

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

*Case Study:*

*Veterans Leadership Program of  
Western Pennsylvania*



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



## VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA CASE STUDY

### 1. Organizational Overview

#### History

The Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania (VLPWPA or VLP) is a community-based organization in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Founded in 1982 by Vietnam veterans, the organization began as a job placement and training resource for fellow Vietnam veterans displaced by the changing local economy due to the loss of steel mill manufacturing. The group was originally called the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program.

Today the agency has grown into the Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania, an independent, community-centered, non-profit organization whose goal is to provide essential housing, employment, and other vital support services to veterans and their families, regardless of discharge status, to improve self-sufficiency, sustainability, and quality of life.

In the last seven years, the organization has doubled in size around its core mission of providing housing, employment and other assistance as needed under the leadership of Executive Director Al Mercer. In 2013, VLP enrolled 2,200 veterans in its programs directly, and made 6,400 referrals to community partners. Pittsburgh is unique in that there are no major military installations in the area. However, Pennsylvania has the fourth largest concentration of veterans in the U.S., and the eighth largest number of female veterans in the country. Allegheny County (where Pittsburgh is located) has the largest population of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in the state. In the past three years, VLP has seen a 30% increase each year in the demand for housing, employment, and support services. As a result, VLP now serves veterans in 18 counties of Southwestern Pennsylvania, in both rural and urban settings. A satellite office is located in Johnstown, PA.

#### Mission Statement

The mission of the Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania is “to provide essential housing, employment, and vital support services to eligible local Veterans, service members, and their families with the goal of improving their self-sufficiency, sustainability, and quality of life.”

#### Organizational Structure

VLPWPA is a 501(c)(3) incorporated nonprofit organization overseen by a Board of Directors which is comprised of 23 community leaders (including 15 veterans) from across all sectors of industry. The Board operates under an executive committee structure.

There are 40 full-time staff members; the Director of Operations supervises the areas of finance and program management while the Director of Resource Management supervises the areas of development, community relations, grants, and workforce development. The two directors and members of upper management report to the Executive Director, who is responsible for all of VLP operations, programs and services, and budget management. VLP has an informal preference to hire veterans and their family members as nearly half of the full-time staff are veterans. In addition to paid staff, VLP has a growing volunteer pool and plans to hire a volunteer coordinator.

## Programming

VLP provides services to all veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces, regardless of discharge status, as well as family members. VLP utilizes a case management model to assess each veteran's needs and matches those needs to an appropriate range of services. Case managers create a detailed plan of action to ensure that veterans in need have access to safe and affordable housing, viable employment matching their skills and experience, and connections to other essential services and community resources.

Under the umbrella of "Operation Back Home," VLP provides services in four core areas of need: housing, employment, prevention, and connection. Each of these core areas is seen as a mission of the organization. This section identifies and summarizes services provided by VLP, as described in their website and marketing materials.

### *Mission: Housing*

#### **Homelessness and Supportive Services**

Housing assistance is provided for emergency housing referrals; transitional and permanent housing; security deposits, rent and utility assistance; and referrals for apartments. Funding for this program is supported through a \$1.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, five grants totaling \$700,000 for both transitional and permanent housing through the Continuum of Care within Allegheny County, funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Housing Counseling Assistance Program, and a \$250,000 grant targeted to Project Journey, a program for homeless female veterans. Funding for Project Journey comes from the United Way of Allegheny County, Duquesne Light, and Newman's Own Foundation. VLP sees homelessness and employment as interdependent and, in addition to assisting with housing needs, the organization also receives funding for employment and training assistance, with the long-term goal of self-sufficiency, sustainability, and improved quality of life.

The intake process involves the veteran completing an individualized assessment. Housing case managers then provide one-on-one assistance in locating appropriate housing. The client is then referred to employment case managers who develop an employment plan. Employment may be deferred if the veteran is determined to need additional support services, such as mental health care, addiction counseling, or has ex-offender status and may need to attend Veterans Court.

### *Mission: Jobs*

#### **Employment/Education and Training Assistance**

VLP provides personalized employment counseling and guidance for job referrals, resume assistance,

workshops, and networking. Funding for this program comes from a \$300,000 Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. VLP serves all veterans, and particularly those with barriers to employment, such as criminal backgrounds or lack of transportation. Career-ready veterans are placed through VLP's Workforce Development Program. Clients have the opportunity to receive vocational counseling, resume preparation workshops, financial literacy training, and job fairs. VLP also provides support services for transportation and clothing.

*Mission: Prevent*

#### **Treatment and Prevention of Co-occurring Issues and/or Recidivism**

VLP provides referrals to other agencies for counseling services to address financial literacy and budgeting; alcohol, drug and other addictions; military sexual trauma; domestic violence, and mental health. They work with Allegheny and surrounding counties' Veterans Courts to help veterans avoid incarceration.

