

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

*Case Study:*  
*Swords to Plowshares*



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES (IVMF) HAS BEEN CONTRACTED TO SUPPORT THE GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE'S RESEARCH TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE AND EMPOWER OUR POST-9/11 VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES.



# GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE



## SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES CASE STUDY

### 1. Organizational Overview

#### History

Swords to Plowshares (Swords) has seen its core mission of advocacy for veterans take on many forms over the years since its founding, building and adding services as funding became available. Founded in 1974 by a group of six veterans who were concerned about the influx of Vietnam veterans and their unmet needs, Swords to Plowshares' original mission was broadly to "heal the wounds of war" through providing job training and educational assistance, working with incarcerated veterans and helping veterans obtain discharge upgrades. Early in its history, Swords became the first organization in the three decades prior to become a VA-certified Veteran Service Organization (VSO), allowing them to formally represent veterans seeking benefits. Over the years as new grants were obtained, their mission grew to include addressing the needs of homeless veterans, women veterans, and active duty military personnel as they transition back to civilian life. Today, Swords has approximately 120 employees across seven sites and an operating budget of nearly \$12M in 2013.

#### Mission Statement

Swords to Plowshares' mission is "to heal the wounds, to restore dignity, hope, and self-sufficiency to all veterans in need, and to prevent and end homelessness and poverty among veterans." The mission is executed through a suite of programs designed to provide social and legal support for veterans.

#### Organizational Structure

Swords to Plowshares is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The Swords Executive Suite describes itself as a Board of Directors, with all operations overseen by an Executive Director, CFO and COO. All programs, with the exception of the policy and legal programs, report to the COO. In addition to the Board of Directors, Swords has an Advisory Board, which serves in the traditional role of a Board of Directors. Swords has seven sites that serve the San Francisco Bay Area, including five residential housing facilities and two administrative offices. The organization has approximately 120 employees, many of them case managers and attorneys.

Swords has invested heavily in infrastructure and human capital to support its programs. Swords' leadership team expressed no desire to spread the organization beyond the Bay Area, noting the importance of community in their success, and that any similar efforts elsewhere would require tailoring to the people in that community. To that end, leadership noted that a "cookie-cutter approach" to the

services Swords offers might not be the best model to bring the depth and breadth of services they provide to other communities outside of San Francisco.

## Programming

Swords to Plowshares' programs are each designed to provide social support or legal advocacy to veterans. They describe their core service areas as follows:

- Health and Social Services
- Employment Services
- Housing Services
- Legal Services

Swords' Employment and Training program, "Career Pathways," assigns veterans to job counselors, who provide individualized training to help overcome obstacles to employment, and build a long-term career plan. The goal is to train veterans for jobs in high-growth, high-wage industries. The program has relationships with roughly 50 Bay Area employers such as Chase and Robert Half International. The program also partners with organizations such as Dress For Success to provide unique services to women veterans. Finally, the program offers certifications for jobs in transportation, healthcare, security and other industries.

The Legal Team provides legal consultation and representation to veterans of any service and any era, regardless of discharge status. Through a pro bono legal assistance program, they also train local attorneys to support veterans in filing for VA health and disability benefits, appeals, and discharge upgrades. This training includes cultural competency and instruction in understanding how to work with veterans with significant barriers such as homelessness, mental health problems, and substance use.

Swords' transitional and permanent housing programs date back over twenty years and provide homes for primarily for single, male homeless veterans. Though there is some housing available for veteran families, it is extremely limited, and housing women veterans can prove difficult at times as well. Housing units are designed to be adaptable to the veteran's needs, so they can be modified to accommodate an aging or wounded veteran.

The Drop-in Clinic is a walk-in mental health clinic and service center, designed to assist veterans living with post-traumatic stress and other service-related mental illnesses. Services include substance abuse counseling, referrals and other mental health services. Veterans can also seek assistance with other issues, such as eviction prevention, emergency housing, mail and phone services and financial counseling.

Through the Women Veterans Project, Swords connects women veterans with mental health resources, substance abuse programs, counseling and health care. The program also organizes and executes events to raise awareness of women veterans' issues and connect them to the community.

The Institute for Veteran Policy (IVP) is the research and community outreach arm of Swords to Plowshares. The IVP publishes white papers on relevant veterans' issues, including supporting the transition back to civilian life, preventive care and community reintegration and education.

