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OPERATION HOMEFRONT CASE STUDY

1. Organizational Overview

History

Operation Homefront, Inc. (OH), headquartered in San Antonio, TX, is a national organization which provides financial assistance and other programs to active duty military personnel, veterans and their families. The organization originated in February, 2002 when a group of Navy spouses in the San Diego area were searching for a way to support each other through deployments. A series of online discussion groups grew to an online magazine then merged in 2004 with a chapter-based group which provided emergency financial assistance throughout the country. In 2006, the organization's Board of Directors renamed the organization Operation Homefront, Inc. Operation Homefront (OH) had 25 individual "chapters" in various locations around the United States, each serving a specific geographic area. In 2008, the transitional housing program was added in response to significant wait times for VA benefits processing. In June 2012, the OH Board of Directors voted to consolidate the individual chapters into one national headquarters; the individual chapters either closed or remained open as field offices. The consolidation centralized service delivery in San Antonio and allowed the organization to expand its services throughout the United States, with the headquarters handling cases in states without a local office. Since 2002, OH has delivered more than \$207 million through cash and in-kind programs benefitting military families. OH receives funding from fundraising events, community/corporate sponsors and individual donations.

Mission Statement

Operation Homefront's Mission Statement is: "Operation Homefront provides emergency financial and other assistance to the families of our service members and wounded warriors." The mission has changed over time, as the organization was originally founded to provide emergency financial assistance..

Organizational Structure

Led by a President/CEO, COO, and CFO, as well as an "Advisory Board" (Board of Directors), Operation Homefront has 17 field offices plus a headquarters that serves the 50 states. The field offices are organized into three service territories or regions: Red, White and Blue. Each region has a Regional Director in charge of operations, though there may be states in the region that are served by the national headquarters. This is the case with the Red and White regions. The Regional Directors report to the Regional Coordinator and Vice President of Field Operations, both of whom are located in San Antonio. In addition, OH has a VP of Programs, with Program Directors organized beneath that role.

The organization has over 125 paid staff. By leadership estimates, over two-thirds of OH's paid staff are in San Antonio, including all case management staff for the Emergency Assistance and Housing Programs. In addition to paid staff, OH has a large volunteer corps, which is empowered to do many of the things paid staff in the field offices are able to do. The degree to which volunteers are leveraged is so high that OH has recently hired a dedicated staff member to train and develop volunteers.

Programming

The broad theme of Operation Homefront programming is to ensure financial stability for service members, veterans, and their families. This is accomplished by offering emergency assistance grants, temporary and permanent housing, and a number of morale programs to active duty military, veterans and their families. Specifically, Operation Homefront has six emergency assistance programs, two housing programs, and morale programs in six focus areas that serve various populations of veterans and their families.

The emergency assistance programs, which were the original mission of Operation Homefront, offer emergency financial assistance grants and other types of assistance to active duty, deployed, and wounded, ill, or injured veterans and their families. The original goal of these programs was to address financial needs that are episodic, acute, and based on an emergency or unexpected event; however, program staff have described the evolution of the program into one that also supports veterans with immediate needs which may be caused by underlying chronic issues. The grants can be used for living expenses such as rent or mortgage, groceries, health care and transportation, including vehicle repair. In addition to financial assistance, OH offers auto donation and repair, health care services, home repair and home goods, moving and relocation assistance and food assistance. OH recently expanded eligibility for these programs to include wounded, ill or injured veterans and their families in addition to active duty personnel. Since expanding eligibility, OH leadership estimates that there has been a 263% increase in emergency grants awarded, and that the current composition of clients served is 85% wounded, ill and injured and 15% active duty.

