ greatly in terms of their membership composition, data sophistication, and collaborative maturity. Fewer than 5 percent of local partners have reached the stage of being stable and well-established in all three of those areas.

**BWF’s findings should also inform local stakeholders—including service providers, policymakers, elected officials, philanthropists, and veterans themselves—about how best to engage and support those collective efforts.**

Committing to participate in a community-based collaborative is the most effective way to improve the collaborative’s membership composition. Many collaboratives would benefit from having individuals or organizations that can share their expertise in data use and information technology when they join the collaborative.

Likewise, philanthropies can play an important role in improving local collaboration through funding. However, BWF’s findings underscore the point that investment alone, without local leadership, is insufficient. For example, purchasing a database capability does not automatically confer data sophistication and may still not give a collaborative the ability to track and refer veterans, measure impact, improve effectiveness, and identify efficiencies.

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’s Checkpoints and this paper are not intended to suggest 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. For that reason, all stakeholders must actively remove obstacles and enable success for local veteran-serving collaboratives through improving collective impact.

**Conclusion**

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**APPENDIX: RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

The Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF) curated a library of resources from the corporate and non-profit sectors that relate specifically to learning about, expanding, supporting, and sustaining collective impact. The library matrix of those recommended resources is below. BWF chose the resources based on collaboratives’ responses to the Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool (LPSAT), our expertise in collective impact, and our accumulated knowledge of each collaborative’s community.

### LPSAT 2020 Recommended Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Maturity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Established</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity on Nonprofit Boards</td>
<td>Evaluating Collective Impact Part 3</td>
<td>Achieving Systems Change (Video)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing Nonprofit Executive Team Effectiveness</td>
<td>Why Organizations Are Moving to the Cloud</td>
<td>Power Dynamics in Collective Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding Inclusion Mistakes</td>
<td>CRMs for Collective Impact</td>
<td>How to Sustain Momentum Over the Long-term (Video; different info modalities in the Presentation description)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evolving</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Powerful Ways to Take REAL Action on DEI (Diversity, Equity &amp; Inclusion)</td>
<td>Implementing Shared Measurement</td>
<td>Value of the Backbone (Requires an account)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Group Toolkit (Requires an account)</td>
<td>Evaluating Collective Impact Part 2</td>
<td>The Top 6 Leadership Challenges Around the World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Board Meetings</td>
<td>Data Toolkit (Requires an account)</td>
<td>Aligning Collective Impact Initiatives (Requires an account)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploring</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Channeling Change</td>
<td>Cocreation for Impact Evaluating Collective Impact Part 1</td>
<td>Backbone Starter Guide (Requires an account)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting the Scene</td>
<td>3 Steps to Make Your Nonprofit More Data-Driven</td>
<td>Collective Impact (Breakdown, easier read)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Board Roles and Responsibilities</td>
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<td>Operating Models for Nonprofit Networks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building Gender Diversity on Boards</td>
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<td>How Strategic Planning Can Help</td>
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<td>Common Agenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building a Board</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Foundational</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding Social Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Collective Impact Planning Toolkit</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Network to Build Capacity</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

After using data from the LPSAT to define the parameters of the three measurement categories (membership composition, data sophistication, and collaborative maturity) and the three developmental stages (exploring, evolving, and stable), BWF identified these resources from national entities to help local partners improve their collaborative work. These resources address multiple aspects and configurations of the categories and stages to provide a starting point for local partners to continue their development. In selecting the resources for local partners in each configuration, BWF took the opportunity to create an additional group of resources (labeled “Foundational”) for stakeholders and other interested parties who may be less familiar with the collective impact approach.
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