Combat to Community is a series of training programs targeted at community partners and developed by the Institute for Veteran Policy. The trainings focus on transition issues, particularly those faced by veterans who have recently entered transition. The trainings are intended to raise awareness of the challenges newly separated veterans face, and to provide tools to assist with transition.

### Veteran Populations Served

Swords to Plowshares provides services to veterans from all services and all eras. While most programs for veterans require honorable or other-than-dishonorable discharge, Swords has programs in which veterans can enroll regardless of discharge status. Additionally, the legal team files upgrade requests for those who have a reasonable chance at a discharge upgrade, in order to support their eligibility for other programs and government benefits. The goal at Swords is to present as few barriers to service as possible.

### Funding Sources and Strategies

Swords' leadership estimates that the organization obtains approximately 52 percent of its funding from federal grants, however, that estimate shifts closer to 75 percent if it is controlled for single, large donations from private foundations or donors. Federal funding typically restricts funding to specific missions or service areas, which, as described in the organization's history, partially explains the variety of the organization's services. Only the Policy program operates with no federal funding.

In the early days of the organization, Swords operations were primarily funded by a single federal grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). The grant limited the scope of services such that only a small population of veterans could receive assistance. Later, this grant was replaced with Job Training Partnership funding, restricted funds which shifted program focus toward employment and away from discharge upgrade advocacy. In the years that followed, Swords was able to obtain VA and HUD funding to assist homeless veterans.

Swords also received over 33 percent of their funding from foundations, corporate partners and private donors in 2013. Colleen Corliss, Director of Resource Development shared that most of their private donors are "successful Vietnam veterans, or somebody who is connected to a veteran. They have a military family or a child who served, but mainly it's wealthy Vietnam veterans as far as the bigger individual dollars go." CFO John Beem describes fundraising dollars as the "oil in an engine – something that's just intended to keep everything running smoothly," whereas the government funding comprises the major components of programming support. Like some other nonprofits, Swords takes a "no unfunded programs" approach.

## 2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

### Types of Data Routinely Collected

The most basic metric across all programs is the number of veterans who receive services, though each specific program may have additional metrics that are tracked. Swords tracks data related to employment services, such as the number of veterans enrolled for employment services, and assessments along the way. The assessments result in one of three outcomes, which are also tracked. The veteran is either determined to be job ready, in need of training, or as having some other priority besides employment, such as housing or help with substance abuse. In addition, Swords tracks some data about military

occupational specialty (MOS) and how long it takes to place a veteran in a job, as well as the number of placements. For housing, the number of placements to permanent housing is the key metric.

Legal services tracks the value of services provided, which is used to determine a leverage ratio. Swords' leadership shared that veterans receive \$26 of federal benefits for every dollar spent in the legal program. The program also tracks the number of veterans assisted, average days waited for a disability review, number of cases placed with a pro bono attorney, and the success rate (resolved cases).

Finally, Swords to Plowshares tracks demographic data, such as race, age, marital and employment status, MOS, service, and discharge status.

### Data Analysis and Reporting

Much of the data collected by Swords is driven by the requirements of federal grants. For example, Swords is the recipient of a grant called the McKinney Grant, administered by HUD. Swords has a dedicated specialist that inputs metric information for that grant.

With regards to data tracking tools, Swords has a tool built on a wiki page that allows them to track how many referrals they have made to employers and how many actually resulted in a job. They also have Salesforce, which tracks program and donor data, as well as financial (budget-to-actual) data.

Swords to Plowshares completes all required tax filings and posts annual reports with financial statements on their website.

### How data are used for getting to impact

One example of how leadership uses the collected data is found in the housing program. Swords participates in the Rapid Results Boot Camp, which is a reoccurring meeting with members of the community, state and local government. This boot camp uses information gathered through the programs to collaborate on veterans' housing issues and identify action plans to address veterans' needs. One result of the needs identified in these areas was that Swords added a permanent housing program to address sustained needs after veterans left the transitional housing facilities.

Swords also makes use of satisfaction surveys, which are provided to the veterans. This open feedback loop provides them with areas of strengths and improvements for their programs.

### Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

While discussions with Swords' leadership made it clear that data are used in decision-making and to inform programming decisions, it was not apparent whether there was a formal program evaluation process in place. However, it is part of their three-year strategic plan to adapt existing programs to meet the needs of the veteran population that they serve, and to better incorporate data capture and use that data to inform programming decisions.

