

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

Case Study:

*Westchester Community
Opportunity Program, Inc.*



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.



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WESTCOP CASE STUDY

1. Organizational Overview

History

Chartered in 1965, the Westchester Community Opportunity Program, Inc. (WestCOP) receives more than 60 grants from corporations, government, foundations and individuals to sponsor numerous programs essential to the wellbeing of the community's residents. The organization's genesis followed on the heels of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty in 1964. Created as a community action association in 1965, the organization has, according to WestCOP CEO, "Been on the front lines fighting for those who are disenfranchised, dislocated, otherwise affected, marginalized, and even oppressed. We run programs. We call it from the womb to the tomb." In November 2014, WestCOP celebrated its 49th year, marking nearly a half a century of service to the low-income and at-risk community.

WestCOP is based in the City of Elmsford, located in Westchester County, New York. At the center of the agency's operations are its community services centers (CAPs) which serve as advocates for the poor and minorities by helping to influence the larger community's allocation of resources. It is WestCOP's intent to assist individuals from poverty to self-sufficiency by serving as a prominent voice through the dissemination of senior services, victim's support, early childhood education, housing support and other related services.

Although WestCOP primarily functions as a community service agency, its commitment and service to the veteran population is significant. A deep understanding of the challenges and obstacles faced by returning military veterans and their families is evidenced in the broad base of services and supportive systems offered by the organization.

A critical component of the broad array of services offered by WestCOP is its Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, funded by the US Department of Veterans Affairs. Recognizing a critical need to improve services to better assist local veterans, WestCOP decided to apply for SSVF program funding in 2011. The goal of SSVF is to help veteran families who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness quickly regain stability in permanent housing after experiencing a housing crisis. The initial process had its start when the organization witnessed returning OEF/OIF veterans who were experiencing housing issues. While preparing applications for the Homeless Persons Representation Project (HPRP), WestCOP was dissatisfied with the services veterans were receiving. It reached out to a local organization, The Bridge Fund, asking, "What can be done for this particular customer?" A period of extensive research, analysis and needs assessment ensued, thus identifying the percentage of those impoverished or at-risk in the

community. Subsequent meetings with the Board of Directors and Executive Staff led to the creation of a 3-4 year strategy and the design for SSVF. With \$936,000 in funding in 2013, an outreach plan was developed to reach 800 of 1000 identified military veterans in the Hudson River Valley. This included acquiring space and the hiring of staff, as well as the creation of marketing materials. SSVF emerged as the base for veteran services and is still expanding, with an increase in funding to \$1.9M in 2014.

Mission Statement

WestCOP's mission is to mobilize and effectively manage resources that will help the low-income and at-risk populations of Westchester, Putnam, and Rockland Counties become more self-sufficient.

Organizational Structure

WestCOP is a private not-for-profit, multipurpose social service agency operating community programs to combat poverty and its adverse effects in Westchester and surrounding counties. The organization is exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. The organization is also classified as a public charity under sections 509 (a)(1) and 170(b)(1)(A)(v) of the Internal Revenue Code.

WestCOP's resources are leveraged and most locations provide multi-level services including day care and Head Start centers, Community Action Programs (CAPs), family living programs, homelessness prevention and assistance programs, emergency food pantries, surplus food distribution, energy conservation, weatherization programs and numerous employment and training programs. A single-minded focus on the mission, and a passion for serving the disadvantaged characterize this organization.

The main office of WestCOP, centrally located in Westchester County, is served by a staff of 40-50 employees who manage the complex administration for more than 70 programs operating under its auspices. More than 570 employees, supplemented by a team of dedicated volunteers serving the greater region, are employed by the agency. A 27-member Board of Directors, primarily composed of concerned members of the community with representation from government, civic leaders, business, and residents, guides WestCOP's strategic mission and goals. The Board consists of three committees: the finance committee, fund development committee, and the executive committee. The CEO, reporting directly to the Board of Directors, is the main contact with the Board. A positive relationship has been forged between the new CEO and the Board, in addition to a renewed strategic and financial focus. Five program directors, including those for Head Start, SSVF, Weatherization, Foster Grandparents, and Victim's Assistance Services, report directly to the CEO, in addition to the CFO, Human Resources, and Contract Compliance. Senior and junior level staff support these primary functions constituting the WestCOP organizational structure. The SSVF Program Manager sits at both the executive and senior staff table, and engages in regular "open door "conferences with the CEO and Deputy. He states that, "I'm constantly part of the process in terms of any change or shift that's going to happen in the organization." Together, the employees of WestCOP and members of the Board of Directors are dedicated to the population they serve, marking the 49th year of service to low-income populations in the community.

