

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

*Case Study:*  
*Team Rubicon*



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



## TEAM RUBICON CASE STUDY

### 1. Organizational Overview

#### History

Team Rubicon (TR) is an idea that emerged from one veteran's desire to continue to serve and a desire for a sense of purpose. As Founder and CEO Jake Wood tells the story, TR was established in January 2010, when Haiti was rocked by a massive earthquake. Wood was "just watching the damage in Port-au-Prince live" and "thinking how similar that circumstance would be to a combat zone." He called some of the organizations that he knew were providing aid and asked if he could volunteer, but the answer was generally "no." As such, he decided to put together a group of people, many of them men he'd served with in Iraq and Afghanistan, to travel to Haiti and provide assistance. The team he assembled, which included Co-Founder and Managing Director William McNulty, was uniquely positioned to offer emergency medical assistance to the many wounded and injured Haitians who had survived the earthquake due to the skills they had acquired through military training and deployments. The team raised \$40,000 via social media and word of mouth, and went to assist with the aid and rescue efforts in Haiti.

While in Haiti, a lawyer in Minnesota incorporated the group as a 501(c)(3) organization, unbeknownst to them, in order to provide the group legal protection. After this initial mission, the group had a large amount of money remaining from the initial fundraising and decided to pursue the idea of Team Rubicon, an organization comprised of military veterans responding to national disasters. They pitched the idea to those individuals who funded their initial mission to Haiti, and offered to return to them all unspent money. One donor requested his \$17 back, while all other donors either allowed the group to keep the donated funds or gave more. Team Rubicon was born from the \$170,000 raised from 1,800 donors. Since 2010, the group has evolved from a small cadre of individuals responding to large-scale international disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes in Haiti, Chile, Pakistan, and the Philippines to a group of over 16,000 volunteers responding to more frequent, smaller-scale disasters across America such as tornadoes and floods. Since its establishment, TR has been part of the aid and rescue response for over 70 emergency situations.

#### Mission Statement

The Team Rubicon mission statement is as follows: "Team Rubicon unites the skills and experiences of military veterans with first responders to rapidly deploy emergency response teams."

#### Organizational Structure

Team Rubicon is recognized as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with a disaster response orientation,

led by a CEO, a Managing Director (Co-Founders Jake Wood and William McNulty, respectively), a Chief Operating Officer, and a Chief Information Officer.

The Field Operations Department manages all deployments, domestic and international. It has patterned its ten regions after the FEMA operating model. Regions are led by a Regional Administrator who is involved in the strategic planning with the core leadership team; volunteer Regional Administrators are paid a nominal stipend each month. Decision-making power is largely centralized and each division or team within the organization may have to seek approval for financial (budgeting) and programming decisions prior to execution. Over time, TR is moving to a more decentralized model in which the regions will write their own incident response plans and will only look to leadership for funding approvals.

The Program Operations Department is responsible for non-deployment activities and engagement with volunteers, including fitness events, social events, volunteer opportunities, the Clay Hunt Fellows Program, and training, described below. More broadly, this department is charged with developing the volunteer base in ways that will lead to greater successes when deployed for future operations.

Team Rubicon is also supported by a development and strategic partnerships team, communications staff, and an administrative team (finance, HR, IT).

The TR operating model makes extensive use of volunteers, as missions are almost completely staffed and executed by volunteers with strategic oversight, management, and financial support from headquarters. Disaster responders take vacation time from their regular employment to participate in TR missions and are provided no reimbursement for their services.

## Programming

Team Rubicon has programs in five areas. First and foremost, TR's primary mission is Field Ops/Disaster Relief. This program allows TR to quickly gather teams of veteran and first-responder volunteers for deployment in response to domestic or international emergency situations. This service is offered free of charge to the affected community. TR has over 16,000 volunteers across the United States. TR has capabilities in the following areas:

- Incident Management
- Damage & Impact Assessment
- Disaster Mapping and Work-Order Management
- Debris Management
- Hazard Mitigation (Fire/Flood)
- Emergent/Hasty Home Repair
- Spontaneous Volunteer Management
- Medical (International Only)

In addition to deployment opportunities, TR coordinates volunteer community service projects which provide opportunities for more "casual" volunteers to get involved. The service projects are typically scheduled for weekends and can last one to two days, which is a smaller and more manageable commitment for people who are unable to participate in a disaster response mission or do not have first responder experience.