The strategic plan also mentions a goal to "improve the timeliness and increase the completion rate of annual performance evaluations," which indicates that Swords does have a formal performance management process. However, it was not readily apparent what metrics were used in evaluating staff

performance. Rather, Swords' leadership discussed the need to attract exceptional human capital by incentivizing its staff through flexible work arrangements, training stipends and other means.

### 3. Strategic Themes

#### Community Connectedness

Owing in part to its long history but also to its organizational capacity and leadership, Swords to Plowshares is not only thoroughly connected within its community but also regionally and nationally, not only as a participant but also as a leader.

The organization and its leaders have either founded or participate in a host of local, regional, or national consortia or organizations coordinating policy and action on behalf of veterans. Executive Director Michael Blecker is a founder of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, a convening body for the sharing of leading practices, research, and policy, where the senior leadership team regularly presents and attends. Swords is a founder of the California Association of Veteran Service Agencies, which coordinated successful lobbying efforts in support of Proposition 41, which reallocated \$600 million of state funding toward homeless veterans. Policy Director Amy Fairweather formerly served as the Program Director for the Coalition of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans, which was a knowledge sharing consortium of organizations serving veterans of those conflicts. Swords founded San Francisco Homes for Heroes, a collective decision-making group which works with landlords and private institutions to encourage them to rent to veterans with HUD-VASH vouchers and which is working on identifying the most vulnerable veterans and creating a vulnerability index. Swords served as one of the initial organizations in the local Continuum of Care (this is very rare for a veteran-serving organization), which is the non-veteran specific conduit through which HUD relates to all homeless-serving organizations in the city. Swords also participates in the VA's national 25 Cities Initiative, the department's effort to end veteran homelessness by 2015, in which each city, nonprofits, and the VA aggressively work to coordinate care and manage admission to the city's homelessness programs.

This collaboration does not stop with working groups and symposia, however. The Swords team has worked with the City of San Francisco, financial institutions, HUD, and the VA to develop transitional and permanent housing properties within their portfolio. The city will help them acquire properties under the understanding that they must use the facility to provide services to low income veterans. Their Otis Street development, made available through the city's surplus property initiative, was a \$30 million project with \$20 million funded through tax credits, \$10 million from redevelopment loans and city contributions, and only about \$500,000 raised by Swords. The roughly \$1 million in operating costs are mostly covered through revenue from residents' HUD VASH subsidies as well as the support services funding. This partnership between the city, HUD, the VA, and Swords made a \$30 million development a reality. Likewise, their Stanford Hotel property, which can house 130 veterans, was created through substantial financial commitment on behalf of the VA. Because of a strong relationship with Swords, the VA had surplus funding and approached Swords looking for a way to further invest in the community. A further example of this trust and experimentation is the soon-to-open Safe Haven property, which will allow veterans who are not yet substance-free to be housed under close case management in property managed by Swords. Without these community partnerships, cutting edge care would not be possible.

Finally, Swords' legal team serves as a model of community collaboration, as well. Participation in veterans courts in San Francisco and Alameda County facilitates treatment for justice involved veterans rather than immediate punitive action. A staff member from the housing and social services department visits jails, or a veterans' justice outreach coordinator from the jails will contact Swords to refer the veterans. Additionally, Swords has set up a legal clinic at the VA medical center. As Staff Attorney Katie Dwight explains, "A lot of people's health problems actually stem from things like poverty, homelessness, and things that can potentially be addressed by lawyers. Lawyers can potentially prevent a family from being evicted or help somebody get benefits, so they're not so impoverished." By marrying Swords' lawyers with the VA medical center, the two hope to improve veteran health outcomes.

At all levels—national, regional, and local—Swords to Plowshares' robust system of community connections and referrals provides support to the veterans they serve and even veterans they do not directly serve but influence. Over 40 years of history and reputation support this level of influence on the community and ability to partner on veterans' behalf, like no other organization studied in this effort.

### Independent Sector Involvement

While most of Swords to Plowshares' funding comes from government sources, Swords does partner with elements of the private and independent sectors such as major banks (JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo, Charles Schwab), corporations (Walmart, Prudential), and foundations (California Wellness Foundation, Zellerbach Family Foundation), both national and state-wide, for funding, as well. Having developed expertise in the policy and thought-leadership arenas, Swords has become a trusted agent for funders who neither have the time nor ability to select the most appropriate recipients for their funding. In response, these private sector and philanthropic organizations make large grants to Swords, which then re-grants the money to organizations across California, establishing communities of practice, including both in-person and virtual convening events to share best practices, lessons learned, etc.