Strategically located in a small office in Orange County, New York, the SSVF program serves a large territory consisting of four counties: Ulster, Dutchess, Sullivan and Orange. Led by the SSVF Program Manager, the primary SSVF Team includes two direct reports – a Tier 2 manager, and one peer specialist. Given the rural population it serves, an extensive outreach effort is an important consideration for the program. SSVF Tier 2 Manager Linda McNiff remarks, "We have an internal goal of reaching a minimum

of ten new locations or contacts per month from our office." Daily meetings and collective brainstorming support this effort and position the SSVF team to be closely involved with each client. McNiff continues, "We put a case on the table and we discuss what is best for this household, for this veteran." This compelling philosophy drives the SSVF team to provide the best possible support for the veteran.

Programming

An extensive list of services administered by a committed and professional staff provides the core of support for local residents and veterans in the 7-county region. Through a regular strategic planning process, the organization consistently reviews the needs of the community in their target area of operations, which includes serving both the community and specifically the veteran, in order to properly tailor their services. WestCOP's primary objective is to offer high quality products and services for its thousands of customers to move from poverty to self-sufficiency. "We're here to help you be the voice that you need to be, to help you move things forward anyway we can," stated WestCOP CEO John Savage.

Supportive services are designed to help both low-income veteran families and single veterans who are currently homeless or facing the housing crisis in the Hudson Valley of New York State, which includes Westchester, Rockland, Putnam, Dutchess, Orange, Ulster and Sullivan counties. Community Action Programs (CAPS) help the poor and minorities to meet their needs, providing direct services to individuals who have nowhere else to turn. Twenty-two Early Childhood Programs (Head Start and Early Head Start centers) serve almost two thousand income-eligible children and families in Westchester and Putnam Counties. These centers provide comprehensive child development services for children from birth to five years, with a sole focus on promoting social competence and school readiness for each child. The Victims Assistance Services provides immediate support and free, comprehensive and compassionate services to crime victims and their families, friends and loved ones. VAS also works to end violence through community action, public policy and culture change, and through prevention education programs in schools and in other community venues. WestCOP's Foster Grandparent Program provides volunteer opportunities to low-income senior citizens. This program places eligible seniors in academic settings to work with young people throughout the six counties of Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess, Sullivan, Ulster and Orange.

The SSVF Program is part of the VA's nationwide initiative to end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015; the goal of SSVF is to promote housing stability among very low-income veteran families who reside in or are transitioning to permanent housing. In terms of serving the veteran through the SSVF program, WestCOP describes itself as the "professional navigator providing the links to those professional clinicians to provide the ongoing stability for veteran housing, because there are so many complex components." The program is designed to assist veterans in two separate populations: those who are at imminent risk and those who are literally homeless. Services to Category One, those at imminent risk, are referred to as homelessness prevention. The primary focus of the grant is the targeted population of Categories Two and Three, those who are literally homeless, those recently homeless and those chronically homeless. The SSVF grant is divided so that 60 percent assists the literally homeless and 40 percent goes to homelessness prevention. WestCOP monitors veteran eligibility across the 7-county area. WestCOP's at-risk target populations are approximately 30 percent Area Median Income (AMI) with dependents, 60 percent who are at least 30 percent AMI or lower, and 20 percent OEF/OIF. The 30 percent population is WestCOP's stated preference. If a veteran is over that income, they are ineligible to receive benefits. WestCOP asserts, "The poorer you are, the more at-risk you are. The more at-risk you are, the more we can provide".

To date, WestCOP has screened 555 households, enrolled 289 and is heading towards reaching their goal of serving 400 households.

