

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

Case Study:

Charlotte Bridge Home



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CHARLOTTE BRIDGE HOME CASE STUDY

1. Organizational Overview

History

Charlotte Bridge Home (CBH) is an independent community-centered non-profit organization based in Charlotte, North Carolina. In 2011, Vietnam veteran and local businessman Thomas E. Norman was first approached by a friend to assist a returning Iraq war veteran who wanted to move to Charlotte. Soon, more and more calls were being directed to Norman, who quickly realized the need was far outpacing his efforts. With support from the Charlotte business community and the Foundation for the Carolinas, Norman founded Charlotte Bridge Home to “holistically connect veterans and their families to available national and community resources and advocate for system and community change around the critical issues impacting these veterans.” The organization focuses on education and employment, while acting as a bridge to other service providers addressing the need for emergency services, health care, benefits and advocacy, wellness, and recreation. CBH provides these services free of charge to veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces, National Guard, and Reserves and their families.

Mission Statement

Charlotte Bridge Home’s Mission Statement is as follows: “Charlotte Bridge Home helps Charlotte veterans successfully transition home after military service by identifying their education, employment and healthcare needs and connecting them to available community, state and federal resources.”

The organization’s vision is to create “a collaborative community strategy to support the employment success of returning veterans in the Charlotte Region” through coordination, communication and connection with the local business community, local government, local colleges and universities, and service providers.

Organizational Structure

CBH is a 501(c)(3) incorporated organization overseen by a Board of Directors made up of 12 community leaders from across all sectors of industry (engineering, communications, banking, legal, health care, sports), as well as Charlotte civic leaders. Thomas Norman serves as the Chairman of the CBH Board. More than half of the Board members have served in the United States Armed Forces.

CBH has six full-time staff members who report to Executive Director Cindi Basenspiller, who joined the organization in June, 2013. Three of the staff members are paid through grants. CBH has hired a contractor

as a development consultant. In addition to paid staff, CBH has two volunteers who provide IT and day-to-day support. An additional volunteer position, social work intern, is currently open.

The six full-time staff members include a director of community initiatives, an LCSW/program manager, an employment and education specialist, a case manager who holds a Bachelors of Social Work degree, an outreach specialist, and an administrative assistant/client coordinator. CBH has recently entered into an agreement with Carolinas Healthcare System to fund a part-time (50%) licensed professional counselor who will augment the intake team by providing referrals to appropriate support resources within the Carolinas Healthcare organization. Initial referrals will be free of charge. Long-term care will be covered through VA benefits.

Programming

Charlotte Bridge Home offers programs and services to transitioning military personnel in three areas:

- Connect Veterans
- Serve Veterans
- Convene and Educate Veterans

The programs and services offered by CBH holistically connect veterans and their families to national and community resources with a primary focus on education and employment within the local Charlotte-Mecklenburg community. Veterans are connected within the larger Charlotte network through monthly networking lunches, weekly workouts, volunteer projects, and a peer/sponsor mentoring program.

The core operational component of their model is case management, which identifies the history and current needs of each veteran, develops a plan with detailed goals and referrals if needed, and provides short-term counseling. Case management staff notes that most veterans who apply for services are already in crisis, and many do not self-identify issues such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety or depression. The average length of time that a veteran works through the case management process (Tier I) is three months. The case manager establishes a plan with the veteran that includes clear goals, responsibilities, and accountability, connecting the veteran with local and national resources while working concurrently with the employment specialist. If, after 90 days, the veteran is not ready for employment, the evaluation process is started again to determine what did not work. This triage approach will continue until the case is closed and the veteran is considered ready to pursue long-term employment (Tier II). While in Tier II the veteran may continue receiving services, such as education, financial counseling, or housing.

Staff prefers to continue working with each veteran repeatedly through this cycle rather than sending them to the VA, where they fear the veteran will “get lost” in the system. The case management staff views its approach as one of establishing trust and developing a relationship with each veteran, demonstrating that they can “get it done.” LCSW Charisse Byron collaborates with the VA if a client is receiving mental health services. Byron receives supervision by an outside contractor who also holds a Master’s degree in Social Work, and is an LCSW. Byron points out that this is one drawback to their model, in that she lacks colleagues at CBH with whom to discuss her approach to individual cases. Leadership is considering bringing in an onsite supervisor to provide more direct support.