Specific to the San Francisco community, the large technology firms in the Bay Area have begun establishing relationships with Swords through their veteran affinity groups. Veterans at these firms, such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Cisco, have begun participating in crowd-funding campaigns to support Swords and its initiatives. Additionally, through the Google Reach Program, Swords recently had two Google employees visit their offices for a week as volunteers to update Swords' communications platforms, Google Analytics, Google AdWords, and assist with search engine optimization. This partnership helped Swords assess their brand, web, and social media presence and instill tracking mechanisms to assess performance.

Finally, Swords' partnership with the San Francisco legal community is a major driver of the legal services department's ability to deliver services to veterans. The pro bono program has recruited nearly 100 attorneys who are interested in veterans' issues, and trained them to assist with benefits application and appeals, as well as discharge upgrades. This initiative has dramatically increased Swords' ability to scale one of its most difficult to fund programs, though significantly more resources are still needed. Additional legal support comes from the local law schools through internship programs, and Swords staff recruits for Skadden Fellows and Equal Justice Fellows, who receive funding to work at Swords for two years.

## Social Connectedness

Unique to any other organization studied, Swords to Plowshares has developed a suite of training services, known as Combat to Community, which is specifically tailored toward bridging the civilian-military divide by educating various segments of the community about the challenges and opportunities that veterans face when transitioning into society, as well as developing familiarity with veteran and military culture. Training audiences include physical, behavioral, and mental health care workers, social workers, police, first responders, court personnel, parole and probation officers, lawyers, judges, educators, the faith community, and employers. Some trainees are able to get continuing education credit for their participation, such as police officers, for whom the training is certified through the California Commission on Police Officers Standards and Training.

Training is tailored toward the audience. For example, police officers and first responders are taught to interact with veterans in crisis situations and to understand what to expect when interacting with a veteran who may be suffering from PTSD or TBI. During training for judges or other court officials, Swords serves in a policy leadership role, helping the court system understand antecedents of maladaptive veteran behavior and providing recommendations as to treatment or referral options. For lawyers, Swords has hosted formal trainings as well as informal events they nicknamed “Everything You Wanted To Ask Your Client But It Would Be Incredibly Inappropriate,” to help lawyers understand their clients better. Finally, Swords’ training for employers works to break down stigma surrounding disability and PTSD, explain military skillsets, encourage the establishment of veteran peer mentor groups, and highlight the business case for hiring veterans.

More broadly, Swords’ policy team serves alongside the executive leadership team as the public face of the organization, featured prominently at nationally-focused conferences and presenting similar content. Unique among organizations studied, Swords deliberately identifies and seeks to bridge the civilian-military divide at both the ground level through its small training sessions, as well as at the national level through its participation in national forums.

## Employment and Education

While the research team did not have an opportunity to speak directly to the employment team, Swords counts employment as one of its primary areas of focus. Swords has developed “Career Pathways”, a nationally acclaimed vocational training model which focuses on growing industries such as clean energy, green marketing, transportation, and healthcare, as well as other industries such as transportation, security, and industrial jobs. One of the more successful aspects of this model has been the development of cohort training, where Swords will identify an employer who needs a certain number of employees for a specific role. Swords will then rent training facilities, provide the necessary training, and the cohort is employed once complete, rather than having each member of the cohort who might be interested in that industry pursue training independently and seek employment independently. Likewise, this cohort model develops bonds among the participating veterans, supporting mental health outcomes due to peer-to-peer interactions fostered by the program. Additionally, as mentioned above, Swords also provides training to employers to demystify issues like PTSD and TBI and to highlight the business case for hiring veterans.

Swords sees employment as part of the continuum of veteran wellness among the services it provides – employment supports housing, which both support mental health (and vice versa), while legal services

support access to benefits which can provide both education and employment training, as well as access to housing and health care.

### Veteran Programming Differentiation

Swords' staff noted several differentiating factors among cohorts within their population of veterans served, most notably between post-9/11 veterans and older veterans (most of whom served in Vietnam). A primary, very practical, difference is the variance in career goals between age groups. The Swords team noted that younger veterans are much more interested in higher-technology jobs than their older peers, and that the employment team had to adjust their employment criteria and expand their employer base accordingly.