Veteran Populations Served

WestCOP serves any individual who has served in the military at least one active day and who was discharged under conditions other than dishonorable, or a member of a family in which the head of household or the spouse of the head of household has done so. Veterans who served in Vietnam comprise the largest cohort assisted by WestCOP, while post-9/11 veterans and veterans of Operation Desert Storm, other conflicts, and peacetime veterans also comprise a minority of those served.

Funding Sources and Strategies

Fundraising at the macro level is critical for WestCOP. The quest for unrestricted funds is an ongoing challenge, as WestCOP believes that it cannot provide viable services to the community if it is not fiscally sound. Currently, 89% of dollars are dedicated to service provision, and 11% support administrative operations.

In 2012, WestCOP received over thirty million dollars in funding from government, private, and commercial sources throughout Westchester and Putnam Counties. The Head Start budget comprises approximately two-thirds of the budget, as it is the largest program. SSVF funding has doubled since 2013 from approximately \$936,000 to \$1.9 million in 2014. Examples of funding sources from the private and public sector include: Federal Emergency Management Agency, New York State Crime Victims Board, Putnam County Department of Social Services, Westchester County Office of the Aging, ACLU, United Way, and SUNY Purchase. The organization also seeks private donations from philanthropic ventures and depends upon individual donors to provide support.

Grants play a significant role in the funding of services. WestCOP believes that grants are not always designed with the customer's best interests, invariably missing the long-term goal of providing much needed and the "right" services. Through the grant process, WestCOP submits performance reports pertaining to demographics, enrollment, homelessness and other related data. WestCOP reports that nearly 90 percent of each dollar received by the organization goes to programming. The State of New York's capacity to process payments are a continual source of frustration and can significantly impede and contribute to cash flow and cash reserve issues. It is not unusual for contracts to take as long as 6 months to be processed, thus affecting salaries and other cash-related activities and requiring WestCOP to maintain a cash reserve from which to fund salaries while awaiting delayed grant payments. WestCOP's goal is to still pursue federal, state and county grants (including continued SSVF funding), but also grow unrestricted funds and donations. It is the organization's belief that "WestCOP will always be mainly funded by government. It's just the nature of the agency. That's who we are."

2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

Types of Data Routinely Collected

Every location feeds into WestCOP's centrally managed Captain Management System (CMS). The CMS is WestCOP's internal reporting system while Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a federal reporting mechanism. CMS tracks numerous data points, specific to the veteran population. These include: veterans under 30% Area Median Income (AMI), how many are under 50 percent AMI (eligibility

criteria for SSVF), and those who for various reasons, can't be served under the particular federal funding or grant. Additionally, CMS reports on those rapidly re-housed, dependents, geographic location, dual enrolled, food, clothing, furniture needs, disaster, legal, medical services, benefits, and social security disability.

Data Analysis and Reporting

A significant challenge for WestCOP is that no single system provides the required reporting functionality: each foundation has unique reporting trails; WestCOP often must report into multiple federal reporting systems; the State of New York requires reporting into the One-Stop Operating System (OSOS); the County of Westchester and surrounding counties report into HMIS for homelessness; Continuum of Care (COC) reports funnel through HMIS; and for the Youth Bill, another federal program reports in an MIS system. WestCOP is looking at a system that will effectively address all reporting requirements. While not unique to WestCOP, this is common problem for many community-based organizations that receive multiple government-based grants remains a significant challenge.

How data are used for getting to impact

WestCOP's umbrella philosophy is that "if you come through the door you'll be helped." Intake is managed and tracked for multiple programs at multiple sites. An initial assessment is performed as to why the individual (veteran or non-veteran) came, followed by a further, more thorough evaluation of individualized needs and care. From this process of data collection, relevant and much needed services, such as food pantry, clothing resources, or the Victim's Abuse Organization are contacted for follow-on support services.

Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

WestCOP has an annual performance review process at which time staff members are evaluated on areas of strengths, weaknesses, accomplishments and what they can do better moving forward. According to Tarek Aziz, Chief Financial Officer, all members of the staff are given the opportunity to respond to this review and engage in an "open" discussion with their superior. A system of checks and balances is also in place at WestCOP, ensuring that different departments for integrity and accuracy review pertinent data, such as financial transactions.