Veteran Populations Served

Individual veteran and immediate family services from CBH are available to all veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces, including National Guard and Reserves, with anything but dishonorable discharge status. In its early stages, CBH was predominantly serving veterans in their 40's who were roughly 15 years removed from active service. As Executive Director Cindi Basenspiller noted:

“My understanding was that we were helping transitioning veterans. Well, when sitting in the actual office, I think for the lack of branding and specifically saying this is who we help, it began to look that there were people through the hallways that weren't really transitioning veterans. So I took a big data sweep of who are we seeing, and I think everybody was surprised to find out that in addition to the folks that Tommy was helping kind of on the side without the help of the, you know, social workers and things like that, the people we were seeing predominantly, the average client was in their 40s, African American, married or divorced 50/50, and fifteen years removed from service.”

Basenspiller stated that this population consumed many hours of social work/case management because the veterans had become frequent users of social services, had been chronically unemployed for years, and possibly homeless. This discovery forced CBH to change their intake process to more of a triage model, which was accomplished with the help of an outside consultant and the VA in creating a case management “tool kit.” Part of this review was to determine where CBH could have the greatest impact, and it was determined that their focus would be primarily post-9/11 veterans transitioning out of the military, although they will never turn away a veteran in need.

Employment is the primary focus of CBH, and case managers work with all veterans in finding long-term employment. For those veterans needing additional services, particularly older, Vietnam-era veterans, CBH has established an extensive referral system to other service providers who can assist in meeting the needs of any veteran who comes through the door. Case managers note that the populations being served range in age from 21 to 55, with an average age of 33. These include younger veterans who enlisted after high school, served one tour, and are now transitioning out of the military. This population tends to have greater need for case management. As Basenspiller noted:

“They're the ones primarily; many of them didn't want to get out of the military. Many of them are the ones that are medically retired so they have different needs. [Their attitude is,] ‘I wanted to stay in for 20 years, I thought this was where I'd be when I was 40, but now I'm 23, I'm injured and I'm out. What do I do?’”

On the other end of the spectrum, CBH also serves career veterans with much more extensive education and experience, who are exiting the service and also seeking employment in the civilian population. These veterans with 40 to 50 years of military service are primarily seeking employment assistance, but may also become consumers of the case management system.

Funding Sources and Strategies

CBH is a 501(c)(3) organization and provides all programs and services free of charge. Funding is a challenge, however, and CBH is involved in continuous efforts to raise funds at the community level.

A Federal grant through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program provides funding for an outreach specialist, as of October, 2014. Other grants that support full-time staff include one from the Foundation for the Carolinas, and another from CLT Works. However, many available grants are program-specific and CBH must compete for dwindling charity dollars. Charlotte is the home of two major banks, Wells Fargo and Bank of America, which are counted among the many private corporations who support CBH. Organization leaders are looking to these corporate funders to underwrite CBH in three- to four-year increments. CBH leaders noted that long-term support from private funders requires performance, and they are refining their procedures to follow a business model that can measure and demonstrate results. Board Chairman Norman would like to see collaboration with the local area VA as a means of expanding and supporting the services offered by CBH.

In addition to community funding, other philanthropic support comes from state and national organizations such as the Newman's Own Foundation, the Leon Levine Foundation, Harris Teeter, and Carolinas Healthcare System.

2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

Types of Data Routinely Collected

CBH leadership understands the importance of collecting metrics due to the demands of funders but also as a means to improve their model. Since January, 2014, the organization has collected data on monthly goals set and met in the areas of veteran outreach, number of clients served, number of successful job placements, number of new companies enrolled in the Charlotte Alliance for Veteran Employment (CAVE, described below), and the number of service providers validated by CBH. Throughout the case management process, data are collected on three outcomes: job readiness, the need for training, and the need for additional services, such as housing or healthcare. Information collected provides a record of the client base and has helped CBH further define their brand.