In order to bolster and hone the skillset of its volunteer base, TR offers training programs in person or online in disaster response-related skills and techniques such as demolition, heavy machinery operation, operational planning, or small-unit leadership. TR is working to design training opportunities to help volunteers toward obtaining professional certifications in emergency management and/or disaster response.

The Clay Hunt Fellowship, named in memory of a founding member of Team Rubicon, is a one-year leadership training program for honorably discharged veterans age 21 and up. Fellows participate in 200 hours of training, equally divided between the fields of emergency management and general management. Upon completion, Fellows are expected to sit for either the Associate Emergency Manager or Certified Emergency Manager Exam. In addition, Fellows are assigned a mentor (ideally a prior Fellow) and are expected to deploy on TR missions, with the goal of gaining a predefined set of skills and experiences. Fellows complete a capstone project, identifying improvements for an area of TR operations and presenting their recommendations to leadership.

Finally, TR organizes and hosts community fitness events and social events to foster connections between members when not on missions.

### Veteran Populations Served

Team Rubicon was founded by post-9/11 veterans; however for most programs, anyone with a willingness and availability to serve is accepted. The organization generally views its volunteer base in three categories: veterans; first responders (police, fire, EMT); and as civilians with no military or first responder background who are interested in disaster response. The Clay Hunt Fellowship, as mentioned above, is limited to honorably discharged veterans, aged 21 and up.

### Funding Sources and Strategies

Most of Team Rubicon's funding (49%) comes from foundations and other nonprofits. Approximately 30% comes from individuals with the remaining 21% coming from businesses/corporate sponsors. Team Rubicon has no government funding and the bulk of their existing funding is unrestricted, which allows them the flexibility to offer training programs and fellowships. Long term, TR leadership believes that funding is tied to the disaster relief space, not the veteran space, and would like to potentially explore ways to seek government funding for disaster relief activities. Additionally, TR leadership describes "surge" patterns in fundraising surrounding disaster relief deployments. Based on the lesson of raising \$40,000 simply from social media and word of mouth, the organization made a deliberate decision in its infancy to invest in a communications team rather than development staff to, as they say "let our story raise the money". While this strategy has been successful, TR has also recently hired development staff.

## 2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

### Types of Data Routinely Collected

Team Rubicon tracks the number of missions they complete and the number of people that they train through their various programs. They also track veteran volunteer hours, noting a 40% increase in hours from 2012 to 2013. However, the actual number of veteran volunteers versus first responders versus civilians are not tracked. TR plans to implement an impact survey in the near future to start to gather information about how serving on missions with TR has impacted the lives of volunteers. Additionally,

data is collected on the estimated economic cost savings of volunteer hours (\$22/hr.), though development of the entire economic impact of the missions is still underway.

### Data Analysis and Reporting

Team Rubicon completes all required tax filings and posts annual reports with financial statements on their website. With regards to other types of analysis or reporting, TR leadership shared that they do not find financial metrics, such as efficiency ratings, to be good judges of effectiveness in this space.

### How data are used for getting to impact

The data collected (number of missions, number of volunteer hours) seem to be primarily used in fundraising, in order to articulate impact. Measures of cost savings to affected communities are shared with communities served to support those communities' filings with the federal government when seeking reimbursement.

### Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

While discussions with TR leadership made it clear that the data are used in decision-making and to inform programming decisions, it seems there is an opportunity for a formal program evaluation process. Leadership shared that they have had discussions with Charity Navigator and the BBB Wise Giving Alliance. Additionally, Team Rubicon staff are subject internal to semi-annual and annual evaluations.

## 3. Strategic Themes

### Transition to Civilian Life

The leadership of Team Rubicon – to a person – all view the organization primarily as a disaster relief organization which leverages the talent of veterans and, as a positive side effect, aids the transition process from service member to civilian. While not originally intended to be a veteran service organization, once the leaders of Team Rubicon identified this secondary positive effect of their mission, they have worked to harness it for the good of their veterans, and shape their organizational structure and processes to best leverage it on behalf of their veterans. To reiterate, however, TR does not see itself as a VSO, but rather as a disaster relief organization whose activities benefit the wellbeing of its veteran volunteers. Likewise, by conducting deliberate activities to support its veteran volunteers' wellbeing (i.e., strengthening its "workforce"), TR becomes a more effective disaster relief organization.