3. Strategic Themes

Community Connectedness

WestCOP finds and partners with services at every level in support of the community and veteran populations. This high level of collaboration with over one hundred community partners demonstrates WestCOP's commitment to helping those in need. Since WestCOP acknowledges that "not one organization has resources to do everything," the agency demonstrates the value of collaboration and overall effectiveness of partners working together. In particular, WestCOP's relationship with the Department of Veterans Affairs is significant. Through its sites in Castle Point and Montrose, WestCOP receives many referrals and thus becomes intrinsically connected with VA case managers. These locations also house One Stop and The Department of Labor, providing additional support for veterans. WestCOP staff and VA social workers meet on a regular basis, discussing the individualized needs of the veteran population they serve. Little duplication of effort is inherent in this partnership, with each party functioning as referral partners and an effective "tag team."

WestCOP regularly engages with a Community of Practice (COP) led by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University. Endorsed by the VA, these "best practice" sharing groups focus on "What can you do for the veteran, versus what can I do for the veteran" The COP attracts leaders from a multitude of organizations who gather to bounce ideas, share best practices, and link providers. Help with the grant application process and questions regarding SSVF eligibility are examples of important topics addressed by this group of community practitioners and leaders. As an example, to avoid "reinventing the wheel," WestCOP shared its SSVF grant application process with Syracuse, receiving assistance with modifications and suggestions as to what other organizations were doing. The agency also benefited by utilizing an existing job description provided by the COP for a newly created Program Specialist position. "Anytime we get into new territory," states SSVF Program Manager Kiron Dawkins, "it's a good platform where we can bounce information off. We'll listen to what the VA has to say and listen to what the community of practice has to say, and make the decision of what we're going to do." At a recent COP gathering, the SSVF Program Manager also presented on "Collaboration Strategies," and believes that the response he received from the grantees was "a gateway that prompted the VA to call me to do facilitation for their regional meeting."

WestCOP itself administers over 24 programs addressing almost every social need including early childhood development, education, employment and training, victim's assistance, weatherization and foster grandparents. Every three years, WestCOP engages external consultants to conduct community needs assessments to determine future programming, financial and administrative services. The Community Action Programs (CAPs) serve people with less money providing, for example, food pantries, soup kitchens, eviction prevention, and shut-offs for low wage working families. WestCOP most recently added two sub-contractors, a legal services provider, and United Way (211) services to further augment its cadre of services. Finally, on the employment side, the American Job Center, formerly known as One Stops, functions as a collaborative partner supporting veterans in their search for gainful employment and career assistance. In a sense, looking through the lens of solely the veterans that WestCOP serves, the agency is by definition its own community – a web of integrated supportive services, coming together to create a strong network of resources to serve almost any of the veteran's needs.

Reintegration with Family

Wealthy communities such as those located in Westchester County are often unaware of the plights faced by veterans and their families. Issues such as homelessness and unemployment can remain invisible to the greater population. WestCOP takes a proactive role in assisting families that may experience these challenges. Year-to-date, WestCOP has screened 555 households, enrolling 289 toward an annual goal of 400. To further support the veteran and their family, the aggressive 90-day SSVF plan enables veterans to be housed faster. As evidenced in Putnam County, veterans may be at-risk for qualifying and receiving benefits based upon the 30% AMI income eligibility thresholds. A veteran may be eligible for SSVF support, thereby receiving housing services and temporary financial assistance. To date, WestCOP has served 160 veterans in Category I - homelessness prevention, and 240 in Category II, Rapid Re-housing, i.e. transitioning from homelessness to permanent housing. The agency establishes the veteran's eligibility within the first 24 hours with the underlying philosophy, "screen in, not out."

Early Childhood Programs (Head Start and Early Head Start centers) sponsored by WestCOP ensure that children (veteran and non-veteran) advance developmentally, build self-esteem and prosper. Twenty-two

sites located in Putnam, Mt. Vernon, Yonkers, Port Chester and the Chappaqua School System serve children in need. The numbers of children served by the agency has grown substantially from 300 to 1716 across the two counties of Westchester and Putnam. Significant barriers exist, however, when serving the veteran population. For example, foster children and homeless children are categorically eligible to receive Head Start benefits, while the children of returning veterans are not. WestCOP takes intentional measures to support veteran children by giving them "first priority" in the Head Start program when they do meet income eligibility requirements. Early Childhood Coordinator Ellen Farrar asserts, "If you're poor you're eligible, but if you're a veteran's child, that puts you at the front of the line." Veteran children not meeting income eligibility are placed in a special 10-percent over income category with other eligible children.

