

INSIGHTS INFORMING THE CONCERNS OF POST- 9/11 VETERANS AND FAMILIES

Case Study:

American GI Forum

National Veterans Outreach Program, Inc.



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AMERICAN GI FORUM/NATIONAL VETERANS OUTREACH PROGRAM, INC.

1. Organizational Overview

History

The American GI Forum/National Veterans Outreach Program, Inc. (NVOP) was founded in 1972 as a separate entity of the American GI Forum, the nation's largest Hispanic veterans' organization chartered by the U.S. Congress. The primary goal of the newly formed service organization, NVOP, was to develop a new community-based organization that addressed the needs of all veterans, regardless of race.

Headquartered in San Antonio, TX, the NVOP is recognized nationally as a leader in providing community-based services to veterans with special needs. In 1979, NVOP recognized the need to replicate their program in other communities and opened its first regional office in El Paso, TX. With the expansion of programming, funders saw the potential for expanding their reach across the state, and the number of federal grants and private funding increasing. Experience and scalability have allowed NVOP to continue its expansion into several regions, increasing their impact on a statewide basis.

In the past 42 years, The American GI Forum/National Veterans Outreach Program has proven itself to be a respected service provider in the military service organization landscape, earning many awards for its accountability and innovation in this space. Some of these awards include: the Regional Award for Cost Effectiveness from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Blue Ribbon award for innovation in economic development from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In addition, the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans selected NVOP as a national Best Practice model.

Mission Statement

The American GI Forum/National Veterans Outreach Program's Mission Statement is as follows: "To establish and maintain a comprehensive community service agency with a diversified funding source that will serve the needs of veterans, their families, and other needy individuals of the community."

Its commitment is "To preserve and enhance the name of the American GI Forum and the National Veterans Outreach Program by instituting total quality management and community goodwill through every program." With the stated goal to: "Establish innovative programs of service for the contemporary needs, through an expansion and growth policy that will seek complimentary services that will generate self-sustaining mechanisms for the organizations."

Organizational Structure

The NVOP is overseen by a Board of Directors, comprised of approximately 10 community volunteers and elected officers of the American GI Forum membership organization.

The organization's hierarchical structure is led by the Founder, President and CEO, Carlos Martinez. Yolanda Suarez, Senior Vice President, and Ignacio Leija, Vice President of Service Operations, round out the top three positions of leadership. Both Martinez and Leija are veterans from the Vietnam era. Additional staff includes: Directors of Monitoring & Evaluation/Housing Development, Finance, and Residential Center for Veterans and Client Services; case managers; intake specialists; employment services specialists; and receptionists. There are a total of 142 full-time employees in the headquarters and five field offices located in Houston, Fort Worth, Dallas, El Paso, and Austin, which have 4 to 13 staff members each. Approximately 50% of the staff are case managers in both the headquarters and field offices.

Programming

Veterans Service Center

The core of the organization is the Veterans Service Center (VSC) located in San Antonio, TX. Following intake and assessment, assistance is provided depending on the individual's needs and case management plan. Employment is the mainstay of the organization; but following processing through the VSC, NVOP strives to meet its vision of a "continuum of care" by providing additional services, such as housing or healthcare, as part of its case management model with the goal of providing long-term employment, self-sufficiency and independence. Additional services also include: basic job skills training, resume writing, access to career attire, and a food pantry, to name a few.

Employment and Training Programs

The NVOP provides several different programs for employment assistance dependent on its target population. Due to its array of employment program services, veterans may qualify for one or several programs designed to address their individual needs. Current programs include:

- *Texas Veterans Outreach Program (TVOP)* is funded by the State of Texas through its Texas Workforce Commission and is administered by the NVOP. The TVOP targets veterans with special challenges to employment, such as homeless veterans and veterans with disabilities, and veterans with barriers to employment, such as those with a history of substance abuse or ex-offender status. This program offers services in San Antonio, Houston, Dallas/Ft. Worth and El Paso.
- *Veterans Workforce Investment Program (VWIP)* is funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor and targets recently discharged veterans (48 months or less since discharge) who are interested in finding employment in newly-emerging "green jobs" fields that include trade-centered skills, such as plumbing, carpentry, weatherization, water processing, and warehousing. NVOP offers this program in Austin, San Antonio, and Houston.
- *Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP)* is funded through the U.S. Department of Labor. Following intake and assessment, HVRP offers support to homeless veterans in their quest to become self-sufficient and, hand-in-hand with intensive case management, achieve stabilization through support services for employment assistance, job training, physical/mental health issues, housing, and any of the other myriad of issues faced by the homeless. This program

is offered to homeless veterans and homeless veterans with families in San Antonio, Austin, Houston, Dallas, and Ft. Worth. Each of the sites has their own HVRP grant.

- *Veterans Integration Program (VIP)* is a HUD-funded program, which serves homeless veterans and their spouses, who are seeking employment, and, currently, serves the San Antonio/Bexar County area.
- *Veterans Enterprises of Texas (VETS)* is a self-sustaining program, specifically established to create job opportunities for disabled veterans. Through the VETS Box Manufacturing Company and the VETS Work Center, the organization creates temporary job opportunities for disabled veterans in a sheltered work environment that is currently located in the basement of the AGIF/NVOP residential center. The organization recently received a \$1 million contract from the U.S. Postal Service to manufacture USPS shipping boxes at its box manufacturing company. Another contract is with the U.S. Army for packing retirement kits.
- *TX-VET Program* addresses the employment and transition problems faced by unemployed or underemployed post-9/11 veterans with special emphasis on serving veterans under the age of 34, who typically suffer disproportionately higher unemployment rates compared to civilians of the same age. This program is offered to veterans in San Antonio, Dallas/Ft. Worth, El Paso, and Houston, and is funded by a \$1 million grant from the Walmart Foundation.

