

Community Collaboration For America's Veterans: Insights From The Bob Woodruff Foundation's Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool

Executive Summary

The Bob Woodruff Foundation's work with leading organizations addresses the current and emerging needs of veterans and their families—a critical part of this work is the recognition that the communities into which veterans transition also play a fundamental role in their reintegration and well-being. The Bob Woodruff Foundation manages the largest national nongovernmental network of organizations and stakeholders supporting veterans' wellness. We support our growing network of BWF "Local Partners" (LPs) through a combination of original programming, shared best practices, regular meeting and learning opportunities and a collective commitment to building capacity for veteran support locally.

Guided by a commitment to use data to inform how we best build the capacity of Local Partner collaboratives to serve veterans, BWF surveyed our LPs to establish a baseline understanding of what veterans need, and how well community leaders are able to identify and deploy resources that address those needs.

This report presents the results of BWF's Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool (LPSAT). It offers the first data-driven view of the landscape of local organizations around the country that serve veterans and their families. The survey results point to important ways in which those organizations—in collaboration with BWF—can increase their individual and collective capacity to support America's veterans.

The LPSAT delivers insights about the needs of veterans—and about communities' ability to meet those needs—reflecting BWF's diverse and engaged network of over 100 Local Partner collaboratives, representing over 3,000 organizations serving veterans in almost every state in the nation.

Our LPSAT insights offer several critically important and timely findings relative to how community and local-level groups identify and address veteran needs:

- First, our findings reinforce the current substantive contributions and enormous future potential of community-based collaborative models to help veterans reintegrate into civilian society.
- At the same time, the survey's results raise reasonable concerns about the sustainability of those efforts.
- Additionally, BWF collected these LPSAT data before COVID-19 became a significant problem in the United States. Thus, the findings in this report provide a baseline picture of veterans' needs—and the capacity of Local Partner collaboratives to address those needs—before the public health crisis.
- What does this mean for the current and near-future state of community-level support for veterans and their needs?
 - » Where the data indicate sufficiency, we recognize that they represent a best-case scenario.
 - » Where they indicate gaps, we are increasingly concerned.

The full results of this analysis can be found in the complete BWF paper, **Community Collaboration for America's Veterans: Insights from the Bob Woodruff Foundation's Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool.**

Priority Findings

Community-based collaboratives are currently addressing, to some extent, nearly every need of veterans. BWF's Local Partners apply the collective impact framework in a variety of ways to address veterans' needs in the community.

- The collaboratives serve large, broad, and diverse veteran and military-affiliated populations; include a significant number and diversity of partner organizations and stakeholders; and, crucially, address to at least some extent almost every need presented by veterans.
- The LPSAT reveals the substantive extent to which LP collaboratives play a key role in community wellness—despite, in many cases, lacking the resources, capacity, or knowledge with which to do so adequately.

Physical and mental health, employment, and career training are the most common needs, but capacity to meet those needs varies. BWF's Local Partner network represents an overall geographic area that is home to approximately 11.5 million veterans. The most common needs of the populations that LP collaboratives serve are physical health, employment, career training, and mental health. Not all needs can be addressed equally, however.

- The collaboratives have notable capacity to meet the employment and career-training needs of veterans and other military-affiliated clients (at least prior to COVID-19).
- Some of them have less capacity to meet mental health needs. Collaboratives attribute their challenges in addressing mental health needs to a lack of community resources for mental health and stigma against mental health treatment.
- Other ongoing issues that persistently challenge Local Partners are lack of affordable housing, transportation needs, and financial problems among veterans.

The majority of Local Partners are relatively new organizations that are still working through the sorts of operational issues that community initiatives commonly face in their earliest stages of development. Most Local Partners are striving to overcome challenges in the areas of leadership, trust, data sharing, recruitment of veteran clients and other stakeholders, and communications.

Local Partner collaboratives vary in composition, resource base, and geographic coverage. Above all, the insights provided by the collaboratives reflect diversity in all of those areas, painting a complex picture of how the unique characteristics of a given community inform, and are leveraged to serve, its veterans.

- Some collaboratives serve single cities, whereas others serve entire states.
- Collaboratives may serve an area with fewer than 2,500 veterans or more than 200,000.
- Some collaboratives operate with no budget, and half run on volunteer power alone. Others operate with budgets of more than \$1 million a year and have their own paid staff.

How Local Partner collaboratives address their challenges varies as well and depends largely on the resources available in their community. In addition to their answers to the LPSAT, Local Partners have reported since the COVID-19 outbreak that they are diversifying their reach and seeking new partnerships. Collaborative structures are proving essential in communities' response to the effects of the pandemic on veterans and military families.

Veterans are well-represented in the leadership and governance of many collaboratives. Over three-quarters of collaboratives have at least three veterans serving on their board. That representation is noteworthy because it represents a best practice of achieving collective impact and ensuring cultural competency.

Use of information management systems and data is limited. Despite the role that collaboratives' lead organizations play in coordinating care for veterans on the broader community landscape, 22 percent of those organizations do not have information management systems to collect data. The LPSAT results identified notable gaps in Local Partners' use of data to track referrals among collaborative members and to evaluate the services that individual members provide.

The LPSAT results affirm that there is no one-size-fits-all model for community-based approaches to serving veterans. The diversity and scope of the Local Partner network notwithstanding, all Local Partners share a dedication to supporting veterans in their local community and to adopting a collective impact approach. Local Partner collaboratives were established specifically to become the navigational tool that helps veterans find their way on the civilian landscape. But most collaboratives face considerable challenges.

Findings from the Bob Woodruff Foundation's LPSAT affirm that community-based collaboratives play a key role in the lives of veterans—whose service-connected needs are often too numerous, complex, and individualized to be addressed adequately by large and frequently distant federal agencies.

American communities have long sought to support their veterans and military-affiliated populations. Particularly in the post-9/11 era, leaders from the public, private, nonprofit, and other sectors have begun to develop and test models for organizing and sustaining such community support.

Each day, BWF's network of more than 100 community-based collaboratives works directly with veterans in almost every state who are reintegrating into civilian society. At the same time, the collaboratives invite and facilitate the involvement, leverage the resources, and coordinate the partnership of many

local businesses, public agencies, service providers, donors, and others. As BWF addresses the critical issues of assessing veterans' needs and the local capacity to meet those needs—and ensuring that the two are linked—our commitment to Local Partners is twofold:

- We are committed to increasing Local Partners' individual and collective capacity to meet the needs of veterans at the local level, in part by providing access to resources that help build their capacity for collective impact and in part by facilitating shared learning with their peers who serve veterans elsewhere across the country.
- Our Local Partners possess unique insights about the specific needs that veterans in their communities face and about their communities' ability to meet such needs. We are committed to learning from those insights and sharing them with our peers in the worlds of philanthropy, scholarship, public policy, and service provision.

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 nearly \$70 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).