*Mission: Connect*

#### **Connection to Outside Resources**

VLP provides referrals for essential services including legal aid, Veterans Courts, food banks/food assistance, SSDI and SSI review, transportation vouchers, and VA benefit applications. Their office provides an updated book of job listings and Internet access for online job searches.

#### **Veteran Populations Served**

As noted above, Pittsburgh is unique in that there are no major military installations in the area. However, Pennsylvania has the fourth largest concentration of veterans in the U.S., and the eighth largest number of female veterans in the country. Allegheny County (where Pittsburgh is located) in Southwestern PA has 230,000 veterans and the largest population of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in the state. Of these 230,000, 23,000 (10%) live below the poverty level and 2,300 (1%) are at risk of being homeless. In the past three years, VLP has seen a 30% increase each year in the demand for housing, employment, and support services. As a result, VLP now serves veterans in 18 counties of Southwestern Pennsylvania in both rural and urban settings. A satellite office is located in Johnstown, PA. VLP serves veterans, regardless of eligibility or discharge status, and their families, including Vietnam-era, Gulf War and post-9/11 veterans. There is a growing trend of younger veterans seeking employment and education or training, as well as an increasing number of female veterans, veterans with families, veterans with mental illness, and veterans involved in the criminal justice system seeking services. As a whole, VLP accepts any veteran, regardless of discharge status – that is, some programs are agnostic as to discharge status, whereas other programs are restricted, excluding those with other-than-honorable discharges, due to their funding source.

#### **Funding Sources and Strategies**

VLP is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and provides all programs and services free of charge. The organization is involved in continuous efforts to raise funds at both the local and national level.

Federal grants provide 70% of VLP's revenue followed by 30% from public support and fundraising. Federal funds are provided through the U.S. Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Services for Veteran Families

(SSVF) Program, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Housing Counseling Assistance Program. The United Way of Allegheny County also provides a substantial amount of funding for housing services. Private corporations and philanthropic organizations include PNC Bank, BNY Mellon, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Highmark-Blue Cross/Blue Shield, The Heinz Endowments, and the Newman's Own Foundation. In 2013 VLP had a \$4.9 million operating budget, and received \$2.3 million in federal funds, with 11.25% overhead expenses. All funds stay in the Pittsburgh region to assist local veterans.

VLP is facing challenges with its governance in that the relatively new Board of Directors is seen by VLP leadership as being a bit disconnected, and is currently undergoing a transition of members – most critically the head of the finance committee. Further, according to Executive Director Al Mercer, there are challenges with board members' understanding of their roles and responsibilities, particularly regarding fundraising. VLP leadership would like to develop an advisory board with "influence and affluence," one that can connect with the local philanthropic community. The goal is for the board to provide strategic direction rather than direct oversight. VLP has engaged BoardWorks to assist with board education and development.

An additional challenge is that VLP leadership understands the importance of applying for grants but notes that grant writing takes time away from providing services and cannot currently devote any less time to its clientele. There are no immediate plans to hire a grant writer.

## 2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

### Types of Data Routinely Collected

As for all HUD and VA SSVF grantees, VLP uses the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to input data entry for clients served. Information collected provides a record of the client base and the numbers of veterans who have been placed in housing. The VA uses this information as a performance rating and monitoring tool for grant funding and auditing purposes. In addition, VLP uses data from their workforce development program to generate interest from employers and the community, and conducts employer satisfaction surveys to gauge the effectiveness of their job placements.

### Data Analysis and Reporting

As noted above, VLP is required to report certain data as part of their federally-funded grants. At the time of the GWBI site visit, enrollment through VLP's workforce development program totaled 192 with 115 job placements and 58 veterans in the interview pipeline or awaiting a job offer. Follow-up with successfully placed veterans occurs at one, three and six months, then at one and two years.

### How data are used for getting to impact

VLP uses data in a number of ways to demonstrate their impact on the veteran population they serve. Based on their enrollment and referrals in 2013, VLP calculated that the economic and social impact return on investment in providing permanent housing was \$2.4 million; the economic impact return on investment for prevention and employment was \$9.4 million. These are concrete numbers that put a clear dollar amount on the effectiveness of their services and can be used to influence funders. As Director of Operations Jesse Rodriguez noted:

"Look at the data from the Workforce Development program. That has generated

interest within the community, not only with the funders, but with partners and people who wish to employ the veterans, but also just the success of...it works. And this is how it works – we’re generating outreach opportunities. That data can’t be argued with. You can’t argue that that level of success is a bad thing, so that helps.”

Rodriguez added that:

“Within some of the housing programs, I think data is helpful when it drives decisions, so we often use the HUD benchmarks, because that’s the world we have to play in. And HUD making these benchmarks more and more strict does help, and you can see where clients end up. You know, for transitional housing, this benchmark says that 65 percent have to go to permanent housing. That’s a number that, whether you like it or not, that’s something you need to strive for. When you talk about the recidivism rate in the Veterans’ Court, that’s a monetary impact. I mean, not only does that help, but that’s a dollar amount that we can talk about. You know, Al [Mercer, Executive Director] could monetize what it cost to put somebody in jail, and now if we divert them from jail and put them in this program, it doesn’t cost that much. That gets people’s attention.”