Veteran Programming Differentiation

Behind every veteran is a member of the WestCOP team rallying for his or her success. The best efforts in the support of veterans and their families are those that are collaborative in nature. "Tag teams" are common, engaging different community partners or different WestCOP programs to provide individualized services required by the veteran returning to civilian life. The goal is the creation of a confidential, judgment-free safe environment in which the veteran may succeed. Homeless individuals are often unemployed, unable to work, or have such low incomes that they cannot afford housing. In addition, some homeless individuals have disabling mental health, substance abuse, or physical conditions that lead to, or compound, their poverty and homeless situation. There can be inconsistencies as to veterans being denied for the same existing condition, reinforcing the notion that there is often "no voice for the poor or marginalized." Thus, WestCOP strives to "help anyone coming through door, even those not in cookie-cutter framework."

In general, the veteran population served by WestCOP is proud and often "embarrassed and reluctant to seek the help they need." These veterans may be "at the end of their rope by the time they come to us, and with great reluctance, and fear, not knowing what to expect." WestCOP maintains that there is a discernable difference in attitude between post-9/11 veterans and those who served in Vietnam. An approximate 95% of Vietnam veterans suffer from alcohol-related or mental health illness, and often harbor bitterness and skepticism. As a group, these veterans "don't expect things to work," but when they do, they are extremely grateful and will tell others about their success, versus a veteran who has returned from Iraq or Afghanistan. WestCOP notes that the Vietnam veteran seeking services is also not typically concerned with education, and wants help without anyone knowing. This veteran population is the largest cohort served by SSVF funding and, according to WestCOP, the largest portion of the homeless system in general at this time. WestCOP sets a target for about 15 percent of their serviced population to be comprised of returning OEF/OIF veterans. It believes that this group tends to uphold the attitude of "not needing help while maintaining their level of self-sufficiency." This cohort may also tend to remain in the "cracks" a bit longer than their counterparts. During this period, family relationships may be affected adversely, and the veteran may be moving from "couch-to-couch." Finally, more veterans from Desert Storm are coming in as well as those who served during peacetime.

In general, marketing to the veteran population has posed challenges for WestCOP. Each population, whether it is Vietnam, Desert Storm or post-9/11 is different and accustomed to a different media approach. WestCOP is gearing their marketing toward the younger population with the future use of a digital platform currently in the pilot stage.

Women Veteran Efforts

WestCOP's commitment to helping women veterans is a visible attribute to the organization. Most often, the female veteran seeking help is not looking for employment, but has experienced some levels of military trauma, including mental illness, sexual trauma or PTSD. To effectively address the sensitive nature of these issues, female veterans are helped by female staff members. WestCOP has served women veterans referred from Samaritan Village, where women who have been incarcerated or have substance abuse issues emerge are housed. According to WestCOP, "The veterans that we've met there seem to really have developed tools to be successful – were anxious to be successful and look for employment." WestCOP notes that there have been no chronically homeless women veterans to date.

A local church and the Junior League of Westchester on the Sound, most recently partnered with WestCOP and a volunteer group of women, to run a seminar series for Hispanic Women. The programs address issues such as financial independence, domestic violence protection and English language proficiency. Aside from this collaborative effort, WestCOP also offers programs to women such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and job training.