CEO Jake Wood described the early days of the organization, when TR membership was mostly comprised of the elite, special operations type veterans who he expected would have less difficulty with transition issues, as though because of their strength in service, they would be less affected by the challenges of transition. Throughout the first year, he says, "These people that we were deploying were coming back and saying the same thing: 'This has been the most—more than the impact I had, the impact this had on me was tremendous.' And to hear that from special-operations-type guys was pretty profound because they are generally considered to be not needing adjustment."

Once this cathartic effect of TR operations was identified, when the organization's members began to experience difficulties between operations, TR members and leaders began to see participation in operations as a potential solution to their emerging challenges. Jake Wood describes the time period when one of TR's founding members, Clay Hunt, began to decline: "He kept always saying, 'Man, Jake, if

I could just go and serve with TR, if I could just do this, if I had the opportunity to do this more regularly, what we did in Haiti, what we did in Chile,' then he's like, 'I think it would be enough [to keep me going].'"

TR leaders began to look for ways to ramp up engagement with the organization through a concept they called "TR Transition", in order to keep members engaged on a more frequent basis. This program was to deploy "units" of veterans to Port-au-Prince to an assigned section of the city with an array of specialties to oversee reconstruction – living and working together as a team, and having the benefit of seeing the progress of their efforts over time. After Clay's suicide, though, the team realized that "You can't transition somebody back to the US by sending them to Port-au-Prince for an extended period of time. On the surface it just didn't make sense after we thought about it deeper." It seemed that one of the lessons of Clay's suicide was that while service with TR was a positive influence, it could not be the only focus of transition – that essentially removing oneself from society and solely associating with other veterans would not be the most effective way to transition into a healthy social presence in the civilian world.

The organization decided instead to shift to domestic disaster response, which would be logistically simpler and more frequent – and to shift away from a largely special operations membership to intentionally seeking a much broader membership with potentially lower operational skillsets. By casting a wider net and responding to more frequent disasters, closer to home, in service to fellow Americans rather than overseas, TR could execute their mission of disaster response, but in doing so, touch more veterans' lives with the positive corollary effects of that mission and, thus, help foster a healthier transition into America's communities. This decision has been pivotal, as membership has now climbed to over 16,000 across the country and TR has responded to disasters nationwide.

TR's mission assists veterans with transition in a number of ways – social, psychological, and practical. Upon departure from the military, many (if not most) post-9/11 veterans suffer a loss of identity, sense of purpose or mission, and sense of belonging. The first major attraction of many of these veterans to Team Rubicon is the hope of replacing that which has been lost. Director of Program Operations Matt Runyon describes this effect by saying, "We ride in on this sexy mission of disaster relief. We get people to sign up and join our community because it's like signing up for the military again. It's something that's cool and flashy to be a part of. Once they get in, now there's comradery, a sense of purpose, identity, community." He continues, "When somebody leaves the military. They've lost their unit. They've lost their MOS. They've lost all these different components. They plug into Team Rubicon, and whether it's on a service project or it's on an operation, they plug back into the mission...They may be helping out with a Habitat build, right? Or it could be mucking out a house or tearing something down in Moore, Oklahoma. Building up or tearing down doesn't matter; they have a mission now. They're plugged back into a community of people that are like them, that sense of community like, 'I'm back with my group.'"

This social effect of regaining a sense of belonging and a sense of mission goes hand-in-hand with the psychological effect of helping veterans who have been suffering from PTSD or depression and may have been socially isolating themselves, which is a common problem for transitioning veterans dealing with these challenges. Matt Runyon describes one veteran who stated that, "I was holed up in my home. I was afraid to leave. I was never going to leave my home. Then I made the trip cross country and deployed, and I was able to connect with some people." Once in the TR community, as will be described

in further detail below, many of these veterans (who were initially attracted by the mission of disaster relief) feel more comfortable taking advantage of the mental health services TR provides – or, for those in crisis, the fact that they are members of the TR community can sometimes prevent them from harming themselves at the most critical moments simply due to the “social safety net” provided by being a member of a community.

Finally, TR’s mission assists veterans in transition through practical means. While described in further detail below, some of TR’s veterans take the training and experience they amass during operations to develop a professional skillset, whether in disaster operations management or as disaster responders. This is a gift not only of a profession, but also of a new identity, which was described as a common loss for transitioning veterans. The TR Training Team states that, “One of the things that we like to do at the end of the three training modules is have our operators look at themselves in the mirror and say, ‘I am a semi-professional disaster responder,’ and give them not only the tools, the tactics, the techniques, the knowledge, the base knowledge, but also give them that new identity, something that they can be proud of.”