Specialized Services

Helping Female Veterans and Veterans with Families (HFVVF) is a program that focuses on serving the particular needs of female veterans and veterans with families. Female veterans receive assistance with employment, housing, and childcare, as well as other social services, such as healthcare and substance abuse counseling. Similar programs are located in Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and El Paso.

Homeless Veterans

In November 2005, The American GI Forum opened its Residential Center for Homeless Veterans with 80 transitional beds and 60 single room apartments. Recently, eight beds were added to accommodate homeless female veterans. Housing services are supported by active case management from the VSC to provide residents a constructive and progressive plan, leading them to self-sufficiency and independent living. Residents are offered a menu of services including: mental health counseling, employment services, addiction counseling, a daily meal service, and community reintegration programs. Both the transitional and permanent housing programs are supported by grants through HUD, the U.S. Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, and the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program. Veterans in transition may stay up to two years in the facility, but the average length of stay is six to nine months. Veterans living in permanent housing are disabled and unable to work. They must contribute rent in the amount of \$205 per month, which is covered by disability benefits. AGIF/NVOP also provides housing assistance for homeless veterans with families through short-term apartment leases.

Housing for the Elderly

AGIF/NVOP operates three apartment complexes in San Antonio, providing 170 affordable apartments for senior citizens. Each of the facilities are subsidized projects that provide affordable apartments for seniors on low fixed incomes.

Veterans Day Stand Down

Due to its experience and longevity in the community, The American GI Forum/National Veterans Outreach Program takes the lead in organizing the annual “Stand-Down”. The one-day event coordinates with over 65 social service agencies that provide medical and dental services, hot food, winter clothing, medical exams, flu shots, haircuts, a community court and judge, and a variety of supplies and information targeted to veterans. The event annually serves approximately 900-1,000 veterans and their families. For many veterans, this event provides initial access to the many services available that may eventually lead them into the workforce and self-sufficiency.

Veteran Populations Served

Broadly, individual veteran services from AGIF/NVOP are available to all veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces regardless of discharge status, though some specific grant-funded programs restrict those with other-than-honorable discharges from receiving services. AGIF/NVOP particularly focuses on serving disadvantaged veterans, those who are homeless, have disabilities, or who might be ex-offenders. The organization currently serves veterans with employment and training services in multiple metropolitan areas across Texas, including Austin, Dallas, Ft. Worth, Houston, and El Paso, in addition to the headquarters in San Antonio. They also operate a 140-bed residential housing center for homeless and disabled veterans in San Antonio. Additionally, housing services for the elderly are available in San Antonio at three different apartment complexes. The employment services and housing programs complement each other in an integrated case management model, with the organization’s vision to provide a continuum of care from job placement to housing to long-term follow-up. AGIF/NVOP believes that face-to-face communication and outreach are among the keys to their success.

Funding Sources and Strategies

The NVOP is a duly chartered non-profit corporation, qualified by the Internal Revenue Service as a charitable organization under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code.

Federal grants provide approximately 95% of NVOP’s revenue paid through 25 separate contracts. Private funding accounts for 5% of revenue. The majority of federal grants are through the VA, HUD, and DOL. Private funders include: USAA, Walmart, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Valero, and Moen. The organization has made recent inroads into corporate funding sources, which have helped their sustainability. Due to their dependence on federal funding, leadership notes increasing difficulty covering administrative costs and have had to turn to private funding to cover those expenses. As President and CEO Martinez noted:

“We’re finding more and more difficulty with administration, because as our programs grow, we have to support more and more of our administration from private moneys, from our businesses, because they keep cutting back and saying, ‘Well, the money should go to the services.’ We all agree that’s what we want to do, but how can you run an organization if you don’t have any accountability? You need good accountability of the funds. You need good accountability of the performance, and that takes administrative dollars. The HUD program here is especially hard to deal with. They keep cutting and cutting, and it’s becoming ridiculous.”

NVOP utilizes Kintera FundWare as its financial management accounting system, and recently hired an accountant. The organization prides itself on having a successful funding strategy due to a professional relationship between finance, programs and leadership that serves to align approaches and activities,

while staying within the boundaries of the established mission.

2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

Types of Data Routinely Collected

AGIF/NVOP, like all HUD-funded grantees and SSVF program participants, uses the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to input data entry for clients served. Information collected provides a record of the client base and the number of veterans placed in housing. HUD and the VA use this information as a performance rating and monitoring tool for grant funding and auditing purposes.