Employment and Education

Veterans and their families receive support from WestCOP in their pursuit of higher education and re-entering the job market. Community educational institutions, such as Dutchess Community College, have provided educational assistance and referrals for WestCOP's veterans. Relationships are also in place in Ulster, Orange and Sullivan County Community Colleges. On-site enrollment is available at Rockland Community College, and Westchester Community College recently hosted an event called, "Women's Veteran Stand Up" where WestCOP played an active role. Additionally, resume writing and interviewing support are further resources for veterans seeking employment and career services. According to WestCOP, "We never send them out blindly without us having created the path." Most recently, veterans were hired on the spot at an in-house job fair and also at a county fair. The local news station, News 12, is planning to sponsor a larger job fair in the near future. WestCOP recognizes that the biggest challenge facing veterans as they re-enter the job market is linking the qualified veteran with the right job and fit. WestCOP has also made it a point to hire veterans, which is evidenced across the organization, engaging 20- and 30-year veterans in different capacities.

Independent Sector Involvement

Veterans and their families benefit from WestCOP's collaboration with partners in the independent sector. Strong alliances with both veteran and non-veteran resources are forged with a united interest in streamlining processes and providing preferential treatment for those veterans needing benefits. As noted, WestCOP has formed collaborative relationships within the community education framework, building partnerships with community colleges located in Dutchess, Ulster, Orange and Sullivan counties. These institutions provide varying degrees of educational assistance for WestCOP's veterans, such as resume and enrollment assistance, establishing an important and much needed service. Finally, WestCOP played a key role in forming a group of local collaborators called, Patriot Housing, with the intent of creating a "separate entity to represent all of the non-profits that were going to get involved with veteran services in some way, shape or form." This entity would "intersect with SSVF, because it's about ending veteran's homelessness according to the mission that was set forth."

Transition to Civilian Life

A veteran's transition to civilian life is an important theme for WestCOP evidenced in the wide range of supportive services it provides and extensive network of Community Action (CSGC) programs. There are no "wrong doors" when serving the veteran in crisis, and, the veteran entering life as a civilian needs a timely response and identification. Every effort is made to support the transitioning veteran by providing much-needed services such as temporary financial assistance, utility fee payment, security deposits, rental assistance, moving costs, emergency supplies, child-care, and transportation. For example, agreements can be negotiated with landlords regarding certain allowances and a guarantee of "time lag" dollars to cover initial out-of-pocket expenses. This complex network of components often requires the services of a WestCOP professional navigator to assist the veteran with the multitude of choices and decisions.

Media

WestCOP seeks to do a better job sharing its mission and value to the community. A concerted effort to drive the WestCOP brand is underway, responding to the need to market to a new audience. The desire to "shout" its long list of veteran's success stories and visibly celebrate those who graduate from the SSVF program are high on the list for WestCOP. Ultimately, the goal is to be able to showcase stories about the many lives touched by WestCOP services. WestCOP recognizes that reaching the veteran and homeless populations can be challenging, and requires a need for new catch phrases and buzzwords. One way that WestCOP has addressed this need is through the design of a new "night-club-style" postcard that targets the younger population. Additionally, a veterans-only digital platform is in the pilot stages of development. Social media posts, press releases, and local cable continue to be the mainstay of WestCOP's media strategy. Ultimately, WestCOP ensures that the "voice of the veteran" is clearly heard and is the focus of every media effort.

As with many community-based, grant-funded non-profit organizations, WestCOP is constrained in its ability to fund a robust communications strategy on behalf of its veterans and other constituents due to restrictions on the use of funding. Without the ability to fund dedicated communications staff, there are often not enough "people to tell the story" of the success of the organization.

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness is a prevailing theme for WestCOP. Assisting veterans and their families to reintegrate into the community and become effective members of society is paramount. From the moment the veteran walks in the door, trained staff identify underlying issues pertaining to mental health, homelessness or unemployment, which may stand in the way of the veteran's adjustment to civilian life. Veterans who are served by WestCOP walk out the door with the feeling that "something good is going to happen." Friendly and compassionate employees provide the supportive environment to encourage the veteran to take the next steps that will better their lives and that of their family.