The two housing programs are the Operation Homefront Villages and Homes on the Homefront. The Operation Homefront Villages are transitional (rent-free) housing complexes for wounded, ill or injured veterans and their families. The transitional housing program offered in the Villages are integrated with mandatory financial services counseling, veterans' benefits counseling and social support/morale programs geared towards the needs of resident veterans and their families. Many who move into the transitional housing are awaiting benefits determination from the VA, which can take up to 2 years. OH staff are trained to coordinate with VA benefits in order to help veterans obtain the financial support they need to establish permanent residence after leaving the program, while addressing healthcare needs preventing them from leaving the service. The strong financial focus of the program is designed to place residents on a stable financial footing (reduce debt, increase savings, repair credit) before departing the program. Homes on the Homefront is a home ownership program that places veterans and their families in a bank-owned home for a period of 1-2 years, during which the veteran (similar to transitional housing) completes financial counseling and executes a documented transition plan. When the transition plan is completed, the house is deeded to the veteran. This program is open to veterans from all eras, as long as they meet specific eligibility requirements.

Operation Homefront's suite of morale programs includes community events hosted by field offices; holiday toys and meals for families; the Military Child of the Year Award, which is an award program for

outstanding children of veterans or active duty personnel; the Back to School Brigade, which hosts school supply drives and giveaways; and the Hearts of Valor program, which provides social support for caregivers of wounded, ill or injured veterans. The Hearts of Valor program includes care packages for caregivers, retreats and support groups, and harkens back to the very first mission which founded the organization. This program recently expanded its programming to include male spouses. These morale programs are designed to serve the dual function of boosting morale and alleviating financial need.

Veteran Populations Served

While the organization's original mission was to serve post-9/11 veterans and their families, if the full portfolio of Operation Homefront programs is considered, OH currently serves active duty personnel, veterans from all eras, and their families. Transitional housing programs and the Hearts of Valor caregivers program are only open to veterans who are wounded, ill or injured, and their families. Emergency Assistance is open to active duty, deployed, and wounded, ill or injured veterans and their families. The permanent housing program is open to veterans of all eras, and the morale programs serve all of the aforementioned groups. The majority of OH clients are the lowest-paid service members, the E-1 through E-6 enlisted ranks.

Funding Sources and Strategies

Operation Homefront obtains funding from over 30 listed corporate sponsors, as well as private donors and fundraising activities. Corporate sponsors include companies such as Outback Steakhouse, Stage Stores, Wal-Mart and Bank of America. As part of its strategic plan, Operation Homefront plans to "implement a fundraising approach that balances revenue across channels to enhance stable, predictable financial resources." Part of the way OH balances programs against funding is that the organization does not take on additional programming unless funding is already available to support it. In creating agreements with sponsors and other community organizations, Operation Homefront only enters agreements that have a life of three years or more. Operation Homefront receives nearly zero government funding, which management credits to its no-unfunded-programs approach and the strength of its relationships with its donors. However, CEO Jim Knotts expressed concerns about loss of corporate support when the popular "cause" changes to something other than veterans. In addition to cash, contributed goods and contributed houses inventories for permanent housing and other morale programs (back to school backpacks, etc.). OH leadership estimates that Operation Homefront received donations from 1,800 individuals, corporations, and foundations in 2013.

2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

Types of Data Routinely Collected

Operation Homefront tracks the number of "needs met" for each of its programs. This number is a common metric across all programs, corresponding to an approved application for assistance. A "need met" could represent rent, utilities, mortgage payments, community events, tickets to sporting events, care packages, food assistance, backpacks, etc. This metric serves as a common denominator for output activity across the organization, and OH leadership is working to redefine their metrics to better align with impact. The organization is beginning to pursue surveys for some of its programs to obtain data from clients that could potentially be used in other metrics.

In addition to "needs met", Operation Homefront gathers and maintains a large amount of data through their applications for various programs. Data includes demographic information such as age, race, ethnicity, branch of service, rank, income/pay grade; and military service information, such as service

dates, discharge information, disability status, proof of deployment, and combat theater status. The housing programs obtain additional financial data for their participants, though this data is not used beyond identifying populations served and evaluating applications.

The OH leadership team places a heavy emphasis on their “efficiency rating,” the percentage of each dollar that goes to program funding and for emergency assistance (93.7%). They also track the average amount of time from application to payment, which is relevant to donors and participants alike.