Data Analysis and Reporting

According to CEO Martinez, management information systems (MIS) were always very important for the accountability of their services; however, he and the organization's leadership saw the need to conduct deeper data analysis to better understand and inform the workings of their operations. To that end, the organization hired Marie Lopez as Director of Monitoring & Evaluation, an attorney and former fellow of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, about a year-and-a-half ago. Initial data collection has consisted of focus groups and client surveys conducted at the Veterans Residential Center. This is a new approach for the organization used to inform improvement of services dependent on feedback from the consumer, the client, the veteran, the family member, and the staff. The organization wants to develop and perform more client satisfaction surveys, and analyze individual performance by case managers and populations served. Long-term goals are to inform policy and legislation based on data collection, evaluation and analysis. As Martinez stated:

“MIS has always been very important for the accountability of our services, and that's reviewed by myself and the other leadership of the organization, but I felt we needed to do even more than that. We needed to analyze the data instead of just looking at the numbers. We needed to look deeper into the operations, and so while I had the idea for a lot of years, it's been difficult, until we grew to this size, that we didn't squeeze out enough or need to create Marie's position, which is Director of Monitoring and Evaluation. Over the last year, I guess, we've added one more position to her evaluation site, and we're adding more MIS people to do more analytical work as well. The idea behind that — that's still in the works, but we want to do more on surveying client satisfaction. We want to do more analysis of individual performance by the case managers. We want to see which approaches work a little better than others, and I also want to analyze the populations that we serve...”

The driving force behind this investment in monitoring and evaluation of services is to ensure that the organization remains contemporary and relevant to an ever-changing population of veterans. Part of the investment in data collection and analysis is the development of a common intake tool that incorporates multiple variables beyond standard demographics, veteran and discharge status. Ms. Lopez noted that earlier tools did not consider critical indicators, such as era served, discharge status or education, all variables that could inform and direct existing programming.

How data are used for getting to impact

Data analysis allows the main office in San Antonio to differentiate services being provided in each of the

six outlying sites across Texas, which serve different populations. Ms. Lopez noted, “I want to start with the broadest approach possible, and that way we can go ahead and specialize. Though, of course, I would want to start locally. This is predominantly where most of our programs do exist, and this is where our closest interaction with the veteran clients are, because we are specifically here right now. But ultimately, of course, I would want to take that model to the other field site offices and clients.”

Ms. Lopez also noted that NVOP is uniquely positioned to obtain needed data due to its reputation in the veteran community:

“...It’s very interesting, especially since we’re so embedded in the community and since we’ve had that kind of reputation and rapport already, it’s very easy to get the information that we do need. I always feel that the veterans are cooperative; and if there are concerns, they’re pretty much expressed instantaneously. So it’s never going to come to a point where it’s going to be an issue of, ‘Wow, we didn’t know about this. This is a really big deal.’ It’s something that we can talk together, get together during our staff meetings and see how we can address it.”

Initial data collection activities have included focus groups at the residential center. During a focus group discussion, Ms. Lopez discovered that residents were not aware of the VA-sponsored assistance program, indicating a disconnect between veterans and available services. Veterans suggested using social media as an effective tool for disseminating such information, which led to NVOP increasing its social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

NVOP is motivated in becoming accredited and sees the continuous improvement process through the use of data analysis as a critical component to accreditation. (The group is currently pursuing CARF accreditation—the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities). As noted above, the organization intends to begin using data to examine case management effectiveness and outcomes. In addition, funders like Walmart are also increasingly interested in outcome data regarding the effectiveness of service providers. Currently, AGIF/NVOP is collecting data to prepare a white paper at the request of Walmart that will focus specifically on the needs of female veterans.

The long-term goal is to develop the use of data, analysis and measurement to address the aforementioned goals and objectives, while also fostering the notion of community collaboration and creating a common vision based on best practices. These best practices would, in turn, lead to collaboration among different entities, state-level organizations, other nonprofits and/or the private sector, to leverage their resources and possibly influence national policy. Another long-term goal is to create a coordinated care database that would be shared among service providers. Ms. Lopez stated:

“This is something that we’re trying to do, particularly in the [HUD] Continuum of Care for Bexar County. We’ve already submitted a plan to HUD on how we want to have some sort of coordinated access system here within the next five years. Now, other communities have already started that process as well, I believe, Houston, as well as Dallas, but I think it’s definitely going to take a lot of time, a lot of resource and a lot of data. And I think that’s what — it’s going to be a vital component for us to be successfully serving these

communities and be able to share this information...So I think it's very important that we come to the table with as much data as we have, as we can collect, in order to advocate properly for the veteran community."

3. Strategic Themes

Employment and Education

As noted above, veterans and in some cases their families receive support from a plethora of employment programs administered through NVOP. NVOP's vision of creating a continuum of care sees employment placement assistance as its core service, enhanced by individualized case management plans with an assortment of support services that will improve chances for long-term employment. These support services include: classroom vocational skills training, on the job training, and basic skills upgrade training. For those veterans who are ready for immediate employment, NVOP offers direct job placement through an in-house representative of the Texas Workforce Commission. Other services include onsite resume preparation and a learning lab that provides access to Internet job searching.

The NVOP provides several different programs for employment assistance, each with varying target groups of veterans as its objective. Thus, some veterans will qualify for service under one program, while others with more acute challenges may qualify for several programs.

A key component of the case management model is its holistic approach to meeting each veteran's needs. Following intake, case managers assess the veteran to determine next steps and; in the case of a homeless veteran, determining whether he or she is qualified for placement in the residential center. This is key because, as noted by Residential Center Director Aaron Cavazos:

"When we created the Residential Center, we made sure that the intake process did not take place over there, because we did not want homeless veterans just showing up and saying, 'I need a bed.' They have to come over here to our Veteran Service Center. Case managers make the decision when that person is ready, not only to get the housing but to embrace the recovery program. They have to be ready to follow the plan, and so we don't believe in the idea of give them a bed for the night and send them out the next day. It doesn't accomplish anything."

