

White Oak VII PARTICIPANTS

American Armed Forces Mutual Aid Association
American Red Cross
America's Warrior Partnership
Armed Services YMCA
Army Emergency Relief
Association of Defense Communities
Association of the United States Army
Bipartisan Policy Center
Blue Star Families
Bristol-Myers Squibb
Cohen Veterans Network
Council on Foundations
Department of the Army, Office of Army Community Partnership
Department of Defense
Department of Veterans Affairs
Elizabeth Dole Foundation
Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation
Howard Gilman Foundation
Institute for Veterans and Military Families
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
Military Child Education Coalition
Military Family Research Institute at Purdue
Military Spouse Behavioral Health Clinicians
The Mission Continues
National Association of Veteran-Serving Organizations
National Child Traumatic Stress Network
National Guard Bureau
National Military Family Association
National Veterans Intermediary
Office of Senator Tim Kaine
Office of Second Lady Karen Pence
RAND Corporation
Robert R. McCormick Foundation
Student Veterans of America
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors
Travis Manion Foundation
United Health Foundation
United Service Organizations
United States Army, Soldier for Life Program
USAA Foundation
Vets' Community Connections
Walmart Giving, Walmart Foundation
The White House
Wounded Warrior Project

Overview: White Oak VII witnessed a successful convening of strong collaborators, guided by independent creative thinking and a willingness to seek innovative solutions. Critical questions were brought to the fore, challenging attendees to examine entrenched positions and comfortable mindsets. The gathering began with intra-sector discussions on “whole family success,” laying the foundation for follow-on breakout conversations relating this measure to the Department of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) efforts as “one team,” and finally concluded with brainstorming discussions on future installations and community engagement.

Resolution: The White Oak community, comprised of major nonprofit military service organizations, related government offices, and other key philanthropic partners and contributors, is committed to creating positive conditions through which these various sectors can better serve the interests and needs of military members, transitioning veterans, their families and caregivers. Participants engage in a process of positive transformation made possible through dialogue, sharing of information and perspectives, inspiration of ideas and future commitment to action. Members resolve to seek innovative, scalable concepts that can be translated into evidence based, empirically driven legislative action and valuable new programs.

Members: Attendees of White Oak participate as thinkers, not as institutional representatives, engaged in a non-attribution, retreat-style atmosphere in which shared knowledge, open dialogue and brainstorming culminate in transformative collaboration. “Membership” is not attached to a concrete organization, but rather to an idea rooted in individual commitment to action united by shared goals and aligned messaging to achieve maximum impact in the lives of military members, veterans, their families, survivors and caregivers.

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

Whole Family Success

- All sectors—government, philanthropy, and nonprofit organizations—agreed there are gaps in the system challenging “whole family success.” Legislative barriers and legal limits formally divide agencies into silos that often result in “disconnect across government” as well as complications with public-private partnership. Families face difficulty in parsing out which entities provide specific services while nonprofit and philanthropic organizations may lack knowledge of where services are most needed. In addition to recognized ongoing efforts to work around these barriers and improve law, the collective recommends promoting/improving family knowledge of service structures, conducting needs assessments that draw upon recipient points of view and “buddy-ing”/pairing organizations to foster shared knowledge. These are valuable strategies to resolving disruptive impacts to children and boosting family success.

- Leveraging all resources to maximize family wellness and positive transition to civilian life demands joint effort and shared responsibility between service members and families with government institutions and organizations. Military and veteran spouses have a strong role in ensuring this well-being; however, volunteer family readiness groups vary in reliability, and little-to-no family aspect exists within VA services. Consensus finds an interagency authority with national level reporting responsibility would serve this issue area well.
- The convening emphasized each sector brings vital elements to the table. Interagency and cross-sector collaboration have made major strides, moving toward value-based care strategies. Philanthropy—*not to be confused with charity*—is able to work with government, offering impact oriented, sustainable solutions designed to facilitate *system change*, capable of quick response to feedback, free of legislative and/or political constraints. Finally, nonprofits, intimately familiar with the community at grassroots level, serve as critical bridges, fostering collaboration with information and advice, providing valuable feedback and shining light on best practices.

The Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Administration as “One Team”

- Creating a “seamless transition” from DoD to the VA ensuring whole of family health may not be one hundred percent achievable due to legal divides, but it can be better! Improving the messaging/marketing of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes, working to promote spouse attendance and extending the window of access to critical transition information are key recommendations made by the group. Marketing directly to families and tailoring approaches to generational preferences for more personal interactions will likely increase participation and improve this process.
- Significant consensus formed around the belief that by allowing transition to be part of the conversation throughout time in service, this idea is reinforced as a normal part of life.

Perceptions matter—transitioning members must have a plasticity of mind that fosters openness to the outside world. Transition is not insurmountable. Normalization of transition emphasizes a unique competency of service members—it’s what we do.

- Examining what defines “comprehensive mental health care,” attendees agreed a continuum of care is optimal with mental health care starting at the very beginning of service. Institutional bias, however, still colors ideas about mental health, and families hesitate to be labeled. To aid in longer-term family wellness smoothing the stress of transition, active participation in local communities throughout military service is encouraged as a means of developing a post-service sense of balance and purpose.
- Questioning the biggest unmet needs for transitioning veterans and families provoked deep discussion, interrogating what it means to be a veteran and how needs may or may not connect to this status or may change over time. Veterans represent a diverse pool of people with a range of needs, resulting in a range of sentiments toward transition. As spouses often have a better sense of family needs due to greater consistency on the home front, ensuring families have access to support is critical. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution, the group agreed having a single point of contact for help would be very valuable.

Future Installations and Community Engagement

- Participants acknowledged improving support to service members and families through future change is best served by dynamics that maximize interactions between military and local communities. Ongoing relationship building is critical to keeping up with changing requirements and needs, both on and off base. Early, frequent communication amongst installation and local officials is key to determining the best solutions.
- Consensus found installation-community engagement is affected in structural and cultural ways with impact to nonmilitary family

recruitment. Structural barriers align with force protection build-up while cultural distance emerges due to heavily episodic community interaction, driven by longer deployment absences and shorter tour lengths. Several solutions were offered to lessen this impact:

- The creation of an installation position responsible for community engagement as a means of recruitment.
 - Base engagement with local high schools to ensure military service is a celebrated choice for graduates.
 - Opening base recreational resources to local community members for fun events that bring nonmilitary onto base/post.
 - “Waving the flag” via active duty and retiree participation in local military affinity groups, clubs and organizations.
 - Promoting military service as a pathway to the American Dream through education.
- Lack of installation services and geographical distance from military cultural competency

complicates Guard and Reserve capacity to receive support. In addition to persistent unemployment difficulties, health care “roller coaster” dynamics created by the continuous back and forth to and from military medical coverage plague this population. A key recommendation made is to consider an insurance program that offers payment to employers when employees are activated, relieving legitimate employer concerns.

- Envisioning installations of the future, attendees agreed operational requirements top the list, but many aspects of installation life are no longer required as they duplicate services available in town with reasonably competitive pricing. Joint-governmental-use facilities and “joint zones” where military and local community members can take advantage of social programs and services together are powerful ideas for the future.

“Disrupt and flip the script!”

A major tendency running throughout White Oak VII was for groups to pause, reflect and question. For the past seventeen years, governmental organizations, corporate philanthropy and military/veteran nonprofits have rushed forward with help for service members, their families and veterans, but careful conversation about obligations, responsibilities and finding balance tempered this year’s solution seekers. At what point do programs need to retreat? How can we mobilize today’s men and women in uniform to be the next great generation?

Next Steps: In addition to White House and Senate Armed Services Committee outbriefs, significant consensus formed around a need to brief and involve commands and chapter organizations at lower echelons. Attendees are encouraged to execute ideas and tackle projects based on White Oak VII revelations; in particular, more work needs to be done clarifying and defining the role of government and civil society in addressing phases of service member/veteran restoration and individual empowerment. Importantly, future steps must include getting our knowledge into the hands of decision-makers.

Conclusion: White Oak VII members wrestled with legal challenges to government connectivity and intra-sector collaboration, recognizing these systems impacting military service members, veterans and their families and caregivers will never be totally seamless. Yet participants identified numerous innovative pathways to improvement. By taking a critical stance to problem solving—questioning obligations, responsibilities and balance—family-centric, sustainable approaches grew out of discourse. Family-inclusive solutions combine with organizational collaboration ideas and visionary institutional transformation, amounting to shared efforts and joint responsibility on the part of government, civil society and individuals to ensure investments made in our service members and families produce the strongest possible returns in the years to come.