Data Analysis and Reporting

Operation Homefront conducts an annual, internal manpower study to assist in allocating resources to various programs. This study analyzes each employee’s effort as allocated to every program in Operation Homefront’s portfolio, as well as to general program support.

With regards to reporting, Operation Homefront completes required tax filings like most 501 (c)(3) nonprofits. These tax filings contribute to the organization’s ratings by Charity Navigator. OH has received a 4-star rating by Charity Navigator since 2008.

Operation Homefront has recently accepted grant funds from the State of Texas for one of the transitional housing Villages, and there will be significant reporting requirements associated with the grant. These types of reporting requirements were cited as a main driver of the avoidance of government funding. The organization also received a significant grant from the Wounded Warrior Project, which they use to expand eligibility for emergency financial assistance to their wounded, ill and injured category of clients, but no reporting requirements for this grant were discussed.

How data are used for getting to impact

As mentioned above, Operation Homefront completes required tax filings, and will complete reporting for grant funds for the State of Texas. Throughout our conversations, Operation Homefront leadership was transparent about the fact that there is an opportunity to enhance internal metrics and that they are eager to discover what metrics to use and how best to implement them. There was considerable conversation about the desire to look across other similar organizations and identify models of assessment for use within Operation Homefront.

Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

As stated above, there is an informal process of collecting data to inform decision making (such as the annual manpower study), but there is not a robust system of formal program evaluation. The Emergency Assistance Program staff described a manual data collection process they use for program evaluation which they found to be inefficient, and which could produce errors or redundancy. This team expressed a desire for a digital solution for data collection, which could help case management but also evaluation of the case managers’ performance.

3. Strategic Themes

Transition to Civilian Life

Among the nine strategic themes, the transition to civilian life is perhaps most strongly linked to Operation Homefront’s mission. In some ways, the transition from military to civilian life is the foundation of the need for much of Operation Homefront’s programming, as staff and leadership believe that the seeds of financial instability often originate during military service and are exacerbated

during, or even because of, the transition. Emergency Assistance Program staff described an environment in which financially illiterate service members, who are often poorly prepared for the transition, are surprised by lower civilian wages and unexpected additional costs, and rapidly find themselves in financial trouble as newly-transitioned veterans.

In some cases, poor financial choices made during military service leave transitioning service members in serious financial trouble prior to separation, and those who suffer from disabilities which prevent employment may soon face homelessness. In these instances, Operation Homefront steps in through its transitional housing program as the bridge to reduce the impact of (or even turn around) what could have been a tragic transition. Along with rent-free housing, this program of mandatory financial counseling, budgeting, and saving reverses transitioning families' financial freefall while awaiting medical separation or the initiation of VA benefits payments, allowing these families to pay down debt, build up savings, and repair credit. To facilitate a holistic transition out of DoD and into the VA, Operation Homefront staff partner with VA case managers to ensure proper enrollment in benefits programs and medical systems. Additionally, Operation Homefront staff review eligibility for other benefits for which the family may be eligible and then assist the family with the application process to provide additional financial support, thereby ensuring a smooth transition into the system of social supports which exists to prevent further financial hardship.

Employment and Education

Particularly in the transitional housing program, Operation Homefront's commitment to the service member's transition does not stop with finances. Aligning with the strategic theme identifying the seminal importance of education and employment to the transition of post-9/11 veterans, Operation Homefront staff recognize that long-term financial stability rests upon employability, which often, in turn, requires further education. In support of these concerns, throughout the program of financial counseling, staff invite representatives from local colleges to speak with residents about opportunities to leverage GI Bill benefits to advance their educational goals. Additionally, local partners visit residents to provide resume writing assistance, and a representative from the Texas Veterans Commission visits the site to link residents with employment opportunities. Other partners, such as Dress for Success provide residents the resources to be successful in job interviews. While these services are corollary to the primary mission of restoring each family's immediate financial viability, Operation Homefront staff realizes that without these services, the family will never be financially independent upon departure from the program.