However, leadership recognizes that they need to do a better job in disseminating this information, especially among funders and employers in the community.

#### Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

VLP does not conduct any formal internal evaluation of case management, and acknowledges that this is an area in which they need to be more focused. Michele Margittai, Director of Resource Development stated, “I don’t think we know how one case manager is working versus another. We know qualitatively and do client satisfaction surveys. Accreditation will help with that. Judge case managers by audit outcomes. We’re still figuring out the system; we have a finger on the pulse.”

Jesse Rodriguez, Director of Operations, who has a background in accounting, added that his metric is more like an audit check. The housing program managers who work with their individual team’s case managers are required to submit three completed case files per hour for review. Case notes are required following every intake. A main objective was ensuring that each case manager had an exit plan for the client, especially in a crisis situation. He admitted that the organization did not have a codified process but would like to develop tighter quality control.

VLP is currently pursuing accreditation through PANO (Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations) and COA (Council on Accreditation) and recognizes that accreditation will require more structured standard operating procedures and data collection. Leadership noted that this accreditation process was helping them focus more on internal evaluation, but that formalizing the evaluation process presented a drain on their resources. Michele Margittai noted, “Unlike a lot of veteran service organizations out there, yes, we’re 32 years old, but we still have a lot to learn, and there are big things going on out there, and we want to learn them. That’s where the resource issue does come into play.”

Finally, VLP has a fledgling volunteer program and has just hired a front-office volunteer coordinator. Volunteer hours will be tracked through eTapestry, a donor management software program.

### 3. Strategic Themes

#### Transition to Civilian Life

Housing and workforce case managers noted that the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) classes offered through the military often are not effective or efficient; separating personnel are focused on getting out of the service and not on transitional needs. According to Workforce Development Manager Kyle Steffen, VLP has made an effort to overcome this inefficiency: “One thing we’ve done to try to combat that is we’ve called every Army TAP class, we’re working on the other branches, to just ask, can you put our flyer for any veterans coming back to western Pennsylvania so they can get the employment assistance.” VLP has recently reached out to the Coast Guard requesting to share the same contact information about the organization. The long-term goal of providing this array of services is to prevent a crisis before it happens. Through this proactive approach, VLP seeks to ensure that their clients attain self-sufficiency and sustainability.

In order to facilitate successful transition, Resource Development Director Michele Margittai stated that VLP has adopted the attitude that, “We’re not a handout organization. We put as much work into you as you put into yourself. We develop responsibility/accountability among veterans.” She further noted that it is beneficial to have veterans on the staff who can understand their clients’ needs and difficulties they may be facing in making the transition to civilian life. VLP has a preference for hiring veterans because they understand the importance of making that connection with veterans seeking services. Currently 18 out of the 40 staff members are military veterans and the remainder are immediate or extended family members of veterans.

Director of Operations Jesse Rodriguez added that transitional needs often vary depending on the age of the veteran. For example, a Vietnam-era veteran may be seen three or four times over the course of five years due to a chronic condition or disability. Likewise, there are also veterans who are chronic users of the system. These are moved along a timeline as case manager’s work with them to establish achievable goals.

However, VLP often does not serve veterans at the point of transition, but rather facilitates a different transition into civilian life – a transition from life on the streets into “regular” civilian society, through the provision of housing and workforce development assistance. Through Operation Back Home, VLP designs services around the needs of each individual veteran, with housing being the first and most targeted service. After completing an application, a veteran is interviewed by one of the intake specialists who evaluates the veteran and triages depending on needs. If housing is required, the veteran is referred to one of the two internal program managers (each oversees either SSVF or HVRP funds) who review the case file and assign the veteran to one of the housing case managers. Once placed in a stable housing environment, the veteran is then assessed by a case manager for further needs, which usually include employment, but might also require referral to other social service agencies.

As previously noted, housing assistance is provided through one of the federally-funded emergency housing programs or private funding, as with the homeless female veteran housing program which is supported through the United Way and philanthropic donations. As a Continuum of Care funded organization, VLP has a strong presence in the housing arena. Working with ACTION-Housing, Inc., VLP has access to both transitional and permanent housing units. ACTION-Housing is a community-based

real estate development organization designed to address community housing needs that collaborates with community-based partners, such as local development corporations and supportive service providers. Using its federal funding, VLP is able to rent apartments from ACTION-Housing. A community member donated a house to ACTION-Housing with the preference that it be used for homeless veterans. The donated house was converted into six apartments and became the female veteran homeless housing unit called Project Journey, which opened in April of this year.

Once veterans are stabilized, they work with a housing case manager who focuses on financial literacy. Veterans are given a budget which serves two purposes: it is a way to begin a conversation about how to live within certain means, as well as introduce the idea of financial education. VLP conducts financial literacy classes at its offices, and also schedules meetings with Advantage Credit Counseling, a credit-counseling agency that conducts discussions on budgeting and how to repair bad personal credit.