While originally simply a group of veterans looking to make a difference in Haiti, the founders and leaders of Team Rubicon in some ways stumbled upon an innovative formula for veteran transition – a disaster relief organization which provides a sense of meaning for many of their peers who feel lost in the civilian world. While at times, these veterans can get so committed to the TR mission that they would rather go on TR missions than do their day jobs – or for those who are unemployed, seek “regular” employment – ultimately the benefits of TR provide a sense of meaning, support mental health, and can integrate veterans into the civilian world of work, which is much more than the founders could have asked for when boarding a plane to Port-au-Prince in 2010.

### Community Connectedness

Team Rubicon leverages connections to serve both the populations in the communities it serves – those in disaster response areas – as well as the veterans who volunteer on its behalf.

Team Rubicon understands that most disaster response situations are coordinated at the local level (not involving FEMA), and thus, they must fully integrate with the local community providers and build a strong network of organizations and volunteers to assist with a coordinated response. Chief Operating Officer Ken Harbaugh explains the TR approach: “The very first call is usually Home Depot – right away, in fact before the damage is even done, literally when the weather reports come in – because we need a base to operate out of, and we’ve been very lucky. I had no idea how many Home Depots there were. Heather’s emailing me and Jake, and Cal is emailing her people to identify which store is closest, who the store manager is, because that’s the epicenter of our response. We take 45 parking spaces or 90 parking spaces, that’s our footprint. We put the tents up. We set up the wash stations. We have a few parking spaces, put a fence around it all, and that’s the epicenter of our response. But shortly after that phone call, we’re reaching out to the local emergency-management officials, fire folks, police folks, city hall folks.”

To complement the TR workforce, large nonprofits such as Southern Baptists or Samaritan’s Purse often bus in scores of volunteers, while local churches and businesses do the same. Other veteran-serving nonprofits like Team Red, White, and Blue (Team RWB) will also notify their members that Team Rubicon is operating in the local area and that there are volunteer opportunities. Additionally, Team

Rubicon has an agreement with the Wounded Warrior Project such that when TR arrives in town, the organization will seek out all Wounded Warrior program alumni to check on them and see that they are safe after the disaster. Additionally, when not responding to disasters, Team Rubicon partners with Habitat for Humanity to identify service opportunities in communities across America, which leverage the skillset of TR volunteers to continuously engage their drive for service.

In these communities, Team Rubicon has emerged as a leader among volunteer disaster relief agencies, due in part to the leadership skills and professionalism demonstrated by its veterans. This leadership has at times caused some resentment among other organizations in the space: “We won the respect of a lot of the local emergency-management offices, and so they go to us, and we manage the volunteers. We're the ones who take the work orders, and then we go to Samaritan's Purse and say, ‘Here are your work orders.’ They used to go and get them directly from the incident commander, and now we're kind of running the show, and they trust us. So in three years, to take that position is awesome.” Through its partnership with, and leadership of, the organizations mentioned above, along with other volunteer disaster relief agencies, TR helps to form a network of agencies forming a coordinated response to disasters within America’s communities – albeit coordinated to varying levels at each event, all in service of those who have been affected.

Finally, by working with other veteran-serving nonprofit organizations, Team Rubicon networks for support of its veteran volunteers. These partnerships are viewed primarily through a “mind-body-spirit” triad. To serve their veterans’ minds, or mental health needs, Team Rubicon partners with Give-an-Hour, who provided a full-time mental health professional to join the TR staff, Dane Frost. Dane has helped develop mental health initiatives (such as suicide prevention training) and deploys with the organization to provide counseling as necessary. Another aspect of their veterans’ minds is education, for which TR partners with Student Veterans of America, which has chapters on hundreds of college and university campuses across the country, as well as the Pat Tillman Foundation, which provides scholarships for select veterans. For their veterans’ bodies, TR encourages their veterans to participate in Team RWB to maintain physical fitness, with the side effect of maintaining the sense of being a part of a team while they are not on deployment. For their veterans’ spirit, Team Rubicon sees itself as a provider, but also The Mission Continues, which is another way to engage a veteran’s sense of service and reintegrate them into a community. Through this web of organizations – almost all similar to Team Rubicon, being comprised of young, service-minded post-9/11 veterans – Team Rubicon has created a web of support which it believes can support many of their veterans needs when not engaged in operations.