Reintegration with Family

Operation Homefront staff and leadership don't simply treat the veteran, but rather they treat the veteran family; this team fundamentally believes that the most important needs for families – housing, education, health and wellness, and employment – are all supported by financial stability, and that each of their programs are critical to facilitating this stability. Whether providing direct financial aid through the Emergency Assistance Program; giving a family transitional housing to pay down debt, build up savings, and clean up credit; providing a mortgage-free home to serve as the foundation of a financially stable future; or even simply providing a backpack full of school supplies to slightly ease a family's back-to-school financial burden each fall, Operation Homefront's programs support financial stability and, in turn, familial stability and reintegration. Indeed, this belief in the importance of family is not isolated to the leadership team as, when asked to articulate the organization's intended impact, multiple staff members across interviews responded almost verbatim that "success is the stability of the family".

One example of family care is highlighted by the types of needs met by the Emergency Assistance Program. EAP staff described multiple scenarios wherein veterans were eligible for VA health benefits, but couldn't afford health insurance for their families, and the EAP team stepped in during emergency situations. In one extreme instance, a veteran's spouse needed \$10,000 in emergency dental work, which Operation Homefront covered. Another example is the Hearts of Valor group, a support group which allows caretakers of wounded, ill, or injured veterans to share their stories, experiences, and feelings with one another, providing a sort of pressure release valve to the otherwise often stressful and isolating life of a caretaker. Similarly, in the transitional housing Village, Operation Homefront hosts the BEITZ Group (Bring Everyone into the Zone) which is a peer-to-peer network led by a facilitator. This group allows residents to discuss the stresses they are going through in transition – anxiety, fears, depression, family issues, etc. Sometimes spouses join the group to learn what the service members are going through, and to integrate them into the healing process. Through these multiple initiatives – caring for a spouse's emergency needs, providing for the emotional needs of caretakers, and working to bridge the gap between the emotional needs of wounded, ill, or injured residents, and their caretakers – as well as through their broader efforts to support the financial stability of veteran and military families, Operation Homefront demonstrates that its target population is not only the service member, but rather the entire family unit.

Community Connectedness

Operation Homefront leadership recognizes that financial stability supports a number of key pillars of wellness; they also understand that financial challenges could often be a symptom of a broader set of problems, which Operation Homefront is not necessarily equipped to handle. CEO Jim Knotts says that, "Partnership among nonprofits in this space is absolutely critical. I think it is for any kind of need you're meeting because no need is standalone with a family or an individual. What we recognized early on is the needs of the military families are so diverse and so broad that no single nonprofit can do it all...At the end, we want stable and secure military families so that means we're going to have to do referrals to other organizations. So that's what we do."

Operation Homefront facilitates this in multiple ways. Sometimes, case managers have existing relationships with a specific organization or case worker who can address the exact issue for which a veteran requires assistance. Other times, Operation Homefront refers clients to a few strategic partners that have extensive referral networks, such as the Wounded Warrior Project's referral resource center and Military One Source. Additionally, the benefit of the broad national network of 17 field offices is the ability to develop an extensive web of relationships at the local level in many of America's communities. One example is a group called Our Daily Bread, which donates food to the transitional housing Village in San Antonio. Another example is a car dealership in Fayetteville, North Carolina, which provides discounted or free car repairs to Operation Homefront clients. Local field offices also develop relationships with MWR offices and spouses clubs on their local military installations and build networks with the local commanders, Warrior Transition Units, and Wounded Warrior Battalions. Between the national headquarters' relationships with large-scale organizations like the Wounded Warrior Project and the local field offices' ability to network "on the ground", Operation Homefront is able to serve as a "national local nonprofit", as they like to say, integrated into a broad community of service providers at multiple levels and better able to serve the broad needs of its veterans.

Social Connectedness

While financially preparing service members for the transition from military to civilian life, Operation Homefront also helps integrate their transitioning service members into civilian society primarily in two ways: events and the work of civilian volunteers.