At the time of the GWBI team's interview (summer, 2014), CBH had served 762 veterans and dependents since 2011 and made 154 referrals to 48 organizations while forming 127 community partnerships in the greater Charlotte-Mecklenburg area. Their goal was to serve 1,000 veterans and their dependents by 2015.

Data Analysis and Reporting

CBH is still in its infancy regarding data collection and analysis. Their primary data collection tools include case notes and spreadsheets. However, staff reports that they are in the process of building a database that will store all client information, including case notes, referrals and outcomes. They have started using a self-evaluation survey tool developed by the VA, rating domains like self-sustainability and safety, as a means of measuring client readiness to exit the program.

CBH acknowledges that the organization has a long way to go in terms of measuring program delivery, quality and impact, and notes the difficulty in developing strong measurement tools with such a new and small staff. They would like to expand their staff by 50%, but are unable to do so right now due to lack of funding.

How data are used for getting to impact

The employment specialist collects feedback from employers after a placement is made, and also stays in touch with the veteran who was hired. Anecdotally, success is measured when a veteran no longer needs a new placement, or the veteran refers others to CBH for employment services. Because of the relationships they have developed through their work with the organization, many veterans return to CBH to participate in social functions and share their success stories. While these anecdotal success stories are welcomed, CBH leadership understands that a more formal and robust monitoring and evaluation system is needed for internal formative evaluation, marketing and fund-raising, and accountability.

Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

CBH has identified areas in which it is currently collecting or planning to collect data used in decision-making and informing their model. The organization has targets for number of clients served, employers that join CAVE, and validated service providers, but there was no indication that the targets are tied to internal evaluation activities.

3. Strategic Themes

Employment and Education

Sustainable veteran employment is the primary goal of CBH, and the organization views education and employment as central to the transition to civilian life. Through long-term employment, veterans begin to address other areas of wellbeing, such as economic stability, housing, mental health, etc. Sustained employment encourages veterans to put down roots and become contributing members of the local community. CBH does not have a strict job placement goal in terms of percentage of veterans being placed in employment. Rather, its approach is to ensure that the right veteran is placed in the right job depending on ability, experience, and interest. This is achieved only after the veteran is deemed ready for employment by the case management team.

The Employment and Education Specialist and Director of Community Initiatives identify prospective employers and educate them on the business incentives associated with hiring veterans and the value that veterans bring to a company in terms of work ethic, leadership potential, teamwork, etc. They also convey the value that stable employment brings to individual veterans and their families. CBH also created the Charlotte Alliance for Veteran Employment (CAVE) among corporate partners and small-business owners to lead the way in hiring veterans. With a goal of 50 CAVE members, CBH currently has 32 companies enrolled. To ensure long-term placements, CBH has developed an individual employment plan for each CAVE member identifying employer needs, qualified applicants, and how to connect the two. A challenge faced by CBH is that many human resource directors do not have military experience. As a result, HR staff often need education and preparation in how to work with veterans. As Chairman Tommy Norman noted, CBH can be sure that the veteran receives resume writing classes or job interview skills, but “if the receiving end isn’t prepared, then it’s not going to go anywhere.” As a result, the Employment Specialist and Director of Community Initiatives depend on extensive networks among hiring managers who can help direct the flow of applicants being referred by CBH.

Education support is another key component of successful job placement. Chairman Tommy Norman cited a case where Siemens, which built the largest turbine plant in the world in North Carolina, could not find trained workers and was prepared to move back to Germany. The President of Central Piedmont Community College sent a team from CPCC to Germany to learn Siemens’ training protocol and

guaranteed that they could train enough workers to meet the company's needs. As part of this labor force, CPCC allocated that 12% would be veterans. This effort was so successful that CPCC has now developed a training program specifically for veterans, and provides training to meet the needs of up to 300 companies in the region. CBH has partnered with CPCC as a training resource.

Additionally, CBH recently conducted a convening of local secondary schools to share best practices in serving the veteran community, and all of the local colleges and universities have dedicated veterans' centers.

Another tool used by CBH in job placement is a monthly veterans' lunch, sponsored by a local restaurant, and open to veterans of all ages and eras. This informal gathering is an opportunity to connect and share ideas, resources, opportunities, and experiences among local veterans. As an added benefit, these gatherings also foster networking opportunities for those seeking employment as well as business owners in search of veterans to join their workforce.