VLP views housing and employment as working hand-in-hand. If special services are needed, case managers are able to make referrals to a number of providers in the community. Through its Mission Connect, VLP connects veterans with outside providers who can address needs such as healthcare, behavioral health issues, food banks, and VA benefits. VLP has recently received a grant from The United Way to fund a full-time benefits coordinator to assist veterans with not only their VA benefits, but SSDI and SSI benefits applications.

Additionally, VLP works with one of the most difficult veteran populations, those with ex-offender status, and this speaks to an entirely different transition that a certain cohort of veterans face – from life in jail to life as an ex-offender. The organization was instrumental in bringing the Veterans Court to Allegheny County in 2009. VLP has a Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator who serves on the treatment team as a mentor. Executive Director Al Mercer explained that the impact this has on the veteran population cannot be understated:

“Veterans Court has been a huge success for us. You can just look at the numbers we've done. In Allegheny County, 80 veterans in Veterans Court, so instead of sentencing DUIs and other minor crimes to jail, they get sentenced to treatment, and the recidivism rate at the Allegheny County jail is about 65%. Those that go through Veterans Court, it's a two-year program, but the recidivism rate is less than 10%, so it's working, and that's because they're being touched by other veterans...”

Finally, VLP sponsors targeted sessions and workshops onsite with partner organizations that focus on mental health, job readiness, and community involvement. Alcoholics Anonymous meetings are hosted in the VLP conference room.

### Employment and Education

Through its Mission Jobs initiative, Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania offers personalized services for homeless veterans, funded by a \$300,000 HVRP grant. It also serves veterans with barriers to employment, such as criminal records or lack of transportation, as well as job-ready veterans. Employment services cover all phases of the interview and hiring process. Clients have opportunities to participate in vocational counseling, resume preparation, workshops, and job fairs. Additionally, VLP offers informal referrals, assistance in networking, and post-placement follow-ups. Due to the declining/aging labor force in the region, veterans from other states are moving to the Pittsburgh



area and many of them have been successfully placed through the Workforce Development Program.

The Workforce Development Program places higher-performing, career-ready veterans and spouses with a goal of assisting the veteran find a career, not just a job. The program is funded in part by a \$400,000 grant from the R.K. Mellon Foundation. While the program places veterans with a broad spectrum of education levels, from a GED to doctoral level, the average client is a post-9/11 veteran with a bachelor's degree. On average, the veterans in this program apply for 10 jobs before being hired.

The Director of Resource Development, Michele Margittai, manages the program and sees this as a "sales" function of her job. Using an extensive network of local companies, the workforce program case managers are able to make direct referrals to hiring managers. Workforce developers stress the importance of making inroads with employers by making successful job placements, which opens the doors for future placements. Kyle Steffan, Workforce Development Manager noted that initially:

"What we've found the difficulty is, is having employers taking veterans seriously for senior level positions, even entry level management, and in veterans without degrees that have 15 or 20 years of military experience and really getting them to accept it. Now the big win that we've had is the veterans. They go in and they've done such a great job when we find that great job for them, so some of the employers that were a little more standoffish in the beginning have really come around once we've gotten one or two really good veterans in there."

Successfully placed veterans help to break down the barriers or resistance to hiring veterans. Steffan added:

"...the main thing is how hard the veterans work, what good employees they are, because when they go in, and that's something we talk with them about is you're not just representing yourself, you're representing every other veteran we're going to send here and that the employers, after we get one or two in, especially the ones that are a little more standoffish, they're just calling nonstop, I need a veteran, I need a veteran."

Case managers educate employers on the benefits of hiring veterans by holding job fairs and similar networking events. Kyle Steffan stressed the importance of getting the veterans in front of the employers to help break down barriers or resistance to hiring veterans. He and his two workforce developers work intensely with the veterans in tailoring their resumes to specific jobs, conducting mock interviews and taking other steps to ensure that each veteran is prepared for an interview, including access to appropriate clothing. Steffan notes that this approach leads to successful long-term job placement:

"We're not saying you should hire this person. We are saying they line up for the skills you're looking for, and what we've found is it gets the veterans in for a lot more interviews and they're much more successful because we've lined them up with the job. Instead of them throwing darts at the wall, they're actually in jobs that they want to be in. So our retention of our veterans is very high. The onboarding is very high. We're lowering overhead for companies on their onboarding."

Steffan uses his background in business to further make his point:

“And when we show this, you know, when I get old business, I have two business degrees, I’m not a case manager, I’m business-minded, and when we go we show return on investment, we show the value...I’m not going in saying I’m a nonprofit, I have my hand out. I’m going in and saying work with me and I will make you money. And it’s really worked well for us. We’ve seen a great return on investment for businesses.”