The transitional housing Village itself physically begins the reintegration of its residents into civilian society by removing them from the nearby military base and placing them in a civilian housing complex. The complex in San Antonio, for example, has a community swimming pool which Village residents often use, which gets them interacting with their civilian neighbors on occasion. On a regular basis, the Village hosts events which incorporate outside (non-veteran) organizations like church groups wishing to host cookouts (“Grillers for God”), or the local Harley Davidson club, which brings outsiders into the community who wish to meet and interact with the residents. Additionally, the Village hosts regular holiday events – Easter, Christmas, Halloween, etc. – where residents of the broader housing complex also join the celebration and get to know the resident veterans and military families. These types of events can facilitate residents branching out from isolating themselves within the military and veteran community and getting to know their civilian neighbors.

Operation Homefront also has a robust and well-managed volunteer program across the country, including AmeriCorps VISTAs, in both its housing and morale programs. These semi-professional volunteers are highly committed to their work and provide dedicated service(s) to the population served by Operation Homefront. Over time, some of the residents become inspired by these volunteers; Village staff have noted that former residents have a tendency to volunteer in their new communities, with the former residents believing that the impact that volunteers had on them can translate to an impact they would like to have on others. One staff member remarked, “That transitions into when they become part of our program, because they’ve already seen what volunteers have come out and done at the Village, and they’re more likely, I think, to say, ‘What can I do in my own town even if I’m moving to Georgia? What can I do there? Because somebody came out and helped us when we were kind of down on our luck and having issues.’” Through this volunteer program, not only has Operation Homefront helped bridge the civil-military divide by bringing civilians in to engage with veterans, but also by encouraging veterans and military families to head out to engage with their new communities as well.

Women Veteran Efforts

Operation Homefront does not differentiate its programming for women veterans. However, the permanent and transitional housing teams have identified themes noted by other housing providers relative to attitudes and patterns presented by homeless or near-homeless women veterans. Housing staff echoed the notion that their women veteran clients, particularly single mothers, were particularly resilient and resistant to initially asking for help, but were highly committed to their success in the Operation Homefront financial assistance program. Temporary housing staff repeatedly noted how “strong” the single mothers in their program were and how committed they were to their families’ success.

Veteran Programming Differentiation

The concept of veteran programming differentiation manifested itself in multiple ways in Operation Homefront. First, as this organization looks to the future it must define its target audience – all active duty, deployed, or veterans. The simple definition of each of these terms can be difficult (what constitutes deployed to one service does not mean the same to another; what constitutes a veteran is not always universally agreed upon), but each of these categories has a unique set of needs (and,

therefore requires a different set of services, and possibly a different composition of staff members), and certain funders will only support programming for one or multiple of these groups, but not necessarily all.

Second, there appears to be a unique cultural differentiation among veterans with disabilities who receive social services (as opposed to among non-veterans with disabilities) regarding the source of one's injuries. Multiple sources at Operation Homefront reported that veterans who were wounded in combat are seen (among veterans) as having more of a "right" to receive services than those who became ill or injured stateside. Operation Homefront CFO Laura Yzaguirre noted her observation that among the veteran population, being injured in a car accident on a base in Afghanistan was viewed as different (more deserving of services) than being injured in a car accident on a base in the United States. Likewise, while visiting the home of a family in the transitional housing Village, the mother of an 8 year-old girl whose father was being treated for cancer (and thus in the process of being medically retired) told the site visit team that when her daughter saw an amputee, she looked at her mother and remarked, "that's a real wounded warrior" (as opposed to her cancer-stricken father). This culture of "wound differentiation" appears so embedded in military and veteran life that it trickled down to an 8 year-old.

Finally, in the permanent housing program, Operation Homefront staff reported the need to apply additional filters to evaluating the efficacy of homes for potential veteran residents above those they would apply for civilian residents. For example, one staff member remarked, "I have to be diligent in making sure that, when I see 16 sex offenders within a three-mile radius, would I want to put my family in that area, and would I feel safe? Then I add on [other factors]. What happens about PTSD, and what are [the veteran's] triggers? I can't flush out every little thing, but I can at least try to get an umbrella of things that I know, as a person, I would not want to have around. I'm not going to place somebody — we had a house that had train tracks right behind it. Could you imagine if I had a woman or a man who had PTSD and a train came through at 3:00 A.M. every morning? Oh, my gosh. It's hard enough sleeping, just as a person, through that. We look at all of those things." This same staff member noted that she pays attention to how far the potential home is from a VA medical center, as well as which VA medical centers perform poorly, so that the veteran she places will not have to suffer from low-quality medical care. In this sense, it is clear that this staff member understands the unique needs of her population and has learned to navigate these needs adeptly.