As part of its holistic approach, case managers fully assess veteran readiness. Many veterans seeking employment may first need support services, such as counseling, medical attention or job training. In those situations, case managers recommend that veterans receive those services before job placement and refer them to appropriate service providers. Case managers often have to work with veterans to set realistic expectations. For example, many career veterans, as well as younger veterans, have unrealistic salary expectations once separated from the military. This can create an obstacle when the case manager presents a placement at \$12/hour, and the veteran is expecting to make \$60,000 a year. This creates a need for career counseling and for learning job application skills, such as preparing resumes to match civilian job descriptions and interviewing techniques.

Job placement specialists have a "toolkit" of contacts as well as extensive referral networks within the employer community, consistently placing 800-1,000 veterans a year in full-time jobs. This internal

knowledge and the longstanding relationships the organization has established in the employer community contribute to the NVOP's success in achieving its hiring goals. Other key strategies are to make placements as quickly as possible based on the veteran's readiness, since earning an income addresses other issues faced by at-risk veterans, such as housing. Another strategy is to ensure the proper fit between the individual and the job placement with regard to skills, aptitude, and interests. One case manager organizes an on-site mini-job fair for employers, where applicants have already been screened and matched to an employer's particular needs. This has proven to be an effective and efficient tool in finding employment for a particularly difficult population, ex-offenders. As of August, this case manager had already met his goal of 81 job placements. Successfully-placed veterans often refer other veterans seeking employment to NVOP. The Residential Center started a job club so that individuals who have gotten jobs and left the center return to share their stories with current residents, as a means of providing encouragement and motivation. As Center Director Cavazos noted:

"The idea of veterans helping veterans goes a long way, and it rubs off on veterans, again, helping other veterans by telling them, 'There's a place over here that does this, helps me,' but the trust that veterans have in veterans because it's just a brotherhood that they maintain, that they keep living for."

To ensure that a placement "sticks", case managers follow-up every 30 days, making sure the employee is still in the job. If employment does not work out, the case manager and veteran repeat the process until a successful placement is made. The importance of this procedure is illustrated by Case Manager Richard Rocha:

"I think the important take away from this process is, if at 60 days or even at 30 days, they're not on the job, then something went wrong, that we missed in our assessment, and so actually we exacerbate the problem, because we didn't find out what was going on...That assessment is really crucial, because they won't stay on the job, and we're back. They're back to square one, and they're back poor, and they're back with the lights off and all that. So we really have to make sure that they're going to be around and that's something they're going to like to do. And even though they say, 'I'll wash dishes,' they'll do it for the first paycheck, and then they're gone. So we can glean a lot from that. If they're not at a job in 60 days, we did something wrong."

An underlying theme to the success of the case managers at NVOP is that they not only do not take a "cookie cutter" approach to each veteran, but that they are all veterans themselves. This enables the case managers to immediately establish rapport, a level of trust, with each veteran that they serve. Further, all staff understands the importance of personal contact with the veteran population. Robert Cano, Director of Client Services, put it this way:

"Face-to-face with a veteran, not only just assessment of needs but them knowing that they've got somebody that's going to fight with them. At that level, you can't beat it. I know some organizations do an online application. You just call, and they'll do that, but there's nothing that can [replace it] — the face-to-face is key."

Additionally, case managers work with veterans in accessing their GI Bill benefits in order to further their

education.

Veteran Programming Differentiation

NVOP's philosophy is to recognize each veteran as an individual with unique needs that are treated in a personalized manner. The extensive case management model, which identifies the history and current needs of each veteran and generates a plan for meeting those needs, has been key to the organization's longevity and success. Employment and homelessness are viewed as interdependent, in that a veteran who finds a job but is homeless is most likely not able to sustain long-term employment. Conversely, a homeless veteran does not have the resources necessary to finding a job. Therefore, the first step in assisting a homeless veteran is providing transitional housing, where they are provided with counseling, meals, clothing, laundry facilities, access to transportation, etc. Veterans can stay in the transitional housing center for up to two years, although the average length of stay is six to nine months. Working in collaboration with employment specialists, veterans can update their resume, learn interviewing techniques, brush up on computer skills, and prepare for job interviews.

Several attributes of its operation provide NVOP with an exceptional capacity to differentiate programming for each individual veteran. One such attribute is its passionate staff, many of whom are retired military personnel. This provides everyone, from case managers to intake specialists to the CEO, the ability to connect on a personal level with every veteran who walks through the door. Another is its holistic model, which assumes that veterans' needs in different areas (i.e. housing, health, employment, socialization, and education) are interactive and interdependent. A third attribute is NVOP's deep connection to the community, local employers, and service providers, which all provide opportunities for the veteran to succeed. Finally, case managers continue to follow the veterans that are successfully placed in a job every 30 days. This continued follow-up ensures that the veteran is successful in not only obtaining a job, but maintaining long-term sustainable employment.

