



**BOB WOODRUFF FOUNDATION**  
Investing in the Next Chapter for Our Veterans

# Veterans and COVID-19: Projecting the Economic, Social, and Mental Health Needs of America's Veterans

## Executive Summary

**As the COVID-19 crisis continues, the Bob Woodruff Foundation examined where the need is greatest in the veteran population and how it can best be supported. We have a responsibility to share what we know, and in turn, lead the way in helping to address the needs of veterans and their families. We invite you to stand with us as we reinforce and expand our efforts.**

The world is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic – just today, the global total reached 809,608 cases and 39,545 deaths. Alongside the public health impact are significant economic issues, including a dramatic increase in unemployment claims and precipitous drops in stock market values.

Our mission at the Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF) compels us to assess the implications, both short and long-term, for American veterans. Currently eighteen million strong, adding almost 250,000 more each year, veterans represent a unique and diverse element of our country and society. They and their families are often the first to volunteer and the last to ask for help. They face the same difficulties every American experiences today - but they often do so while contending with other challenges related to their service.

The Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF) finds, funds, and shapes innovative programs that help America's impacted veterans, their families, and caregivers thrive. We are an organization that focuses on the current and emerging issues facing our veterans and their families, ensuring that we help get support to those who need it.

**Our goal: Offer insights and recommendations to community leaders, employers, neighbors, policy makers, philanthropists, and fellow Americans concerned with the well-being of our veterans as we all address immediate needs and prepare for**

The full results of this initiative can be found in our recently published paper, **Veterans and**

**COVID-19: Projecting the Economic, Social, and Mental Health Needs of America's Veterans.**

## Priority Findings

**Vast numbers of veterans are likely to become unemployed, at rates that could surpass the highest level of veteran unemployment in the post-9/11 era.**

- Approximately 14 percent of employed veterans work in the five industries most likely to witness immediate layoffs due to COVID-19.
- These industries are concentrated in cities where the effects of mass layoffs will soon ripple through communities – 500,000 veterans live across the 15 cities where economic effects will be most pronounced.
- Our focus on the 5 industries most likely to be affected reflects just the tip of the iceberg. Less impacted industries like construction and manufacturing will still be at some risk, as are small businesses and workers dependent on the gig economy.

**Data from past recent recessions highlight at least two groups of vulnerable veterans.**

- New veterans transitioning from the military (200,000 to 250,000 annually) had higher levels of unemployment than older veterans and non- veterans.
- Older Americans, including veterans, who experience an unexpected job loss had longer durations of unemployment during recessions.

**The COVID-19 pandemic creates at least three conditions (emergent trauma, loneliness due to social isolation, and unplanned job or wage**

**loss) that could culminate in a “perfect storm,” threatening the mental health of many veterans.**

- Veterans with pre-existing mental health conditions are at increased risk for symptoms worsening and developing new problems like substance misuse.
- Social distancing and self-quarantining are necessary to help control the spread of COVID-19, but they can also increase the sense of loneliness of veterans, many of whom reported often feeling lonely even before COVID-19.
- There is likely to be a surge in demand for mental health care services, but even before COVID-19 the nation was only meeting a quarter of the demand.

**Veterans, especially younger veterans, have limited savings that are insufficient to support them through spells of unemployment that could last over 6 months.**

- Before COVID-19, over one-third of post-9/11 veterans report challenges paying their bills after leaving the military; and 59 percent of veterans 35 to 44 years old had credit card debt compared with 48 percent of nonveteran households.

### **Citing Our Sources**

The full report was developed by the inaugural Craig Newmark Fellow at the Bob Woodruff Foundation, Dr. Rajeev Ramchand, in partnership with BWF's Chief Program Officer, Dr. Margaret Harrell, BWF's Chief Growth and Marketing Officer, Marshall Lauck, and the President of National Veterans Intermediary (NVI), Nancy Berglass. It is based on data from various sources including those from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census, Moody's Analytics, and Brookings. It also makes use of recently collected data from BWF's Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool, a unique platform to

# Implications and Recommendations

## **Some communities will face greater struggles than others.**

National organizations that serve veterans, and the entities that fund them, should consider targeted support to areas most likely to be affected and with a significant share and number of veterans (for example, Myrtle Beach, Savannah, Gulfport, Las Vegas, and Orlando.)

## **Veterans will face significant employment challenges.**

Organizations that provide career training or employment services to veterans need to develop plans to adapt to a more challenging job market, and funders should require accountability and monitor success.

## **Veterans are at tremendous financial risk.**

Organizations that serve veterans but do not directly provide emergency financial services should be aware of legitimate programs that do exist and direct veterans in need to these sources.

## **Veterans are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges.**

Caring for those with pre-existing mental health conditions needs to be a priority before symptoms get worse and lead to grave outcomes. This will require supporting and sustaining crisis services, like suicide prevention hotlines, and providing evidence-based care where possible; in the short-term much of this care will need to be provided via telehealth platforms.

## **Social connection is important for well-being.**

Veterans who relied on sponsored activities and events to promote social interaction may be especially vulnerable; efforts are needed to create and sustain social interaction events online and using other technology platforms, as well as proactively engaging veterans at risk of sustained or increased loneliness.

## **Upcoming challenges could eliminate a landscape of organizations that serve veterans.**

The large, diverse landscape of organizations that serve veterans have very limited annual budgets. Resource audits, general operating support for both backbone and service providing organizations, and eased restrictions from grant makers can help ensure sustainability.

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## **About the Bob Woodruff Foundation**

*Our team at the Bob Woodruff Foundation brings together a diverse range of backgrounds, experience and leadership – this expertise, coupled with constant engagement with our veterans and their families, has made BWF the trusted, nonpartisan voice and leading impact investor meeting the comprehensive needs of the post-9/11 veteran community. In response to COVID-19, the Bob*

**Woodruff Foundation is adapting current grants and making new grants to address these critical needs. We need your help to fund these grants**  
**– our veterans and their families are resilient in the face of adversity and with your contribution, we can support them through this crisis.**