Media

Operation Homefront's media coverage largely focuses around the home giveaway program, as this is the highest-profile program they offer, and the homes are often given away on stage at Tim McGraw concerts, which helps garner additional attention. This program has been featured on Fox News and Good Morning America; when it does get such coverage, the media strategy is generally to tell the immediate story of the veteran and aim to broaden the story to explain that Operation Homefront is a national organization.

Independent Sector Involvement

Operation Homefront has developed several strategic partnerships across sectors which support its programming for veterans and their families. Programmatically, OH's new relationship with ClearPoint will facilitate financial literacy training which will be mandatory for any Emergency Assistance Program participant seeking a second grant. Additionally, the Homes on the Homefront program would not exist

were it not for the strategic partnerships forged between Operation Homefront and some of the nation's largest banks – Chase, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and Meritage. Additionally, assisting in providing access to military bases and in the delivery of morale programs on-base is the USO. Finally, the American Legion Auxiliary serves as the grantee from the National Corporation for Community Service for AmeriCorps, which facilitates a portion of Operation Homefront's robust and significant volunteer support network through its VISTA program. These strategic partnerships are critical to Operation Homefront's success and position it prominently among the national landscape of leading veterans' service organizations.

4. Key Learnings and Reflections

Catalysts of Impact

One of Operation Homefront's most significant strengths is the apparent deliberate nature of the leadership team's decision making process and organizational design. One example benefit flowing from this was a clearly thought-out process of realigning the organization from a chapter-based model to a centrally-headquartered model. This resulted in more centralized fundraising (and therefore more standardized program delivery across the country), as well as centralized case management by fewer but more highly-trained staff comprised of professional social workers or counselors with holistic assessment skills. Through discussions with the leadership team, it is also clear that this model provides flexibility into the future for contingency planning should the external resource environment force a restriction in the size of the organization's operations.

Also evident as a result of a deliberate decision making process (and evident as a clear leading practice) is the robust and thorough volunteer infrastructure in place to support operations. OH explained that many veteran organizations have a plethora of individuals who wish to donate their time, but only for one-time support like filling care packages, but this doesn't align with OH's needs (or those of many of their peer organizations). This problem is explained as such: "The program mix we have really doesn't lend itself to that. I mean, they can't help someone with an emergency assistance program. They can't help someone with financial planning. They can't help someone in casework kinds of things that we're doing in transitional housing or permanent housing." In response, Operation Homefront has created a trained cadre of loyal, card-carrying professional volunteers who have been recruited through a targeted process for specific skillsets. OH's robust volunteer process includes recruitment, onboarding, training, management, recognition, and evaluation, all led and overseen by a full-time volunteer manager. Described in our conversations as akin to "active duty troops" (full-time employed volunteers) and "reserve troops" (not-currently employed), these volunteers may not always be actively engaged, but they remain committed to the Operation Homefront mission and can be "activated" at any time when the need arises.

Finally, Operation Homefront's strength revolves around the clear and straightforward combination of mission and culture that this organization exists to provide emergency assistance which stabilizes the lives of its clients, whether that is individual veterans or families. Each program is in some way designed around that mission: emergency assistance clearly is designed to fill a critical gap; transitional housing is designed to provide the breathing room necessary to get a veteran or family's finances in order sufficiently to transition to independence post-service; permanent housing provides a transitional period to do the same, then provide a mortgage free base for a financially independent future; even morale programs serve as a minor financial relief to cyclical and holiday costs to military families which otherwise struggle to make ends meet. Culturally, each employee is clearly dedicated to that cause, as

evidenced by the near unanimous responses to the question of “how do you define impact?” With variations on a theme, each employee responded similarly: “success is the stability of the family”. This clarity of mission provides unity of effort, efficiency in development efforts, prevents fragmentation of effort, and supports a unified culture.