That being said, differentiation among various veteran populations does emerge. Veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress and/or traumatic brain injury are becoming more prevalent, as are younger, post-9/11 veterans, which make up the largest number of clients. For this population, CEO Martinez stated that one of NVOP's primary focuses is to, "Just help them learn how to apply for a job. They're good candidates. They're young. They're energetic. They're ready to go. They just don't know how to apply for a job." He cites the overabundance of employment options as a challenge for this population, resulting in confusion regarding what may be available to them. Not having considered life outside of the military, they are unaware of the range of possibilities that may await. However, Vince Iapichino, Case Manager for the TX-VET program, believes that many younger veterans exhibit a "me, me, me" attitude when they first transition out of the military. While they may have many options, they are only interested in what will bring them the greatest benefit, regardless of their skills or training. This requires additional job counseling and an honest discussion about employment opportunities and salary expectations.

As previously mentioned, older, more experienced veterans often need to reset their salary expectations as well, requiring the need for job counseling and learning how to prepare their resume to meet the needs of civilian employers. As Vince Iapichino noted, many things go into preparing the most appropriate resume, particularly for older, career veterans:

"I did 30 years in the Air Force, and trying to write a resume in civilian speak is very

difficult, because we use terms that aren't used out in the civilian world. So we help them translate all those terms so a civilian employer can understand the resume. Then we also show them different jobs, how to apply for a job online, because most job applications are online. The first look at your resume is going to be by a computer system. It's going to look at the job announcement, look at those keywords and then look for it in your resume. If it's not in your resume, you don't even make it to the recruiter. So those are the kind of things we help them out with."

Perhaps one of the more unique characteristics of AGIF/NVOP is its commitment to serving veterans who are typically the most difficult to place due to their specific and differentiated needs: the homeless, veterans with disabilities, and veterans with ex-offender status. Richard Rocha, Case Manager for the Texas Veterans Outreach Program (TVOP) has developed a level of expertise in working with this population. He maintains an extensive employer list and enlists the aid of many other social service agencies to meet the needs of his clients. He also organizes an onsite mini-job fair where he matches veterans with employers seeking skill sets that match the veterans in need of employment. In this way, the case manager can streamline the hiring process, while sidestepping the typical human resource procedures that may automatically knock out an applicant with certain barriers, such as homelessness or a history of substance abuse. This approach has been so successful that many employers reach out to him when they need additional employees. To date, veterans have been placed with corporations that include Weatherford, Halliburton, and Toyota. Rocha maintains long-term follow-up with both the veteran as well as the employer to ensure that the placement has sustainability.

The success of this approach is due in large part to the personal touch adopted by everyone at the organization, starting from CEO Martinez:

"...with our population, targeting the homeless is very important, because with that population, you need to constantly be there and build trust. We will go out under the bridge or encampments till we find them. We visit with them. We explain the program, and we give them water bottles with tags and our phone number, our location, or we'll give them a bandana or something that they need, some T-shirts, some socks. Then we'll go back two or three weeks later, run into the same guy. By the third visit, they already know the individual. Now they feel more comfortable about saying, 'Hey, I really have a drug problem. If I go in there, what's going to happen to me?' Then they'll explain to them, 'Well, we're going to send you to treatment. That's what we need to do.' They feel a little more comfortable, so yeah, it takes building that relationship with that targeted population."

Women Veteran Efforts

As previously stated, NVOP operates the Helping Female Veterans and Veterans with Families (HFVVF) program, which is committed to serving the particular needs of female veterans and veterans with families. In addition to employment and housing, Female veterans often have special needs, such as childcare, addiction, and issues associated with military sexual trauma.

Zena Hooper, Director of Client Services, runs the HFVVF program. She noted that the issue of childcare cannot be understated in that the high cost of childcare can actually prevent a female veteran from

seeking and/or accepting employment opportunities. Additionally, when temporary, short-term assistance can be provided, many female veterans are reluctant to accept it because of pride and the negative connotations associated with accepting what they see as “welfare”. Another barrier that Hooper sees among her clients is the reluctance to self-identify as a veteran. Many female veterans are concerned that the stigma attached to being a veteran is a detriment to their transition and a common theme heard among female veterans is: “Well, I don’t need help. Veterans need help. Veterans go to the VA. Veterans are crazy. I’m none of those things, and I don’t need any help from anybody.”

The TX-VET program is another tool that has been particularly effective in addressing the needs of female veterans. Funded by the Walmart Foundation, the TX-VET program was so successful in serving female veterans (last year 20% of enrollees were women), that Walmart has agreed to increase its support and has requested that NVOP prepare a white paper on the causes and reasons why NVOP is attracting women veterans. The Monitoring & Evaluation staff will be collecting and analyzing data in support of this project.

At the time of the GWBI team interview, the female veteran caseload was approximately 45, which included those successfully placed and in follow-up. Last year NVOP enrolled 151 female veterans and of those, 132 were placed into employment. La Quinta has been a major employer for veterans enrolled in the TX-VET program, both male and female, but particularly female. Importantly, La Quinta has agreed not to conduct background checks on veteran applicants, thus avoiding the possibility of a veteran being screened out due to behaviors that might otherwise prevent them from being employed, such as a history of substance abuse.

As previously mentioned, the residential housing center recently added eight beds to accommodate female veterans who are experiencing homelessness.

Community Connectedness

NVOP collaborates with the VA and other military resources and community organizations to provide an array of services in support of veterans on the road to self-sufficiency. In addition, the organization has proven itself among local employers to be a reliable partner in developing and providing strong candidates for employment.