### Social Connectedness

Much like the way in which Team Rubicon discovered its mission’s impact on veteran transition, it seems the organization has also discovered a similar impact on its ability to bridge the civilian-military divide. While setting out to respond to natural disasters and serve America’s communities by leveraging the talents and strengths of veterans, TR has also integrated veterans into these communities, helping the veterans learn more about their civilian counterparts and vice versa. The civilians being served learn the value of America’s veterans not through rhetoric but through experience. Chief Operating Officer Ken Harbaugh explains: “It says something that 40% of our funding comes in thin envelopes from civilians in communities whose homes we worked on. That's how we bridge the civil-military divide. We're a bunch of vets who go into a civilian community, because 99% of our communities are civilian, and we just, we work. You know, we do stuff. And the most powerful message that sends is that we're still valuable. We're still civic assets. And we don't need to say that; we just do it.”



Likewise, through partnership with other organizations, Team Rubicon creates engagement and learning opportunities between TR veterans and civilian volunteers, which can help the veterans get out of the sometimes insular “veteran world”, their attraction to which may have driven them to join TR, and engage with their civilian peers. Director of Field Operations Vince Moffitt tells the story of a veteran who was surprised to learn that civilians in New York wanted to hear his story: “In Sandy, we accidentally jumped into volunteer management. We weren't going to do that. So a lot of people were like, ‘Hey, I said I wanted to be with my brothers in arms, and now you give me a bunch of civilians, and I have to take these guys out for the day.’ This guy comes in from the field, and I said, ‘Hey, how was your day?’ He goes, ‘Man, it was awesome.’ I said, ‘What was so good about it?’ and he said, ‘Lunch.’ I thought he was joking, and he goes, ‘Man, we had MREs for lunch, and I had this group of kids, and we sat down with these college kids, and I showed them how to eat the MRE. And we were sitting there, and then they asked me about my experience in Afghanistan and sincerely asked me. No one ever asked me that before, and they asked me how I felt and what my opinion was on it. It was an experience I've never had before,’ and I think about that, because of that whole uniting them with the civilians.”

When TR founders discovered that their mission had the dual effect of fostering veteran transition, they worked to harness this effect by changing their structure (broadening opportunity) and aligning their operations (domestic vs. international). Likewise, in discovering the civ-mil divide effect, TR leadership is working to harness this to advance the employment outcomes of all veterans. By expanding the organization’s reach nationwide, TR hopes that potential employers will see the value of the post-9/11 generation as a whole, and when faced with a hiring decision, will look more favorably on veterans than they had before. Director of Program Operations Matt Runyon explains: “If we're able to show that veterans can continue to be those leaders in the community in addition to just doing just good work, [then we can change the narrative]...Hopefully we'll outpace what we hope to; but even if we don't, I think 75,000 [veteran volunteers] is our goal in five years, and I think that's enough, because we're already in all 50 states, to at least start changing the narrative. And if you can start changing the narrative, someone that saw Team Rubicon but doesn't know this veteran from any veteran but comes in and applies for the job, maybe they saw the vignette on Team Rubicon, and they're like, ‘I'm going to give this guy a chance because I saw what those vets are doing.’”

## Media

Team Rubicon has viewed its communications platforms as a strategic asset from the beginning of the organization. From the very first operation in Haiti, when the initial story of Team Rubicon was so compelling that \$40,000 came in almost instantly, TR leadership decided that rather than invest in a development team, they would invest in a communications team, and let the story do its own fundraising. At the beginning of the organization, TR hired three full-time staff members to manage communications, social media, and photography/videography and now, a full four years into the organization’s existence, they have hired a dedicated development staff member. On all operations, the communications team sends a photographer to capture compelling moments to tell the TR story and to highlight the work being done in affected communities. The communications team articulates their strategy: “We try to highlight the relationship between our veteran volunteers and our first responders, and especially our veteran volunteers and homeowners—members of the community. I think it's very rewarding for people to see that image because they see a veteran, they see a happy veteran. They don't see a veteran with PTS; they see someone who is getting something out of this organization, and they see the community member, the homeowner who's been affected by this storm, getting something

back from this organization or from that veteran. I think one of the things that I hear William and Jake say all the time is that we showcase veterans as assets and not liabilities, so when they're out doing this kind of work, it speaks for itself."