Barriers to Impact

One strategic challenge Operation Homefront faces when looking to the likely resource constrained future is defining the direction of their organization – most critically, identifying their target audience. CEO Jim Knotts articulates this challenge as such: “What should our strategic direction be? Frankly, there are some on the board who are saying let’s follow the need. This cohort of wounded is going to need support for the next 50 to 60 years and there is a broad base of support, we think we can raise money for it. There are others who are saying that’s true and we can continue doing what we’re doing, how we’re doing it for wounded, but let’s not forget the active duty. There are a whole lot fewer organizations that are providing this kind of safety net for active duty than there are wounded. A whole lot more are supporting wounded than active duty. So we’re providing a critical need if we continue to serve primarily active duty. But you look at the active duty needs and it’s mostly the morale programs.” As discussed above, this challenge gets even more complicated when deciding whether to include deployed service members, as the definition of “deployed” is complicated within and across services, and even more so with the drawdown from the large-scale conflicts in the Middle East, but with the likely residual presence of Special Operations Forces in these regions.

Program Staff stated that overcoming the social stigma of a “handout” was extremely important to reaching their target audience. They believe that the people they serve are very proud and have aversions to receiving assistance, even if it has been “earned” through their service. Messaging at the program level takes on the tone that veterans are deserving of assistance for their service to their country, and that rather than a handout, their services are a foundation for moving to self-sustainment in the future. This challenge goes hand-in-hand with the challenge of outreach, which spans across all organizations working in the veterans’ services sector. Operation Homefront events often serve as their most effective public relations tools, particularly the very public home giveaway program. Additionally, OH relies upon referrals from other organizations which may not always be “high quality”, meaning that the referring organization may not understand OH program criteria when making the referral, so OH program staff must turn the veteran away.

Finally, achieving effective coordination with the military is a continual challenge. Operation Homefront’s services can be seen as competing services by the personnel on military bases (USO, MWR, etc.). Management and program staff have both indicated that reaching intended audiences is hard because it is not always easy to get on the bases or coordinate with the Warrior Transition Units (WTUs). Operation Homefront frequently has to depend on the personal relationships of their staff and clients to gain access to a base. Program managers expressed an urgent need to promote their services as a compliment to services offered on base, not as competition or duplication of services. Additionally, once relationships are developed with commanders on a given base, once those commanders rotate out of their assignments, new relationships must be built from the ground up, trust must be re-gained, etc.

Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

Operation Homefront is working to move their programs from intervention to transformation to have a better impact. The team believes that one assistance grant can be transformative, but for repeat

applicants, OH wants to move to a model where clients will not be allowed to receive more money without financial education. To achieve this, OH has partnered with an organization called ClearPoint to provide this education. The goal is that this works against the “handout” stigma and promotes independence amongst OH’s clients. In that same vein, encouraging clients to use food funding (or giving them food) to make healthier choices in order to promote wellness will reduce long-term health costs and promote long-term financial stability. Likewise, Operation Homefront hopes to add nutritional counseling to their program offerings towards the same end.

During the opening session and throughout the visit, there was considerable discussion around moving from measuring “needs met” to better defining “impact”. Where “needs met” serves as a measure of outputs, it does not clearly articulate the long-term impact of that action, and it also places the value of a backpack on par with the value of a potentially life-changing financial grant, or the gift of a home. Additionally, the Operation Homefront team understands and values the contribution of qualitative impact stories, such as one individual who passed through all of their programs and is now a staff member, but would otherwise be represented solely as a data point in a quantitative metric system. CEO Jim Knotts discussed a formula known as “Quality Adjusted Life Years” which measures impact through the variables of number served, quality of life, and length of impact. He is considering the use of this measure, but brought it up in conversation as a way to describe his effort to search for ways to better define his organization’s impact.