A less practical and more strategic difference, though, was the way in which staff needed to approach younger veterans – in both outreach and language. Younger veterans can be averse to programs that appear dominated by older veterans. One staff member described a scenario in which a young veteran walks into their waiting room, only to find it full of older men, and thinks to himself or herself, “this is not for me.” Likewise, when speaking to younger veterans about their situation, they are less comfortable with certain terms or labels. Policy Director Amy Fairweather stated that, “You don't ever want to say to a recently separated veteran, ‘Oh, so you're couch surfing? You're homeless?’ That's scary, and that's new, and they don't necessarily identify themselves as somebody who is homeless,” whereas an older veteran who has been on the streets for many years would be less upset by such terms.

Simply due to their age, older veterans have a unique set of concerns which must be accounted for when designing career, housing, and mental health services. Many older veterans begin to demonstrate signs of dementia, Alzheimer's, heart disease, and other age-related illnesses. These may also be correlated to or exacerbated by PTSD, and this must be taken into account when identifying job opportunities or searching for viable housing options. If attempting to place a veteran in permanent housing where they will reside for the rest of their life, that housing option must be able to accommodate the veteran's needs as their health deteriorates.

Regardless of age, Swords staff estimate that 80% of their population suffer from mental illness, PTSD, or substance use, and this presents a host of unique challenges as a sub-population to work with. This population is more difficult to serve due to their general lack of organization and unreliability with keeping appointments or their tendency to arrive without an appointment. Staff must possess great patience to work with this population, many of whom have rarely, if ever been listened to or helped since they became homeless and/or substance dependent. Staff Attorney Katie Dwight states that, “The fact is, they really want someone to listen to them. It's amazing how actively listening to someone has an amazing effect on somebody. Many, many times I've been told I'm the first person that ever listened to them, and I'm not exaggerating. People who are homeless, they just are not used to being listened to.”

A unique aspect of the veteran population, however, regardless of how severe the mental illness or substance dependency, is that each veteran experienced a time in their life when he or she was a productive member of society – their military service. One staff member noted that, “No matter how disorganized the vet has become, almost all of them can relate back to a time when they were part of a functioning organization. And there's an automatic pickup in the step when they get back together with other vets.” Not all those who receive social services can point to a moment when they wore a uniform

and had the respect of their peers, but veterans can; this is an asset to those serving them. Veterans belong to a brotherhood and a sisterhood and can be reminded of this no matter how isolated they currently feel. This is a clear differentiation from broader society – when a veteran falls, no matter how far – he or she can be reminded that at one point they stood tall, and for that they can be proud.

An additional differentiator highlighted regarding older veterans, but which may be applicable to younger veterans as well, is the migratory nature of this population. Executive Director Michael Blecker described the situation post-Vietnam: “If you weren’t there, it’s hard to really get that full sense of how divided this country was, how polarized they were...The divisions weren’t just in the big time culture or D.C.; it was actually with your father. You know, how close is that? That’s how close you’d get in your home. So, many veterans just took off. As you know, when you leave your home, a lot of times you leave your key networks behind, so you’re out there. Vets really ended up in places where they had no roots, and they never really got hold of what was going on. Again, there was a sense that there was nobody out there helping us.” While today, America is more unified in support of its veterans (if not unified in support of the operations they served in), this migratory pattern continues, leaving veterans cut off from social networks and often feeling alone and abandoned. It is perhaps a differentiator between veterans and broader segments served by social services that veterans expect a certain level of support, and then feel abandoned if that expectation is not met, whereas other segments may not perceive such an underlying social contract; though those seeking social services feeling isolated from society is likely not a differentiator, perhaps this feeling of betrayal by society is.

The final differentiator, then, is not about veterans but about those who serve them. As the veteran perhaps expects a social contract, those who serve veterans at Swords noted that the reason they do so is that very social contract. Whereas society may feel compelled to assist other segments of society – other homeless individuals, survivors of abuse, etc. – society has a moral and ethical obligation to serve veterans. As one staff member notes, “That’s not to say that people who are experiencing homelessness don’t deserve a home, because I think everybody deserves that human basic right. However, when you have a group of people that have said, if you need me, I will go, I think, you know, as a community, it’s our responsibility to be able to be there as the support system to welcome them back.” Society collectively made the decision to send these veterans to war and, therefore, society has a collective responsibility to heal the wounds of war.

### Women Veteran Efforts

Swords to Plowshares has identified that its women veteran clients are often difficult to serve for a number of reasons and has taken a series of steps throughout the past several years to improve this situation. This problem seemingly begins upon entry to the building – when walking in and seeing a room full of homeless men, the women often do not feel comfortable, so Swords has worked on new ways to welcome them into the building, such as establishing a separate waiting area, including a women’s hangout area with couches and books in the back of the building to make them feel more comfortable.

