

### White Oak V

**Overview:** The purpose of White Oak is to encourage creative thinking and willingness toward collaboration in support of the veteran and military community among major military related nonprofits, government leadership, and other major public and private contributors. The main goals of White Oak V were to build local civil-military bridges to strengthen military families, to work towards the modernization of personnel management and define the “value proposition” of service for the purpose of recruiting and retaining future forces and their families, and finally, to consolidate priorities/develop collective strategies to gain commitment from the next presidential administration for the sake of preserving public awareness and “voice” enjoyed by military/veteran communities.

**Resolution:** Members resolve to seek measurable goals and impact accountability; scalable and replicable solutions; elimination of redundancies and identification of crucial gaps in support coverage; ways to educate our populations on available services, on how to define themselves as “in need” of help, and on how to empower themselves to take action and get involved in being part of the solution. Most importantly, White Oak partners pledge to support each other in the spirit of promoting human-centered care for veterans, military members and their families.

**Members:** Participants do not constitute a concrete organizational membership, but rather emphasize “White Oak” as a *process* by which positive transformation is made possible through dialogue, collaborative sharing of information and perspective, inspiration of ideas and future commitment to action amongst cooperative but uniquely focused individual participants. The result is a rare blend of national, regional and grassroots efforts working toward the ultimate goal of providing military members, transitioning veterans and their families with comprehensive support networks and superior care.

**Consensus Items:** The following reflects sites of convergence, giving rise to actionable issue-areas and directing attentions toward our “next steps.”

#### ***Defining Priorities, Opportunities and Challenges***

- Priorities for community-level solutions for military family engagement and reintegration include construction of collaborative local service networks based on expanded knowledge of military family needs, use of inclusive language and narratives that resolve civil-military social divisions, and local partnerships built on trust developed through collective understanding, participatory dialogue, information sharing and extended conversations between military and community leaders.
- A major barrier identified is the partial picture of either “victim” or “hero” narrative, characterizing military families and veterans, and failing to recognize these people often as both---sometimes needing

assistance, but more often contributing to society, and always an integral part of American communities. Other barriers include a lack of shared knowledge characterizing military needs and the availability of local support mechanisms in addition to failure to self-identify as “in need.”

- Current budgetary environments suggest an optimal window for collaboration to resolve these barriers by leveraging local partnerships. Military leadership has an obligation to educate their populations, while local government and philanthropic organizations can aid in educating communities and reconstructing popular views of military members and their families. Foundations can also direct contributions to the places of greatest impact.

### **Improving Support Through Policy**

- Military family well-being and future force successes are strongly linked. The retention of top service members poses a multidimensional difficulty, stemming from both professional and personal realms. Professionally, long-term propensity to serve among America’s most talented will be enhanced by policies promoting a strong “public service” oriented narrative, emphasizing contribution to society as well as the unique blend of military technical and professional career paths, characterized by flexible on-/off-ramping options and significant educational opportunities. Creation of a military career designator transforming recruitment specialists to *recruitment and reintegration* professionals would significantly enhance such future policy implementation.
- As families play a major role in military effectiveness, this demands increased formal recognition of this relationship, family inclusive language and family-friendly ideas in future policy where applicable. Challenges regarding spouse employment, stability for children and capacity to plan for the future can limit family wellness. Policies needed to create a military personnel system that is responsive to diverse

and changing recruitment and retention decision calculi must formalize methods to give families “voice.” Data is critical to determine what factors carry the most impact---exit surveys and ongoing research are critical for structuring appropriate changes to ensure quality force retention.

- Private sector and foundation collaborators can strengthen military families as part of future force initiatives by serving as bridges between military families and the civilian sector. They can educate society on the strong talent and competencies of military families, help develop public empathy towards the challenges of military life, and foster military spouse employment strategies via long term mobile career options.
- The challenge of elevating/maintaining the quality of recruits will become more acute as the economy improves and as demographics continue to change, increasing participation of female service members, dual military service members, and single parents alongside social demands for improved work-life balance. An overall more human-centric defense personnel management approach is needed, seeking to incorporate private sector “best practices.” A key White Oak V policy recommendation is the establishment of a “Defense Personnel Board,” comprised of private sector leaders offering “outside” perspective/knowledge.

### **Communicating a Collective Agenda & Strategy**

- Ideas for managing the transition to the next administration stem largely from current administration lessons learned as well as the unique conversational blend of White Oak, which emphasizes the humanity of the client at the center of our efforts while connecting the welfare of those we serve to the decision-making of our national leadership. The preservation of voice, vitally fostered by current White House “America Joining Forces” support, and partnership with the next administration must come not on the basis of politics but rather

on the foundation of bi-partisan civic responsibility to serve those who serve our great country.

- As visibility and consistency have proven critical to success, White Oak V set to work developing foundational frameworks for securing candidate campaign commitment to future support of military families, defining expectations for specific, visible post-election demonstrations of this commitment, constructing positive military community narratives, and capturing our to-date lessons learned.
- Three key White Oak initiatives were identified and the developmental foundation was laid for

the maintenance and continuation of military family and veteran support with future administrations:

- A **Consensus Pledge for Presidential Nominees/Candidates** indicating intention to maintain a firm commitment to supporting military and veteran communities.
- A **“First 100 Days” Consensus Document** defining recommended key events intended to demonstrate publicly continued support for the military community.
- **Military Communications Plan** to ensure accurate narratives about military members, their families and veterans are promoted in American discourse.

#### *“Expanding the White Oak Process?”*

A repeated theme for this year’s convening was the call to “grow our circle,” referencing the possibility of including more participants in the White Oak process. Many expressed hope that incorporating more participants might improve unified messaging and provide a wider pool of resources from which to draw. Careful contemplation and discourse produced the idea of potentially expanding this valuable process through White Oak-inspired follow-on initiatives rather than increasing numbers at the annual gathering. At full capacity and juxtaposed with concern for preserving the intimacy that enables open and honest exchange of ideas, consensus on this question was elusive among White Oak participants.

**Next Steps:** The final work of White Oak V centered on immediate to long-term objectives. Specifically, short term goals include securing candidate pledges from presidential candidates, holding a candidate forum for the military community to publicize their unique needs/contributions, the creation of the First 100 Days document, generating a “White Oak score card” to summarize its history and accomplishments, creating a communications plan of advocacy on behalf of military families and veterans, and finally, defining a date for the next White Oak retreat. Medium-to-long-range goals include continued efforts to reduce the civil-military social divide and barriers to local community integration, continued public education on the unique lifestyle demands experienced by military families, and the solidification of White Oak strategy in terms of meeting frequency and membership.

**Conclusion:** White Oak is an incubator of legislative action and innovative programming. The candid, organic and collaborative nature of discussions at these convenings gives rise to a powerful germination of big ideas with strong consensus backing. There is an understanding that no single sector can provide all the solutions. The move towards shared goals and aligned messaging strengthens the overall impact of our voice. White Oak V successfully facilitated this exchange of ideas, primarily related to questions of civil-military community (re)integration, reforming personnel policy in support of recruitment and retention, and preserving the significant gains in military family advocacy achieved during the past eight years.