This coordination of services and its extensive case management approach enables individualized services to be offered to each veteran, while also educating and engaging the community. The organization has deep roots in the San Antonio community, and the case managers have developed an extensive referral network among employers and service providers. They collaborate closely with San Antonio College on education services. Another local school, St. Philip’s College, recently created a veterans center on their campus, and NVOP has been invited to provide an on-site case manager.

NVOP refers veterans for additional support services, such as coordination of VA benefits. The Salvation Army continues to provide emergency housing for homeless veterans when the residential center cannot accommodate them. The organization also works with providers to accommodate the needs of the veterans they serve. For example, veterans living in the transitional housing unit, who were required to attend addiction training, were finding it difficult to meet the group appointment scheduled for 2 pm at the local VA. NVOP recognized that if the veterans were working, it was virtually impossible for them to leave their jobs in the middle of the afternoon to attend their addiction support group. NVOP leadership

approached the VA and suggested, and the VA agreed, that the counselor would conduct the addiction group at the residential unit in the evenings, making it easier for the veterans to be compliant.

Other collaborative efforts include donations of suits by the Men's Warehouse and Walmart's Dress for Success program, which provides professional clothing for female veterans. Moen has donated new plumbing fixtures for the residential housing center.

AGIF/NVOP has developed solid relationships with public, private and nonprofit partners, bolstered by formalized agreements, or MOUs. In addition, all employees are given a set of Standard Operating Procedures, which identify partner organizations with whom AGIF/NVOP has formal agreements. By developing these strategic partnerships with a broad spectrum of private businesses, philanthropic organizations, and education providers, NVOP has successfully created a network of community partners.

Transition to Civilian Life

NVOP focuses both on veterans making the initial transition from military to civilian life, as well as on those who have struggled in civilian life, may have found themselves on society's margins, and need to make another transition back into the mainstream. For those veterans making the initial transition, NVOP states that there is much confusion in the nonprofit service provider space, creating an environment in which veterans do not know where to turn for assistance. At the point of transition, NVOP sees the military's Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) to be inadequate in preparing separating military personnel. Adhering to their belief in the importance of personal contact, outreach specialists at NVOP have recently made inroads into accessing Lackland AFB, where they will give a presentation at future TAP classes to help them understand the resources at their disposal as well as NVOP programs.

The flagship of the organization is the Veterans Service Center (VSC), where a continuum of care is available to veterans in need with several optional programs including the Veterans Integration Program (VIP) and the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program. VIP has been critical in providing support to spouses of veterans (non-veterans) who are also looking for employment. Additional ancillary services are provided through the NVOP's Basic Skills Upgrade learning lab, Clothing Closet and the NVOP Food Pantry. Assistance is provided as a single service or a combination of services as dictated by the individual's case management plan.

Opened in 2005, the Residential Center provides housing for those homeless veterans who have struggled with transitioning to the civilian world. As previously noted, the first step in assisting a homeless veteran is providing transitional housing, where they are provided with counseling, meals, clothing, laundry facilities, access to transportation, etc. Veterans can stay in the transitional housing center for up to two years, although the average length of stay is six to nine months. Working in collaboration with VSC case managers, veterans can update their resume, learn interviewing techniques, brush up on computer skills, and prepare for job interviews. Once in transitional housing, the importance of collaborating with the case managers goes beyond simply providing a place to stay and finding a veteran a job. As Aaron Cavazos, Director of the Residential Center explained, the long-term goal is independence and sustainability:

"Like I said, each program complements one another...You can place people all day, but at the end of the day, when they don't have a place to shower or wash their clothes, they're still stuck in the same situation, and we don't want to sign anybody up for

failure...You don't want to just place somebody in a job and think, 'Okay, they're good to go.' You want to make sure — 'Let's talk about this. Let's deal with this issue. It's a very real issue, and when you get out of this place and find your own apartment, how are you going to handle that situation? That's what led you here, and when you're all alone in your apartment, how are you going to deal with it?' Or you deal with individuals that, once they've been working and they've saved up money and they come to you, 'Hey, I think I'm ready to move out,' 'Okay, well, let's talk about how much furniture is going to cost you. Let's talk about some realistic things that you're going to encounter.' We've had individuals that have brought those up and all of a sudden, 'You're right. I'm not ready to leave just yet. Let me save up a little more money.'"

Ignacio Leija, Vice President of Service Operations, added that once stabilized in the housing unit, veterans work with case managers to develop a plan that will assist their transition to civilian life by getting them into the workforce and on the road to long-term stability. He added that communication between the housing and employment case managers was key:

"...Because if you forget about them, the veteran will say, 'this is great. I've got a great vacation here. Everything is given to me. I like it here'...and although, as Aaron said, they can stay there for two years, we don't want them to stay there for two years. They get too dependent on this, and the idea is for them to become self-sufficient, for them to go and get permanent housing and go out into the community and become useful citizens of the community and give back to the community as much as possible."

NVOP has even placed residents in their own Box Company as temporary employees, providing them an initial sense of accomplishment until they are ready for more permanent job placement. Through their case management model and collaborative effort, NVOP has successfully assisted homeless veterans' transition back into the traditional civilian workforce.