Successfully placed veterans become a recruiting tool by sharing with other veterans their experience and job placement through VLP. Steffan encourages employers to develop mentoring opportunities for veterans once the veteran is successfully placed to ensure long-term sustainability in the job. At the time of the GWBI team visit, 192 veterans had been enrolled in the Workforce Development Program and 115 had been successfully placed in both white collar and blue collar jobs. Five veterans had received assistance in applying to graduate school, and 58 were currently interviewing or awaiting job offers. The majority of placements for Steffan’s team are in the oil and gas and healthcare industries.

On the other end of the spectrum are the veterans facing multiple barriers, including homelessness, addiction, and ex-offender status. These clients also tend to be older with the average age of 40-42 and with lower levels of education. Senior HVRP Career Advisor Karen Payne estimated that approximately 80% of her clients suffered from post-traumatic stress. Employers typically will only extend entry-level or temporary placement to this population. VLP works with local community colleges, training centers and PA Career Link programs to provide job training and educational opportunities, particularly for veterans in this population. Kyle Steffan noted:

“...we’ve connected with I believe every single college in Allegheny County and a lot in the surrounding to include community colleges, training centers, the career links because they can provide some free training, so we have a veteran with the GI Bill, we really push veterans to get more education, whether it’s technical or if they have no education, I mean, if they don’t want to, that’s their choice and we help them find the best employment, but no, we really encourage them to get continual training where it’s going to be a really good job into a career.”

Veterans who participate in the job training programs belong to a Job Club, during which they share what they have learned from the program and talk about the type of job they are looking for. Payne noted that many of her clients never had a resume so she works with them from the ground up to build a resume and educate them on the realities of what job opportunities will be available to them. For some of these veterans looking for a \$20/hour job, this requires a lowering of expectations in terms of salary. As a social worker with 37 years of experience, Payne relies on an extensive local network of employers when seeking to place a client. She noted that transportation is a major barrier for the clients she serves. A local funder supports the purchase of bus passes, a valuable resource for veterans just getting back into the job market. Jobs in the oil and gas industry – some of the highest paying in the region – are located outside of the city limits, making it difficult for VLP’s clients to reach them.

The two employment programs work together, however, when employer needs overlap. Kyle Steffan stated:

“One thing we’ve found is that there’s synergy between the two programs. There’s different requirements but if, Lowe’s for example, it’s a great example. If I connect with Lowe’s and I’m looking at sales managerial type jobs, well, then they say, hey, we’re really looking for people in the warehouse, so I’m able to kick that [to Karen’s program].”

Ben Stahl, a housing case manager, added that once a veteran has stable housing and is placed in a job, the objective is consistent follow-up to ensure long-term stability and sustainability. Typical follow-up with veteran clients occurs at one, two and three months post-service, then one and two years. However, many veterans are so pleased with the relationships they formed with VLP that they continue to stay in touch much longer than two years.

### Independent Sector Involvement

VLP collaborates with many local resources and community organizations to holistically serve the needs of veterans through its individualized case management and referral approach. Larger community service providers include The United Way of Allegheny County and ACTION-Housing, two organizations that together support VLP’s female veterans housing unit, Project Journey. ACTION-Housing also provides access to transitional and permanent housing units for VLP clients. The Salvation Army and Burlington Coat Factory donate appropriate clothing for veterans seeking employment. Additionally, VLP partners with the Pennsylvania Legal Assistance Network, which provides free legal assistance to low-income residents of the state.

Another community partnership was formed with BNY Mellon (Bank of New York Mellon), an investment bank with offices in Pittsburgh. Through its “Boots to Business Webinar” VLP collaborated with BNY Mellon employees and students who are fellow veterans to participate in an informational session to present insight into preparing for the transition from a military to civilian career, while learning about internship and full-time careers at BNY Mellon.

As noted, community colleges and training centers provide career counseling, job training and resume writing workshops. Workforce Development Manager Kyle Steffan participates in local university and college job fairs. VLP hosted a veteran entrepreneurship workshop sponsored by The Duquesne Small Business Development Center. The Workforce Development Program, which started in January of this year, is cultivating relationships with a number of local businesses who are becoming repeat employers for VLP’s clients, including PNC Bank, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and Highmark Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Philanthropic organizations supporting VLP include the R.K. Mellon Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and the Pittsburgh Pirates. VLP has both informal and formal relationships with these partners.

### Social Connectedness

VLP has a longstanding history within the Pittsburgh community based on its longevity in the military support organization space. With 32 years of experience, they have established connections within the provider network that serve to bridge the civilian-military divide. Each component of their overall mission (housing, jobs, prevent, and connect) serves to address and bridge the civilian-military divide.

For example, VLP was asked to work with the United Way’s 2-1-1 call center to train the call center staff in how to talk to veterans and to provide insight into how better to serve veterans in the community.

Alternatively, the organization brings in service providers to train their own internal staff so that there is an understanding of what happens to veterans when they are handed off to a referral organization. In this way, VLP staff connects with external service providers to ensure that veterans receive the help that they need.