4. Key Learnings and Reflections

Catalysts of Impact

A strong drive, passion for the mission, and unwavering commitment to excellence exemplify WestCOP as an organization. The motto, "one success story makes a difference," creates a platform for the agency's

track record of best practices, accountability and transparency. Clearly WestCOP's strengths are exhibited in the family-friendly atmosphere, a confident, professional and cross-trained staff, teamwork, and myriad of success stories. The spirit of collaborative and sharing of transferable skill sets with its partners greatly reflects these qualities. WestCOP's three-pronged approach, "informing, funding, and serving," has contributed to its well-earned reputation in the local community. Invariably, veterans served by WestCOP walk away feeling that they are important and have been served. Emphasis on hiring compassionate and caring staff for the veteran in crisis contribute to this success. WestCOP's key catalysts of impact can be summarized as:

- *Collaborative teamwork:* A non-competitive collaboration is WestCOP's signature approach to working across a broad sector of not-for-profit and for-profit enterprises, including the broad network of programming that WestCOP provides internally. Sharing best practices, expediting veteran referrals and ensuring the best outcome for the veteran is the goal of every collaborative effort through this dynamic display of teamwork. "WestCOP's reputation is extremely strong," cites a newer social worker, "I actually see and feel what I do."
- *A passion for the mission and commitment to the veteran:* Veterans and their re-integration into civilian life are foremost. From the moment the veteran is identified, concerted effort is made to activate needed resources regardless of the issue. A compassionate staff responds with a sense of urgency to people in crisis, providing sensitive care and help. For WestCOP, one success story makes a difference.
- *SSVF Program and Services:* WestCOP's approach to providing SSVF programming for veterans is "more organized than most and extremely structured." The SSVF program is in a continuing state of evolution, serving countless veterans and their families who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness.
- *Cross-trained and diverse staff:* People are "the greatest asset at WestCOP." Compassion, an important and necessary element in working with the veteran population, is a key attribute of WestCOP staff. Staff members who can "step out of their position and perform someone else's duty" are highly valued.
- *Transparency, open door policy, multiple layers of checks and balances:* WestCOP prides itself in its "open door" policy for its employees, the goal being to provide an environment where staff can express themselves in a safe, non-judgmental environment.

Barriers to Impact

WestCOP cites a number of perceived barriers in its efforts to serve the veteran population. Discretionary funding for local administration remains a constant challenge for the organization, and narrowly restricted dollars limit WestCOP's ability to accomplish certain objectives that best serve the veteran. The organization must seek funding to "work around certain restrictions," not always consistent with government rules and regulations, creating more of a "patchwork" system. Additionally, with so many different programs underway, it can become difficult to "tell the story" due to a lack of human capital. Monetary increases to staff present an additional challenge, in that "the only way we can afford to give everybody an increase is if every contract at the same time brings through an increase." Adding to these challenges, slow payments from the State of New York greatly inhibit cash flow and vital financial resources necessary to keep the organization moving forward.

WestCOP's strategic goal is to be strong both programmatically and fiscally. This can be challenging given

the stated constraints and barriers to impact. Paper redundancy, and the lack of data management systems integration also present an ongoing problem for the organization, and deterrent to effective data collection and analysis. "It's all very labor-intensive just from a paperwork standpoint," states a WestCOP employee. To mitigate this issue, a new software program is currently under evaluation. Because bringing the veteran's needs to the forefront of the community is such a considerable concern for the WestCOP organization, WestCOP also maintains that there should be veteran preference for housing, i.e., "If you're a veteran, you go to the top of the waiting list." Along with this belief is the desire that different non-profit organizations in the same community share the same sense of urgency when serving the veteran and their families. Differing understanding exists among local partners of what serving veterans "in crisis" actually means and necessitates as far as true action and service.

Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

WestCOP believes that "the best times are ahead." Positioning themselves ahead of the curve, as opposed to being reactive is an organizational objective. This goal is in concert with understanding trends and positioning the agency to take advantage of opportunities from a strategic perspective. The Board of Directors, Executive, and Senior Staff members regularly strategize and project 3-5 years down the road. Every three years, a formal community needs assessment is conducted determining where services are most needed. WestCOP also views itself as an "incubator" for other non-profits just coming on board, helping them with infrastructure and other valuable knowledge and expertise. WestCOP readily admits that it desires "to improve and learn from mistakes that we've made in the past, continue to go after government, state, federal and county money and the programs that make sense financially." Ultimately, the organization would covet the opportunity to "shout from the rooftops" its successes and stories around helping the veteran. A celebration of SSVF graduates and showcasing their stories is just one example of sharing how these services have touched the lives of veterans and their families.