Reintegration with Family

NVOP recognizes the need to first stabilize veterans, who are unemployed, homeless, or both. Many arrive with numerous obstacles, which may have forced them to separate from their families or contributed to a dysfunctional family environment. As previously noted, the Veterans Integration Program serves both veterans and non-veterans, who are homeless, and seeking employment. The unique program allows the NVOP to serve both the veteran and the veteran's spouse, and currently serves the San Antonio/Bexar County area. Program Director Zena Hooper noted that VIP has been an important resource, particularly for female veterans whose spouse was also looking for employment. Another benefit to the program is that if both spouses are able to find work, accessing childcare may be less of a financial burden.

Ms. Hooper also pointed to the fact that under SSVF regulations, the definition of family has been broadened to include nontraditional families. For example, she cited a female veteran who takes care of four or five children living in her neighborhood, who would otherwise be homeless. While she has not formally adopted these children, they are all living under one roof; and the veteran is identified as the head of the household, qualifying her for SSVF funds. As Ms. Hooper stated:

"It is that first step in the right direction to include families within the community

approach of serving veterans and their families, funded by the VA. That's what's most significant. It's a foot in the door in the right direction to introduce these services to head of households that otherwise would be completely shut out of the services spectrum of what this country does for veterans."

Independent Sector Involvement

Since its founding 42 years ago, AGIF/NVOP has become embedded in the local San Antonio community, developing strategic relationships which have led to employment opportunities, housing facilities, and volunteer opportunities for local employees. The leadership and many case managers have spent years developing a connection to the local employer base and service providers. The job placement specialists seek to successfully place veterans in long-term sustainable jobs, which they see as vital to a veteran's sense of connection to the community.

After discovering that homeless veterans were not being sufficiently served by the Salvation Army, AGIF/NVOP decided to provide its own transitional and permanent housing on behalf of veterans. The renovation of a 35,000 square foot former warehouse to create 80 transitional beds and 60 single room apartments (SRO's) was a multi-million dollar collaboration accomplished through the leadership of the NVOP, financial support of HUD, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the City of San Antonio. AGIF/NVOP provided approximately one-third of the construction funding of the facility, which has been recognized as a model for other homeless shelters in major metropolitan areas, including the city of San Antonio. Former Secretary of Veterans' Affairs James Peake designated the residential center as a national model, and high-level visitors have included Congressmen and President Barack Obama.

Another strategic partnership has been forged through the volunteer activities of USAA, which has informally "adopted" the residential center and provided financial support for things like furniture. USAA employees, many of whom are veterans, volunteer to serve meals at the residential center, creating a connection to the community and also providing an opportunity for socialization for the residents. USAA employees visiting San Antonio for training at the local headquarters also volunteer to serve meals. Another corporate partner is Valero, whose employees, many of whom are veterans, also volunteer to assist with meal preparation and service. Moen has recently donated new plumbing fixtures for the residential center.

Media

NVOP is increasing its presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Recently, they upgraded their website in an attempt to stay current and expand their outreach to a younger veteran population. They have commissioned a company to assist with targeting veterans based on demographics collected through Facebook, and review data collected through Google Analytics. They recognize the need to educate the community and rebrand their image so that it is evident the organization serves all veterans, not just the homeless or more disadvantaged. The organization has received local media coverage related to its community-sponsored events, as well as the occasional success story of a veteran finding employment through its services. However, in the words of Senior Vice President Yolanda Suarez:

"...as an organization, we work very well alone and are well-respected amongst other organizations, by the community as a whole knowing what we do...As long as we've been

around, one of the things that we probably have not done very well is we get that comment quite often is, 'We didn't know you guys existed. We've never heard of you.' We've never been very good about tooting our horn, for one."

So as an organization with deep roots in the community, AGIF/NVOP has been able to succeed with little awareness among the general public. While acknowledging that as an organization they have been successful doing things on their own, they also recognize the need for more engagement and exposure with the local community, which includes a broader strategy in both media and marketing. The organization has taken an initial step in addressing this situation by developing a reliably working website. According to Ms. Suarez, they recognized the need for increased marketing on their part, but noted that everyone is so busy working that it leaves very little time to devote to marketing and promotion. On the other hand, federally funded programs limit organizations in terms of spending on marketing efforts. This is a tension commonly faced by federally funded nonprofit organizations, and runs in-hand with the previously discussed tension regarding ability to fund administrative versus programmatic activities.

Social Connectedness

Following from the challenge to market the organization, this difficulty adds to NVOP's difficulty in bridging the civilian-military divide through any sort of proactive campaign other than its day-to-day activities and the influence that they have on the community. As such, case managers note that putting veterans to work is the best way to address the divide:

"For us...it's just who's heading back to the community after they've been here for services. They've got a positive outcome, and presenting him or her back to the community after receiving services, that's the best way, I think, that we can influence it."

Aaron Cavazos, Director of the Residential Center added:

"I think those mini job fairs help too, because you're presenting individuals who are made to work, and you're highlighting their accomplishments and their abilities. You're offering them to these employers. So you're able to kind of – even though it's not the wide spectrum of the community, you're getting at least employers aware of, 'Hey, this is a population we can tap into to employ that can help us meet our goals.' I think it needs to be – I think organizations need to educate the community more when it comes to our veterans."

Social connectedness is also evident through positive engagement with other people through community events, such as the annual Stand Down and Veterans Day Classic golf tournament.