One challenge that presents itself as Swords provides women-specific weekend employment workshops for both unemployed and underemployed veterans is the need for childcare. When corporations donate space for the training they often do not allow children in the building due to liability reasons. This requires Swords to provide vouchers for off-site childcare. Additionally, the geographic dispersion of the women clients (greater than male clients) requires additional stipends for transportation to the training site.

When delivering legal services, Staff Attorney Katie Dwight estimates that women comprise roughly 10% of her clientele and that, “A huge percentage of them want to pursue claims based on military sexual trauma. That definitely requires a lot of sensitivity to that issue. Many times, they want to work with a female attorney, which works for us, because we have three. [But that requires] some knowledge of sexual assault, what the survivor of that might be going through, sensitivity to that.” Because of the range of isolating and highly sensitive issues like this which women veterans face, Swords would like to conduct retreats solely for women veterans to begin to foster community among the women, similar to the decades-old fraternal organizations that male veterans have long been a part of.

Though Swords to Plowshares wishes to have greater capacity to house women, they cannot afford to set aside a certain quota of units for them if the units are going to sit unused, so sometimes they simply do not have the capacity to house women in need. Situations like these can be partly resolved by Swords’ broader regional reach through re-granting and partnerships, as Swords has re-granted to a series of California Wellness Women Grantees and sought out organizations which serve battered women who may not know that they were also serving veterans. Through this process of providing funding and/or technical assistance to other organizations, Swords’ clients may receive case management from Swords, but housing from another organization. Alternatively, Swords may simply identify organizations where women veterans may be receiving services but may not have self-identified as veterans, and train these organizations to ask “have you ever served in the US Military?” Many of these organizations have been surprised to find that the number of positive responses have been very high and that the impact of Swords’ training has been accordingly significant.

While the challenges of serving women veterans are many, Swords to Plowshares continues to identify them and strive to identify solutions internally or partner to develop solutions externally.

## Media

Swords to Plowshares leverages a communications and marketing team to communicate the message of the organization as well as the broader message of the veterans it serves. Through social media, connections with local media outlets and reporters, and both web and print newsletters, Swords maintains contact with its varied web of stakeholders. In terms of messaging, the communications team uses their platform to convey the need for a continuum of care, explain the unique needs of veterans, or advocate for Swords’ legal program, which is traditionally difficult to fund and difficult for the public to understand the value of. When dealing with the media, the communications team attempts to walk a fine line between educating the public that veterans may have issues and therefore need support (and that first responders should enroll in the Combat to Community training), without creating a culture of fear and concern.

Where outreach to veterans who utilize Swords’ services is mostly accomplished through reputational strength, the communications department is primarily geared toward stakeholders, funders, other organizations, and the general public. That said, Swords does attempt to leverage its social media platform to reach the younger generation of veterans, though not as a service provider but rather as a thought leader, sharing articles and information about events, webinars, etc. Director of Communications Colleen Corliss explains: “We will share things about job fairs, local opportunities, job opportunities, fun things, fun events to attend, film screenings, book readings, anything to sort of create a community where we're

not just asking for something all the time, or sharing an article. We're getting you something useful, so that is a little bit different...We don't expect that our relationship to younger veterans in the community is going to be that we provide them services. We want them to come to our free events. We want them to go to a book reading. We want them to share information." This gives Swords access to a whole new segment of the veteran population they might not have otherwise reached with their services and helps bolster their position as a thought leader in the space.

### Reintegration with Family

Swords has traditionally served single veterans, and mostly single male veterans. With only 12 family units in their portfolio (at their Treasure Island property), Swords does not have the physical capacity to serve many families, though this is a problem common across homelessness services, as there are few shelters and housing developments dedicated to serving homeless women or families. In an effort to better serve families, Swords is partnering with the Hamilton Family Center through its \$2 million in SSVF surge funding to expand its family services. As the Hamilton Center is highly regarded (and been awarded by the National Alliance to End Homelessness), Swords is excited about the future of this partnership and its ability to serve veteran families.

### Transition to Civilian Life

As Swords' population largely faces significant barriers, such as mental health challenges, PTSD, substance abuse, and homelessness, Swords often does not see veterans until at least a few, if not several, years post-transition. Some of Swords' programming could be considered related to the initial transition from service member to veteran – employment assistance, for example, or assisting with discharge upgrades to get someone the benefits they did not receive at the point of transition – but on average, Swords sees veterans much further past the point of transition, by which point a series of support systems in their lives have already failed.