Development Director Michele Margittai noted that “There is a big misperception in the social services field that ‘I serve people who are homeless, I can serve veterans.’” VLP saw the need to clarify this approach and planned a symposium for 250 nonprofits in April of 2013 “to really help them to understand that that attitude will alienate and disenfranchise veterans from coming into your door.” She went on to note the importance of having veterans on staff who can better understand the needs of fellow veterans.

The organization’s leadership team, primarily Executive Director Al Mercer and Director of Resource Development Michele Margittai, sit on various committees within Allegheny County that address veteran service initiatives, such as employment. Michele Margittai sees employment as addressing both the core needs of jobs and prevention, stating that they “believe our veterans are incredible resources to our community” and look to communicate that message through their stated mission. They believe that the quicker a veteran is successfully engaged through transition to civilian life reduces the chance of crisis, such as homelessness or unemployment.

Through their volunteer activities, VLP addresses the civilian/military divide, particularly through Project Journey. Volunteers “adopt” an apartment in the six-unit building, decorating the unit and providing linens in preparation for each new resident. Other examples of VLP’s social connection to the community include sponsoring the annual Stand Down event, an annual golf tournament, and Veteran’s Day Breakfast hosted by Duquesne University.

Past events designed to bridge the civilian/military divide have included Military Appreciation Night at PNC Park, where 10,000 free tickets were distributed to veterans and active service members for a Pirates-Cubs baseball game. Following the game, an auction of Pirates’ autographed jerseys was held, with proceeds benefiting Pirates Charities and Operation Troop Appreciation, VLPWA, and the Wounded Warrior Project. Other community-based fundraising events have included “A Tribute to Veterans” at the Carnegie Museum Music Hall, a Memorial Day Benefit at a local yoga studio, and PittsburghGives.org Day of Giving.

VLP also bridges this divide through their day-to-day work. Kyle Steffan, Director of the Workforce Development Program does so by educating employers on the benefits of hiring veterans based on their work ethic and retention value. He does this taking a business-minded approach – by placing veterans he has already screened and vetted, a company saves money in its own onboarding costs. To further enhance the social connection to employers, the Workforce Development Program hosts events where employer military recruiters speak directly to VLP clients, coordinates focus groups for employers, and develops mentoring opportunities for veterans and employees in the region’s workforce.

Steffan’s work to bridge the divide goes both ways, however, as he noted that he often has to coach veterans about inappropriate behaviors in the civilian world:

“Lastly it’s just the professional demeanor. That’s something we work with every

veteran whether it's from their email address being marinekillerof5 or — we see a lot of that. You know, and it's funny but we see it in probably one out of three veterans, we have to say, hey, this is not a professional email address. It's the really little things or it's a Sergeant Major who speaks too loud because that's what they're used to. It's these just the little things that we find that really help them.”

Finally, the development director conducts outreach and speaking engagements to educate the community on the organization's mission. Margittai captured the spirit of the need to bridge the civilian-military divide when she said that “Truly, I mean, part of what makes our organization, I think, very unique is we believe in the civilian and veteran working together.”

### Veteran Programming Differentiation

With its primary focus of housing and employment, VLP serves many at-risk veterans facing barriers such as homelessness, addiction, and ex-offender status, though it does not differentiate its programming among specific cohorts (age, disability status, etc.) within the veteran community aside from its unique program for women. VLP recognizes each veteran as an individual with unique needs that are treated in a personalized manner. The case management model, which identifies the history and current needs of each veteran and generates a plan for meeting those needs, is key to the organization's success. Homelessness and employment are viewed as interdependent, and the first step in assisting a homeless veteran is providing transitional housing, followed by whatever additional services may be required. VLP works with the local Veterans Court to help prevent veterans from becoming incarcerated. Targeted sessions and workshops held by VLP staff and partner organizations focus on mental health, job readiness, and community involvement.

That said, VLP has identified unique characteristics among the varied settings where VLP operates. Pittsburgh is a small city and has the highest concentration of veterans, however, VLP serves 17 mostly rural counties in Southwestern Pennsylvania, and this creates challenges in terms of available services, particularly in emergency housing. This region is distinctive from the rest of the state due in part to its geography: it encompasses part of the Appalachian Mountains, includes heavily forested hills and valleys in the Allegheny Plateau, and is surrounded by multiple rivers. Housing program managers have discovered homeless veteran encampments in the woods and found veterans living in caves. The logistics of reaching veterans living in such remote areas, and then finding available services, continues to be a challenge.

One of the greatest challenges faced by the housing case managers is serving these veteran populations living in rural communities. Housing Program Manager Judy Hickey noted that access and acceptability are barriers that she faces when trying to service this population: “We are having to go in and create inroads into areas that — you have communities that are very tight, you know, and, [what we hear is] “We want to take care of our own.” Hickey works with the County Office of Veterans Affairs, local VFWs and American Legions to get the word out about VLP and its housing assistance programs. Additional barriers to servicing this population are transportation, childcare and access to other service providers, especially homeless shelters that may be miles away from rural locations.