Transition to Civilian Life

The transition to civilian life through sustainable employment is the ultimate goal of CBH, and working with local community-based corporations and small businesses is the path to achieving that goal. CBH believes that placing veterans in long-term employment helps veterans avoid the pitfalls associated with chronic unemployment, such as divorce, loss of child custody, lack of health care and increased need for emergency services, while also bolstering the local economy by producing active consumers. When many of the veterans apply to CBH, they are already in crisis and may need a plethora of support services before they are considered ready for job placement. CBH contends that the transition education provided by the military to exiting service members is inadequate and not at all preparing the veterans for their separation from the military or transition to civilian life. They would like to partner with military bases in creating a more realistic transitional education program that will better inform and prepare service members prior to their actual separation, and thus, taking a more prevention-focused approach.

For many veterans, particularly career service members, accepting a civilian job will mean a decrease in income compared to what they received in the military. This requires additional career counseling until the service member is ready to lower their expectations in regards to income. There is also a need for career counseling to learn job application skills (e.g., preparing a resume, learning interviewing skills, having an appropriate wardrobe). CBH provides readiness training and connects veterans with support services that can provide a professional wardrobe when the veteran is ready for a job interview.

Finally, among veterans seeking services through CBH, the average time since exiting the service is approximately three years. Staff notes that at that point, many of the veterans are already in crisis and have many other issues to contend with before they are considered job ready. Through its triage approach at intake, CBH addresses the individual needs of the veteran through referrals to service providers, offering a menu of holistic treatment options. The long-term goal of creating a sustainable support system for returning veterans transitioning to civilian life is through this creation of a safety net at the community level.

Community Connectedness

CBH was founded on the principle of providing a bridge to the community, and Chairman Norman believes that in order to support veterans “You’ve got to drill down to the community level and get close to the problem.” Leaders acknowledge that while the federal government is working to address the growing needs of returning veterans, the demand for support will never be fully addressed at the federal level. Instead, CBH contends that local communities are needed to take a greater role in helping veterans and their families as they transition and integrate into civilian life.

Organization leaders observed misinformation and misperceptions within the community regarding veterans and their needs, and went about creating connectivity among employers and service providers by making them partners in the process. Through its collaboration with employers in the community, specifically Wells Fargo and Bank of America, CBH created “community assistance facilitators,” employers who successfully hired veterans and could be held up as examples of good corporate partners. Other corporations and small businesses followed suit. All understand that part of the responsibility in hiring veterans is providing mentoring and other support systems so that the job placement is sustainable.

As previously mentioned, CBH created an employer alliance (CAVE) among corporate partners and small-business owners to lead the way in hiring veterans. With a goal of 50 CAVE members, CBH currently has 32 (64%) companies enrolled. CAVE members are now required to sign Memoranda of Understanding (MOU). As noted above, to ensure long-term placements, CBH has developed an individual employment plan for each CAVE member, identifying employer needs and connects that employer to qualified applicants. Continued education of civilian HR staff members are addressed with CAVE members to overcome any misperceptions or stigmas attached to hiring veterans. The Employment and Education Specialist and Director of Community Initiatives depend on extensive networks among hiring managers who can help direct the flow of applicants being referred by CBH.

Further, CBH validates its service providers, and recently began requiring service providers to sign an MOU. As a relatively new organization in the veteran space, CBH has had to clearly articulate what type of services they provide and has recognized the need for better understanding of their role in the community. A summit in September, 2014 included service providers in an effort to better explain CBH’s role, while also encouraging conversation between service providers and creating a broader network. Current community service providers include local community colleges and universities, Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, and the YMCA of Greater Charlotte among others. Charlotte Bridge Home maintains and updates a comprehensive resource guide that provides detailed information on the services and supports currently available to veterans in the Charlotte Community. This resource was funded by a grant of the Foundation of the Carolinas.

In addition, CBH sponsors weekly workouts, neighborhood runs, and volunteer activities that are open to the entire Charlotte community. They also participate in the GO RUCK challenge series, an intense physical workout that encourages teamwork while bridging the gap between all walks of life: military/non-military, men/women, and young/old. These events also encourage military veteran participants to be leaders in their community and serve as a point of contact for veterans in their area.