## 4. Key Learnings and Reflections

### Catalysts of Impact

One of the most distinguishing features of Swords to Plowshares, not only among the 25 organizations studied, but among organizations nationwide, is Swords' policy department which serves as a catalyst not only for thought leadership but also for advocacy across the veteran landscape. Since its inception, this department has proven the ability to shape the operating environment for both Swords and its clients at the strategic level, by shaping the national dialogue through prominent participation in symposia, publication of research, and by altering legislation and shifting hundreds of millions of dollars to the most needed causes (Proposition 41). Perhaps more importantly, Swords has also proven the ability to shift the landscape at the programmatic/tactical level, by changing the way police officers interact with veterans on the streets of San Francisco (Combat to Community), judges interact with veterans in the courtroom, and local HR managers interact with veterans across the interview table.

Through its policy team, Swords uses internal failure to not only identify problems within their own structures and processes, but also to look systemically to identify broader barriers to their success and drive future advocacy. Chief Operating Officer Leon Winston explains this process: "If you look at the failure loop at the bottom, one thing we looked at is saying what would happen if we stopped kicking vets to the curb who relapsed in transitional housing? Well, that's a failure loop so how do you address that

failure? What's the unmet need? What are the programmatic changes we need to do? What's the advocacy we need to do to get HUD to change the way it does business, to get the VA to change the way it does business to allow us to do what we see as necessary in that space?" Mr. Winston went on to describe an example of success in such advocacy: "Several years ago I asked, what would happen if we didn't discharge vets who relapsed? We can't have them using on the site and that sort of thing but what would happen? We're serving the most impaired, chronically homeless, chronically mentally ill, frail elderly, and we had the highest outcomes in the country. So among the highest, where you're over 80 percent in 2012 with a population, the VA's benchmark for success in their GPD program at that time was 60 percent. Since we presented on that, they've raised it to 80." While some in the veterans' field serve as advocates, and others serve as practitioners, Swords' ability to draw on decades of programmatic expertise to lend informed advocacy is truly distinguishing and can be cited as a hallmark of innovation in the veterans' services field.

This leadership extends past advocacy, however, into Swords' extensive participation in local coordinating bodies, detailed above. As founding members of organizations designed to foster collaboration across government, private, and nonprofit agencies throughout the Bay Area, Swords creates greater gains for the homeless veterans it serves. The results are often tangible in nature – including multiple real estate developments worth tens of millions of dollars, one of which tests the limits of the "housing first" policy by allowing active substance users into its walls. It is clear that Swords to Plowshares is part of the bedrock of the San Francisco veterans services community. When the VA or HUD needs a trusted partner to test a theory or take on a risky project, they turn to Swords. When community partners seek advice and an anchor for a coordinating agency, they turn to Swords. When local nonprofits need to refer a veteran to a partner organization, they turn to Swords. The trend is clear.

This strength is not solely built on a policy department and a network of community partners, however. Through Swords' decades of history, it has developed a continuum of mutually-supporting care systems which collectively can bring a veteran from the streets to society. Legal services can provide a discharge upgrade for a veteran who is ineligible for any services whatsoever, then help that veteran apply for VA disability compensation and/or healthcare, and assist with an appeal should one be necessary. Mental health services can begin to heal the psychological wounds of war and prepare the veteran for employment. Housing services provide the veteran shelter while these processes are taking place. Employment services get the now-employable veteran a living wage, hopefully to the point where he or she can leave transitional housing and live independently of any services. Some may not progress through this whole system, and may live in permanent housing until they die. Some may only need assistance with employment and never need mental health support or a place to sleep. But if they do, Swords has the ability to support these interrelated issues as they arise.

These foundations of impact make Swords a pillar within the San Francisco community and a known leader across the country – so much so that some have asked why they don't expand or "franchise." Swords' response is that every community is different, and their expertise is San Francisco. Their intense local focus has also contributed to their impact by preventing the leadership and staff from the distractions of "empire building," as the sole focus has been the improvement of their own community. It is clear they have found success.