Finally, Project Journey is a housing program specifically designed to meet the needs of female veterans and female veterans with children, described below.

## Women Veteran Efforts

VLP has undertaken a clearly differentiated approach to women veterans' needs, as Jesse Rodriguez stated:

“When women veterans started coming to our door and we realized that we weren't quite equipped to give them the best services, what we decided to do was establish programming around that and provide them the best services.”

To that end, VLP has hired a full-time women's benefits coordinator whose job is to deal exclusively with the needs of female veterans and female veterans with families in need of housing. The women's benefits coordinator oversees management of Project Journey, a housing program developed by VLP which is designed specifically for female veterans and female veterans with children. The need for this program became evident when temporary housing and shelters in the area were not able to accommodate the demand for services. Typically, shelters will not allow teen-aged boys to accompany their mothers into a female shelter. This caused the painful breakup of families, or in some cases, the families refused to be separated, preferring to remain homeless. Project Journey provides housing for all children, allowing entire families to remain intact. Funded primarily through the United Way of Allegheny County, Project Journey provides temporary housing from 30 to 90 days in a six-unit apartment building. VLP works with ACTION Housing, a local community-based organization dedicated to providing affordable housing to vulnerable populations, to successfully transition veterans from the Project Journey apartment into permanent living quarters. The women's benefits coordinator manages all aspects of Project Journey and carries a caseload of 25 female veterans at any one time. Additionally, the benefits coordinator has become an in-house expert on community resources available to women veterans and supports the other case managers who may need referrals for services specific to the needs of female veterans. In this role, the benefits coordinator directly served 225 female veterans last year through both her own personal caseload and in support of other VLP case managers.

## Media

As previously noted, VLP continues to expand its use of social media, and has a community relations associate who routinely updates and monitors their Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn accounts. The organization uses Google Analytics to track website activity and had, at the time of the GWBI team visit, recorded almost 48,000 page views in the last eight months, 68% of which were new visits. The website includes an application for services and links to other emergency services available in the area.

VLP receives four to six mentions per month in traditional print media. A popular radio drive-time program promotes VLP as a resource for employers through its “Employment after Deployment,” feature which airs every Monday. The pre-taped interview features a veteran seeking employment through the Workforce Development Program. The public response has been very positive and has resulted in VLP receiving calls from employers seeking to hire veterans. Additionally, a monthly e-letter is sent to 1,100 readers.

VLP does not have an advertising budget and is seeking to revise its brand. As the development director noted, the name of the organization does not communicate clearly what VLP is or does. To many it sounds like a recruiting/leadership program. Rebranding represents a challenge because VLP already has name recognition within some organizations and changing the image will make it appear that they are a “new kid on the block.” There has also been opposition to changing the name and logo from some of the

founders. This has created a challenge to remain respectful of the founders' experience, while updating the current image to become more contemporary and still be seen as relevant.

### Community Connectedness

Executive Director Al Mercer points out that the organization doubled in size in the last seven years around its core mission, and that this would not have been possible without making great strides in partnering with community providers. As previously noted, VLP made 6,400 referrals to outside providers in 2013.

Community partnerships have been formed with the United Way including its 2-1-1 service, a local call center that provides referrals to providers for individuals seeking a variety of social services, such as housing, employment, addiction counseling, etc. As previously mentioned, VLP staff helped train 2-1-1 call operators in how to speak to a veteran. VLP receives referrals from the call center for veterans seeking assistance with housing and employment, among other services.

VLP partners with the Neighborhood Legal Services Association, which provides free legal assistance to low-income residents of the state. In addition, VLP partners with area Veterans Courts, which assist veterans charged with non-violent crimes who, because of addiction or mental illness come in contact with the criminal justice system. Participants working through the Veterans Courts system receive support and guidance from a treatment team, including veteran mentors, many of whom are VLP volunteers.

VLP is also connected with the area VA, although that relationship has been somewhat challenging in recent months due in part to the removal of the local director. Due to time constraints, VLP case managers were not able to assist veterans with registering for their VA benefits, but leadership saw a need for a benefits coordinator and recently received funding from the United Way to hire someone to fill this need. The benefits coordinator, who is SOAR trained (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery), provides benefits information and assistance with application completion for veterans seeking benefits under the VA, SSI or SSDI. According to Jesse Rodriguez, this was needed:

“So that the clients walking in the door can get their benefits faster...This individual is going to be able to liaise a little bit better...Again, I think this is an example of what we've established this is a need. We understand that our veterans need the services, so why don't we go out and get the funding for it so that we can hire an individual that can fill this gap?”

VLP has a history of working with mentally ill clients and relies heavily on referrals to community mental health organizations, such as the VA, Emergency Behavioral Health, and Western Psych. Jesse Rodriguez noted:

“More importantly, that's one of our biggest referral areas. We're not everything to everybody...We try to do that outside of the agency. We don't have an MSW or we don't have anything like that on staff. We're very aware that this is an area we try to partner with the community in and create strong partnerships.”