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness is supported through the activities of CBH as implied by its name: it serves as a bridge to social services in an effort to meet the needs of veterans and their families, connecting veterans

to resources that will help smooth their transition and reintegration to civilian life in the Charlotte community. CBH addresses the civilian-military divide through its ongoing efforts in raising awareness among employers, small business owners, and corporate partners as they lead the way in hiring veterans.

This is facilitated by a full-time Director of Community Initiatives, Blake Bourne, whose role is to serve as the connection between CBH and the employer community. According to Bourne,

“...the big piece that CBH recognized early on was we can’t expect the veterans and their families to do all the work...to do the whole marathon themselves, because it’s a nonmilitary town and there’s a lot to learn and a lot to get there. If we could...educate Charlotte on veterans and their families and their needs and the nuances, and educate veterans on Charlotte. So we like to believe that we’re on both sides of that and we can, we know the community well and we know veterans well. Neither of them know each other very well so let’s educate those two.”

As part of the organization’s efforts in community education, CBH hosted an event March of 2014 for service providers and employers, as a means of educating both groups on employment readiness. As Bourne explained, CAVE originated as a way to educate hiring managers and HR departments to better understand the needs of veterans in relation to their hiring practices:

“...what does an infantry officer with six years of leading small units know that can be beneficial for an LPL Financial or a Bank of America or a Family Dollar, because we’ve got some great companies here. What was recognized immediately was that Disney, Bank of America, Home Depot, these companies have sunk a lot of money and a lot of time and a lot of resources into figuring this out. But Family Dollar, the YMCA of Greater Charlotte, Crowder Construction, local companies don’t have those resources nor have the time. Why not share and collaborate those best practices and create a nonthreatening opportunity to be that broker between the two and to say, look, we can get Family Dollar to where Bank of America is, let’s not take five years and \$2 million...That’s the idea behind the Charlotte Alliance for Veteran Employment – to get companies that are doing things well, getting the subject matter experts and the best practices shared across the board and to raise the overall level of awareness in employment, because it’s one thing for me to come in there and explain to them about what they should be doing, but when you bring a VP of HR Operations from Time Warner Cable, then she can start talking about all the other benefits and why Time Warner Cable took that on, and what the veterans have provided internally to them.”

Through its collaboration with the largest employers in the community, Wells Fargo and Bank of America, CBH created “community assistance facilitators,” employers who successfully hired veterans and could be held up as examples of good corporate partners. Other corporations and small businesses followed suit. All understand that part of the responsibility in hiring veterans is also providing mentoring and other support systems so that the job placement is sustainable and in line with CBH’s goal of “the right veteran in the right job.”

As Founder Tommy Norman explained,

“...depending on the audience, we probably try to get in on four levels. So there’s the ‘it’s great for Charlotte,’ get the leaders in...you can get a mid-manager or a very loyal, dedicated, motivated employee. On the other end, it’s the consumers, right? We’re producing consumers that have jobs and can consume. On the third level, it’s avoidance of divorce, child support, unemployment, the emergency room, etc. A veteran displaced inappropriately is going to cost money and for a very long time, so forget the fact that they can’t be productive and bring value. [Finally], the Department of Labor, you know, putting in the OFCCP (Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs), we’re not shy about that either, right. So as long as an agency is willing to hire veterans, we come in and say you must engage them and you have to have career paths and you have to have visible mentors and all of that.

Through the CAVE initiative, CBH has taken leadership responsibilities within the Charlotte community to connect a variety of entities, from employers to service providers to government at all levels, and created a collaborative strategy in meeting the employment needs of veterans in the Charlotte region. As such, Charlotte Bridge Home does not duplicate existing efforts, but rather, assists in “connecting the dots” to support the entire network of service providers for the veteran population.