4. Key Learnings and Reflections

Catalysts of Impact

A key component that differentiates AGIF/NVOP from similar organizations is their holistic approach and integrated case model, which ensures that individual programs complement each other with the long-term vision of creating a continuum of care that leads to employment and permanent sustainability. AGIF/NVOP recognizes the broad spectrum of veteran needs, especially in the most at-risk veterans. An

underlying philosophy is not simply to hand things over, but to require that the veteran actively participate in their efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. This “tough love” approach establishes clear parameters and expectations so that the veteran understands he or she is responsible for his or her own success.

AGIF/NVOP is one of the oldest community-based nonprofit organizations in the country that serves disadvantaged veterans and their families. The organization has grown from a skeletal staff and outreach facility into an organization with multiple sites across Texas that provides a continuum of care to military veterans and families with no fees for service. AGIF/NVOP sees the critical issues of employment and housing as interdependent; and through its own residential housing facility, provides both transitional and permanent housing to veterans in need. A dynamic trio of leaders, who have transferred their passion and philosophy to the extended staff, manages the organization. Staff members, many of whom have served in the military, expressed their passion and commitment in serving veterans in need.

In addition, AGIF/NVOP leadership invokes strong stewardship practices that provide consistency in delivery, through its case management model, which is anchored in intense training for all employees, reinforced and monitored by management in San Antonio. AGIF/NVOP has been able to replicate its practices in six field offices throughout Texas, due in large part to its ability to directly monitor and manage its field operations.

When asked to describe the secret to their funding model, CEO Martinez explained that it was “...the professional relationship between finance, programs and leadership that serves to align approaches and activities, while staying within the boundaries of the established mission.”

Barriers to Impact

AGIF/NVOP is a successful and dynamic organization seen as one of the leaders in the military support organization space. However, leadership and staff face a number of barriers to their continued success. These include:

- *Military/military divide:* NVOP leaders do not see a high level of commitment to today’s veterans from those veterans who have made the successful transition to civilian life. The leadership team is concerned that they will not find veterans with the same level of passion to serve others when it is time for the current leaders to step down. In addition to compassion, potential leaders will need the appropriate credentials, like an MBA, and possess leadership and management skills. AGIF/NVOP is making a concerted effort to identify and attract the next generation of leaders.
- *Impending change in leadership:* As alluded to above, the three senior leaders in the organization are approaching retirement age and are struggling to find appropriate personnel to fill their shoes. The organization’s success is clearly tied to the presence of the top three leaders, and it is unclear how this might change when they are no longer running the organization.
- *Federal funding:* The majority of AGIF/NVOP funding comes from federal grants (95%), many of which operate on different schedules. This makes it difficult to staff projects, if grant money starts and stops at different times throughout the year. Leadership suggests having federal grants all align with the federal fiscal year.
- *Clarity of services provided:* As CEO Martinez pointed out, there are so many military service organizations on the current landscape that it is overwhelming and confusing for veterans to identify which one(s) will provide them the best support. There is a real need for some type of

clearinghouse or directory of services that veterans can refer to for needed services. Ideally, such a directory would be available prior to the veteran's transition from the military.

- *Changing landscape in hiring practices:* Case managers who rely on a face-to-face approach in providing employment services are finding it increasingly difficult to interact with hiring managers and recruiters due to automation in hiring practices.

Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

Several specific strengths of AGIF/NVOP emerge for consideration as efforts to enhance impact:

- *Early identification of veterans in need of support:* The longer a veteran struggles in the community following discharge, the more serious and wide-ranging his or her problems are likely to become. Many veterans wait until they are in crisis before seeking help. NVOP is slowly gaining access to military bases and participating in TAP sessions as part of its outreach efforts.
- *Early intervention:* Once contact with a veteran is made, interventions need to begin as early as possible, beginning with the most serious. For many of NVOP's clients, this means homelessness. NVOP's on-site support system has prepared it to address critical issues and minimize delays in treatment.
- *Wrap-around support:* Many veterans seeking assistance face challenges in multiple areas. NVOP's primary goal is finding long-term employment for many veterans who are the most difficult to place. These challenges are compounded by homelessness. NVOP views employment and homelessness as interactive and inter-dependent, and their triage approach creates stability in the veteran's life by providing temporary housing in their residential housing unit while the veteran's needs are addressed. The long-term goal and action plan by case managers and program specialists depends on their collaborative efforts with programs that complement each other.
- *Individualized approach:* AGIF/NVOP prides itself on not taking a "cookie cutter" approach to client treatment, instead insisting on an individualized treatment plan for every veteran. For example, the typical length of stay in the transitional housing unit is six to nine months, but that can be extended to two years if necessary.
- *Staff Communication and Collegiality:* NVOP has a core staff of employees who have worked together for multiple years and who share the same passion and philosophy in working with a very difficult population. The high levels of trust, respect, and collegiality between those individuals are critical for the integrated case management system to succeed. The organization's leadership team has established strong stewardship practices and holds everyone to a high level of accountability. These expectations are communicated clearly and with transparency throughout the staff. From the top down, NVOP has created among its staff mutual respect, collegiality, and shared goals.
- *Outreach:* NVOP recognizes the need to expand its social media presence, but still relies heavily on face-to-face contact as a means of educating the community and veterans about its work. The scale of the organization's operations and longevity in the community have created long-term collaborative relationships that are built on trust and mutual respect. They continue to explore new approaches to conducting outreach, such as through access to TAP sessions on military bases.