Other healthcare providers that VLP partners with include Healthcare for the Homeless, which supplies

health care and social services to the homeless by coordinating with other community health providers and social service agencies. A representative from Healthcare for the Homeless visits VLP on a weekly basis enabling case managers to schedule meetings with their clients who are in need of healthcare services.

### Reintegration with Family

Family reintegration is an underlying theme of all the services offered by VLP's holistic approach. VLP recognizes the need to first stabilize veterans who are unemployed, homeless, or both. Many arrive with numerous obstacles which may have forced them to separate from their families, or contributed to a dysfunctional family environment. VLP works to place homeless veterans in stabilized housing as a means of keeping families together. They do this primarily by providing rent in subsidized transitional apartments; many veterans stabilize in 90 days and then move on to permanent housing, but those with multiple children may stay longer in transitional housing. Project Journey is an emergency housing program for female veterans with children. Using a donated house, VLP created a six-unit apartment building to house female veterans, who typically stay 30-90 days. There are currently five to seven female veterans on a waiting list for one of the apartments. There are plans to expand this project to include male veterans with children. By putting housing first, VLP makes every effort to keep veterans and their families together.

## 4. Key Learnings and Reflections

### Catalysts of Impact

VLP is one of the older community-based nonprofit organizations in the country that serves disadvantaged veterans and their families, having been started in 1982 by Vietnam veterans. The organization has seen significant growth in the last seven years, doubling its client base in a very short time period. Broadly, VLP serves all veterans and their families, regardless of eligibility or discharge status (though certain grant-funded programs pose restrictions), free of charge. Many staff members are also veterans, and their passion and commitment in serving veterans in need is evident.

One of the unique insights provided by VLP is its calculation of the return on investment, which enables them to monetize the cost of putting a homeless veteran in housing and finding them full-time employment. For example, based on annual calculations, Executive Director Al Mercer can quantify that putting homeless veterans in permanent housing saves \$2.4 million versus incurring acute homeless housing care costs. VLP has determined that through their job placement services, they have generated \$9.4 million worth of income from veterans placed in jobs. These are annualized results and illustrate in a very powerful way the economic value of service organizations such as VLP. This data can be an important tool to use when reporting to funders and seeking to develop new financial resources.

### Barriers to Impact

VLP utilizes a case management approach which is fundamental to serving veterans and families and a class-leading practice across similar organizations. However, leadership acknowledges that this approach is at times inconsistently applied due to its informal quality control. Leadership also understands the need to better integrate the coordination of services between the employment case managers and housing program case managers. Leadership recognizes the need for more quantitative evaluation methods of its case management team, and believes this will be addressed through the accreditation process. They would like to develop standard operating procedures for their case



management model.

As with most providers in the military service organization space, funding is always a barrier as more and more providers compete for dwindling funds. VLP's Board of Directors is going through a period of transition, and leadership admits to being challenged with having to educate board members in understanding their roles and responsibilities, particularly in terms of fundraising. They recognize the need for board members with dependable connections to the philanthropic community. Further, they struggle with the issue of getting people of prominence with military backgrounds to serve on boards of nonprofit military service organizations, and see this as an obstacle to bridging the military/military divide.

At times, VLP operates with what could be perceived as inefficient pockets of service provision, choosing to hire internally versus leveraging resources available in the community. For example, Allegheny County has a veterans' service agency responsible for providing veterans with benefits counseling services. VLP saw this agency as being largely inefficient in its ability to deliver services, so rather than partner with it, VLP decided to hire their own benefits coordinator, replicating an existing service they felt was inadequate. Additionally, VLP leadership admits to experiencing difficulty in making inroads with the local government.

Finally, VLP is exploring ways to rebrand in order to expand community awareness and increase its appeal to younger veterans. At the same time, it is challenged to create a new image without losing its already established reputation within the community.

### Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

To meet the increasing demands of a growing veteran population, VLP has created a strategic plan to address staff capacity and development, board development, accreditation, rebranding, and the need to diversify revenue streams. There are plans to move into a larger facility in the coming months in order to accommodate their growing number of staff members.

Certain strengths of the organization, as it operates today, do stand out and include:

- *Multifaceted approach:* VLP focuses on housing, employment, connection, and prevention. Once contact with a veteran is made, interventions begin as early as possible, beginning with the most serious, which is usually housing. Case managers then work with the veteran to create an achievable plan with a reasonable timeline in order to reach their goal.
- *Flexibility of program design:* VLP allows for flexibility in its case management approach to individualize or extend treatment on an as-needed basis. For example, transitional housing is typically provided for 30 days but can be extended to 90 days, especially when veterans with families are involved.
- *Active Media Outreach:* VLP receives regular coverage in both traditional print media and radio. It has an active social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, as well as an accessible website. A community outreach manager tracks Internet activity on its website and continually updates its social media accounts. The director of development is routinely called on to present workshops and conduct speaking engagements within the community.