Further efforts in bridging the civilian/military divide on a more social level include CBH sponsored weekly workouts with F3 (Faith, Fellowship, and Fitness), which is non-veteran focused and started by an ex-Special Forces veteran. A similar group is available for women, Females In Action (FIA). Local neighborhood runs are sponsored through Team RWB. Finally, volunteer activities, such as Habitat for Humanity, are open to the entire Charlotte community. CBH also participates in the GO RUCK challenge series. Each of these events encourage military veteran participants to be leaders in their community and serve as a point of contact for veterans in their area while sharing the experience with the civilian population.

In addition, one of CBH’s board members is the Executive Vice President of the NBA Charlotte Hornets. CBH is exploring ways to effectively partner with the team to further educate the broader community about the needs of veterans living within the Charlotte region.

Independent Sector Involvement

Chairman Norman credits CBH’s connection with the independent sector to one CEO’s conversation with a veteran seeking help in finding a job. According to Norman, this corporate leader:

“...took the message to the street for us and it was an enormous not only commitment on his part, but it gave us legitimacy every step of the way to have a very highly respected community member say we’re in the game and let me tell you a story about what I just saw, believed in, now know that we can make a difference, and having that affirmation, if you will, gave us a real touch point to open a lot more doors. Harris Teeter suddenly was involved. Suddenly Bank of America was involved...Wells Fargo who said, you know, we’re in to the tune of a million dollars...to raise whatever it takes to get this company, this organization up and going and the companies in this community involved. So my point in saying all of that is as a nonmilitary town, it’s imperative to ramp up the leadership of

the community on the front end, and we were learning as we went.”

Today CBH collaborates with 127 local resources and community organizations to holistically serve the needs of veterans through its individualized case management approach. CBH coordinates with the larger community service providers, such as Charlotte Works, the USO, the Red Cross, Goodwill, and the VA. In addition, The Foundation of the Carolinas funded the development of a comprehensive resource guide that provides detailed information on the services and support available to veterans in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community. CBH maintains and updates this resource guide, which includes local small-business service providers, local colleges and universities, healthcare systems, as well as national NGOs and philanthropic organizations. As noted above, CBH plans to strengthen its partnership with service providers through the introduction of MOUs.

In addition, CBH has developed close ties with 32 local businesses and corporate partners committed to providing employment opportunities to veterans through its CAVE initiative. The organization has a goal to increase employer partnerships to 50 this year. The Board of Directors includes a cross-section of business owners, civic leaders, and retired military. To further strengthen this partnership, Employment and Education Specialist Tiann Shade is developing objectives and standards for every CAVE member, with a long-term goal that each organization be given specific hiring requirements.

Additionally, CBH works with Charlotte Piedmont Community College, as well as other educational institutions and vocational training centers, as resources in support of veterans seeking job training and continuation of secondary educational degrees.

CBH staff is continuously working to develop relationships with providers to better serve veterans. By developing these strategic partnerships with a cross-section of private businesses, philanthropic organizations, and educational institutions, CBH has created a successful and collaborative network of community partners. A second summit of business partners, military service providers, and non-profit organizations occurred in September 2014, to share best practices, identify gaps, continue to raise awareness, and expand the collaborative effort among employers, service providers, and veterans.

Veteran Program Differentiation

The CBH approach to this strategic theme is evident in the organization’s case management support and holistic service model. The staff views every veteran as a unique individual who will benefit from support designed to meet their individual needs. CBH focuses primarily on post-9/11 veterans seeking employment, but offers services to any veteran who walks through the door. According to the lead social worker/program manager, “Every single veteran is different; that’s the only constant.”

One differentiator is found within the population of veterans served, specifically between younger post-9/11 veterans and older veterans (most of whom served in Vietnam). Typically, the older veteran is facing a number of issues that do not include employment. The frontline staff estimates that they receive two to three calls per day from this group of veterans who become direct referrals to other service providers. Staff notes that these calls require a certain amount of manpower spent identifying the specific need or needs of the veteran prior to making an appropriate referral. This intervention is not included in their overall census of veterans assisted through case management, but would be an important metric to track.

The case management team views the younger veterans, those who entered the service when they were 18-20 years old, as the most impressionable and in greatest need of direction and focus. Social worker Charisse Byron stated that “They come back traumatized. So you are pretty much teaching them, guiding them about really what’s the civilian world, which they never really knew before they left, right?” Byron likens the CBH support team to “civilian battle buddies...we’re all committed to connecting and serving and educating this specific population.”