## Barriers to Impact

Despite its many strengths, Swords faces a series of challenges which impede its ability to fully impact its target population, in part due to its changing operating environment. With the introduction of the major technology firms into the area, young, wealthy employees of Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other similar companies are flooding the San Francisco real estate market and driving prices up dramatically. This influx of young money has had the effect of gentrifying once low-income neighborhoods and pricing out the middle and lower classes in the city. Executive Director Michael Blecker explains the situation; “We are seeing our friends who are teachers in school, you know, ordinary workers can’t afford to pay; they couldn’t buy their place and they’re being chased out. Right now things are evolving so rapidly, so you don’t want it just to be a dumping ground for the real poor and just a playground for the real rich, you know, which is what it could become.” This also makes it increasingly difficult for Swords to acquire properties for transitional housing and to place veterans in low-income housing to use VASH vouchers.

As described above, the influence of the technology firms and other private sector funders, has also affected the way Swords has to track and report its operations, which it sees as too onerous a process. Accustomed to large amounts of data, new donors expect stricter metrics and reporting requirements than Swords has typically been held to, and this places an added burden on Swords’ staff, which they feel unreasonably takes them away from the ability to serve their veteran clients. While Swords appreciates the support and the altruistic desire of the young donors hoping to make change, they also believe the donors lack an understanding of the nonprofit environment and have unrealistic expectations.

Finally, and somewhat related to monitoring requirements on staff time, is the need to ensure that staff are adequately cared for. The business of caring for homeless veterans, and particularly those with mental health challenges, can be tiresome. Staff Attorney Katie Dwight explains: “I think for all of us, it can be draining to work with people who are in a really bad way. You want to be able to help them and you can’t always help them. They really want you to listen to their story. They really want to talk to you about their story. A lot of the job is listening, but that can get draining, too.” Multiple members of the leadership team cited the need for self-care as critical among their staff, and this is clearly a challenge in the work that they do. COO Leon Winston stated that to be an effective staff member, one must “have compassion for the veteran and also to take very good care of one’s self, and watch one’s own situation to make sure that you’re healthy enough to deliver the services so that you can help. You have to take care of yourself before you can help someone else.”

## Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

Looking ahead, Swords to Plowshares seeks to expand its support of women veterans and families through both its policy team and housing offerings, and to reach new audiences across a number of fronts. Policy Director Amy Fairweather stated that she would like to take what her team has learned from their women’s re-granting initiative and publish and present that work in public health venues rather than simply at veteran-related conferences. This seems to be a theme across Swords’ women veteran efforts – in addition to focusing on organizations which serve veterans, the team focuses on organizations which serve women and train these organizations about issues that the veteran women within their population may face. Additionally, the policy team would like to expand this and other community education programming to a broader behavioral health provider population, as well as more employers and police departments. Swords would also like to target primary care providers, to teach them about issues older veterans face such as Agent Orange and hairy cell leukemia, and younger veterans may face due to TBI,

like the potential for early-onset dementia. Finally, the team would like to work with the State of California to educate “health navigators” which help military families navigate the California Care system so that they can understand that the veteran may be eligible for VA care.

To further support women veterans and families, COO Leon Winston stated that he would like to develop a housing project which would house both of these communities. Acknowledging the problem of setting aside large swathes of housing for women veterans and the risk that it go unused, his hope is that a mixed-use community incorporating families would be fully utilized and would still make women veterans feel welcome and safe.

An additional innovative housing project, alluded to above, is the Safe Haven development. This 40 unit development in the Fairfax Hotel is an “ultra-low barrier to involvement” transitional housing program which will utilize “forced harm reduction” – meaning that sobriety will not be a barrier to housing. Wake staff will be present 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide nearly one-to-one case management services. This model is designed to get the hardest to treat individuals off the street, and is very costly (\$257/day, fully subsidized by the VA). The goal of this project is to stabilize the clients enough to transition them to other housing developments within the Swords portfolio. This kind of leading-edge project is experimental (and potentially controversial), but in the words of COO Leon Winston, “If they get clean and sober along the way, that’s great. If they don’t, we’re better off, they’re better off to have them using and off the street than we are to have them using and on the street.”

Finally, in an effort to overcome the barriers of increasing housing costs and the ever-present demands on the Executive Director’s time, the development staff has begun organizing “Jeffersonian Dinners” to bring together some of Swords’ wealthy supporters to build a community of individuals committed to ensuring that there remains a stock of affordable housing for Swords’ clients. Attendees of these dinners include real estate developers, financiers, bankers, members of other private institutions, and members of the technology sector as they are beginning to get more involved in the San Francisco philanthropic sector. Through these gatherings, Swords hopes to cultivate not only this community commitment, but the kind of major donors who can help finance additional housing developments to house their clients.