However, the frontline staff noted that this younger population does not readily self-identify as needing assistance, often applying for help when they are already in crisis. More effective outreach is seen as a method to identify veterans in the community before they get to the point where they need multiple support services, in addition to employment, but defining and refining best outreach practices within this community is still evolving at the organizational level.

CBH sees a dichotomous trend in the veteran population applying for their services: demand is largely represented either among young veterans with little or no secondary education or older, career veterans. Data provided by staff indicate that 31% of veterans seeking services had exited the military between 1 and 5 years prior to their arrival at CBH, while the next highest percentage of veterans seeking employment services (10%) were career veterans with more than 20 years of military experience. These two widely varying groups present particular challenges in easing the transition to civilian life. Many of the younger veterans do not really have an idea of what they want to do once they leave the military. They may have enlisted when they were 18, 19, or 20 years old, have lower levels of education, and are still maturing on many levels. Successful job placement for this group often depends on the veterans’ furthering their education through the GI Bill or connecting them with vocational training providers.

Meanwhile, older veterans present another set of challenges for the employment specialist: career veterans that may possess years of experience that do not necessarily correlate to “corporate” experience, and the sometimes unrealistic salary expectations of the service member.

Women Veteran Efforts

CBH does not have differentiated programming designed to meet the needs of female veterans. Rather, all veterans are served, regardless of gender or age. It is notable that while the majority of the clients served by CBH are men (73%), CBH also extends its employment placement services to spouses and family members of veterans served.

Reintegration with Family

While not specifically addressed as a goal, the family reintegration theme is clearly present in the case management services offered under CBH’s holistic model. According to founder Tommy Norman, “It’s driven by the families. That’s our mission, family first.” Through its extensive intake model, veterans’ needs are identified and assistance is provided through referral to support services. Continuous follow-up by case managers and counseling services provided by the on-site social worker help veterans get to the next step of finding sustainable employment, which contributes to reintegration with and stability of family. CBH even provides employment placement services for spouses and family members. Family members are always welcome to visit the center and can directly participate in social activities sponsored by CBH.

Media

CBH has a social media presence on Facebook and Twitter. However, their outreach efforts are less targeted, noting that many veterans hear about their services by word of mouth or via Internet discovery. They currently do not employ a communications staff. Their website includes articles about upcoming events and announcements, such as a call for volunteers for a tree planting event. Recent Twitter conversations are posted on the website home page. Veterans seeking services may complete an online application through the website. The site also includes a donations page.

Staff would like to see a marketing campaign and rebranding effort. Even though Charlotte is a nonmilitary town, many veterans move there because of the employment market, particularly in the banking industry. Veterans new to Charlotte often do not know where to look for services or support; a more focused outreach effort could assist CBH in its efforts to connect with veterans before they are in crisis.

Finally, CBH has received local media coverage in traditional outlets, such as The Charlotte Observer, surrounding its community volunteer events and social activities.

4. Key Learnings and Reflections

Catalysts of Impact

A key component that differentiates CBH from other veteran service providers is the holistic approach taken in meeting the needs of each individual client. CBH does not try to provide every service, but instead serves as a bridge to other providers who can better serve veterans' needs. This enables CBH to focus on its main goal of education and long-term sustained employment for veterans transitioning into civilian life.

CBH is a relatively new community-based nonprofit organization that serves veterans and their families with no fees for service. The organization has grown from one referral into a resource for returning veterans making their transition to civilian life in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region. When leadership realized that they were not fully reaching the desired population of transitioning veterans they retooled the organization to better meet the needs of the post-9/11 veterans. This ability to demonstrate flexibility and agility has provided CBH with a clearer focus and direction in meeting the needs of its core population.

A majority of staff members at CBH are former military personnel and are clearly passionate about what they do. This familiarity with military culture supports them in their interactions with veterans, allowing them to make connections and establish "street credibility" in developing and maintaining trust among their clients. Their compassion and dedication contributes to the long-lasting relationships they develop with their clients, and leads to success in meeting their clients' needs, extending beyond finding them a job. As Administrative Assistant/Client Coordinator Melissa Raymond noted:

"What we do, our employment readiness and our short-term counseling, is such a core part of our program, but our runs with our buddies, I mean that is such a core part of our program too, and we want to get you connected with our runs and we want you to be a friend of ours. If down the line something happens in five years or ten years, you know where to go. You have your kind of framework kind of set up, and you know it's here."

Barriers to Impact

As with many nonprofit organizations operating in the veterans' space, funding is a major barrier. While Charlotte Bridge Home currently enjoys financial support from major corporate partners and philanthropic organizations, the organization acknowledges that they are one out of many who are all competing for the same dwindling dollars. Increasingly, funders are demanding outcome measures and evidence of impact, and CBH leadership is in the process of developing more systematic data collection and analysis that will provide these necessary metrics.

CBH is on the cusp of growing its population and expanding its services, yet not having the staff to meet these needs. They are at a critical point in terms of expanding in order to continue to provide such differentiated programming for veterans. Tied into their pending expansion is the need to develop a more formalized outreach effort. Currently, veterans apply for services either through an Internet search, direct referral, or word-of-mouth. An Outreach Specialist was scheduled to join CBH in October 2014 and a more clearly-defined outreach effort is being developed. An improved outreach process, however, will increase the demands on such a small staff, leading back to the need for increased funding to hire additional staff.

Another area that may be holding back CBH in terms of outreach is the lack of a focused social media/communications staff person responsible for getting the word out in a more consistent manner. Increasing the role of media, especially social media, might include publicizing CBH to veterans new to the Charlotte community; increasing community awareness of CBH and the services it provides; increasing the business community's awareness of CBH's services and successes; and educating potential employers on the benefits of hiring veterans and the veterans' needs for jobs. The need for an increased social media presence is particularly critical when trying to reach younger post-9/11 veterans.

Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

The following insights emerged from discussion with CBH staff:

Need to become prevention specialists: Many veterans seek assistance from CBH when they are already in crisis. Case management would like to create a path to their door before the veteran reaches rock bottom. The longer a veteran struggles to transition into the community, the more serious and wide-ranging his or her problems are likely to become. Many veterans do not self-identify as suffering from PTS or other chronic issues like anxiety or depression, and these conditions often do not become apparent until many months after discharge. Earlier contact can be achieved through a greater outreach effort, including access to military bases in order to participate in the service-provided transition program.

Early and consistent intervention: Once contact with a veteran is made, interventions need to begin as early as possible, beginning with the most serious. Follow-up is critical during this time, and veterans may need to repeat the evaluation process until they are deemed ready for sustainable employment. Currently, the case management team follows-up with the service provider and the veteran, typically by telephone, to ensure that the veteran's needs were met. A more formalized vetting structure is being considered as well as more systematic documentation of services provided and their impact.

Holistic support: Many veterans approach CBH looking for assistance in finding a job, when they could also be in crisis dealing with multiple issues related to housing, health, and reintegration with their family and the community. CBH recognizes that these challenges are intertwined and trying to fix one at the expense

of another will not produce sustainable benefits. CBH's triage approach ensures that the most serious problems are addressed immediately through a variety of support services, as well as in-house counseling and case management.

Connect vets to the Charlotte Vets Network: CBH understands the value in connecting veterans to each other and seeks to promote this connection through its weekly workouts, neighborhood runs, monthly networking lunches, volunteer projects, and other social activities. It also works to establish a peer, sponsor, and mentor program with employers who have hired veterans for their workforce. Successfully-placed veterans are encouraged to reach out to other veterans seeking employment, and often provide referrals to CBH.

Convene and educate to elevate community understanding: CBH connects veterans and their families to available national and community resources while advocating for system and community change around the critical issues impacting veterans. They achieve this by raising awareness among a network of community-based support services, employers, and providers of higher education by focusing on three areas: connect, serve, convene. The organization compiled a resource manual of its 127 service providers. They have also surveyed agencies and businesses about employment practices specific to the veteran population.

In addition, staff participates in monthly meetings with local government and service providers making up the Continuum of Care within the community as a means of networking with nonprofits in the Charlotte area. This also provides CBH with the opportunity to expand awareness among other local service providers.