In addition to TR telling the story of its veterans, the organization encourages the veterans to tell their own stories. During operations, veterans and first responders are encouraged to share their own testimonials or reflections regarding their experiences, and these are shared online via social media. The communications team states that they "are really good at getting flooded with video from pretty much every operation", as more veterans become comfortable reflecting and sharing their stories as a result of their peers participating, and because of the effect they see in raising the profile of TR and getting more people involved. The communications team also takes written testimonials and puts a few words or a few pages of these as social media posts online, throughout the operation. These are often powerful examples of the impact that the organization has on its veterans, such as a recent example, which stated, "I was a recluse. Couldn't go out. I was on meds. Didn't want to leave the house. Was not re-acclimating to society at all. Took a chance. Came out on this operation. Haven't been on my meds, and positive, wonderful, have a new outlook on life. Found my purpose." While the TR communications team has set a goal of going back to the communities they served in, one to two years later, to take testimonials in order to gauge impact, this has proven more difficult to achieve.

With regard to social media, Team Rubicon has a broad reach – 80,000 likes on Facebook, compared to 16,000 volunteers – which demonstrates engagement with supporters far beyond their specific volunteer base. They have partly achieved this expansive following through targeted ad spending, but have also found that ad spending on social media for development purposes is ineffective. Due to their extensive social media engagement, however, and their deeply committed volunteer base, the communications team will send out packages of "approved" Tweets, or suggested links they would like their followers to share, either during operations or to support specific initiatives to expand the reach of their efforts and awareness. This peer-to-peer awareness also lends legitimacy to their messaging, as people demonstrating a personal commitment to the organization online are far more compelling than a purchased advertisement.

Due to the extensive engagement of Team Rubicon's volunteer base on social media, the leadership team can also use the social media platforms as a bellwether of sorts. COO Ken Harbaugh states that, "Our first warning bell is social media. That's how we sense discontent in the regions. It has been up until now. We're getting better at communicating with our regional leadership, but yeah, we absolutely use it as an antenna." By monitoring comments on posts or within discussion groups, regional leadership and national leadership can understand the attitudes and level of motivation of the volunteer base.

Using social media for a different type of warning signal, the tight-knit community has, on multiple occasions, noticed trouble on a TR member's page – troubling messages indicating suicidal thoughts, for example – which have mobilized a broad TR response which has, in some cases, saved that member's life, or in less extreme cases, simply motivated them to seek mental health services. The closeness of the in-person community on operations translates to an online community which looks out for each other. Director of Program Operations Matt Runyon explains: "What we've seen across the board, as people go out on missions, as people interact in their regions, is that they all know the people who are struggling with challenges; and as they do and they see there are no negative repercussions, they know people are getting help, they see the wraparound service that's occurring, interestingly, on Facebook. Somebody

makes a post on Facebook, and swarm, like [there's a] TR Nation response. 'You're the man. If you need anything, let me know.' People are willing to drop what they're doing to go help somebody without judgment. It's happened mostly organically, which I'm really proud to say, but as that's occurred and people have seen it, I think it's increased people's ability to reach out to one another and have this organic thing start to occur. I think that's what's growing this, honestly. I think, truthfully—I think we've seen now two people that we know of commit suicide in Team Rubicon. People have seen these instances of occurrence, they don't want to see those happen again, and they see people all around them. I don't know, this community has meant something in kind of destigmatizing and actually responding to these instances of crises.”

Finally, with regard to traditional media, Team Rubicon has largely focused on engaging with local media when on operations to connect with the communities where they are operating. In these instances, they seek to introduce the veteran volunteers to the audience as best as possible rather than be a “talking head”, or they put out local press releases. That said, TR Headquarters does put out national releases from time to time and, when conducting events for national holidays like Memorial Day or Veterans Day, or when conducting major operations like responding to Hurricane Sandy, they will engage with the national media to get the story out.

### Veteran Programming Differentiation

The notion of veteran differentiation – that is, to differentiate programming based on various sub-cohorts within the veteran community – does not apply to Team Rubicon, as the organization does not have different programs or teams for various cohorts within the veteran population (such as Vietnam veterans versus post-9/11 veterans, veterans with disabilities, women veterans, etc.). It was mentioned that veterans of older generations have volunteered with Team Rubicon and do participate in TR programming and operations, though the overwhelming focus of the organization is on post-9/11 veterans. Likewise, there is no differentiation between veterans and civilians, as the organization allows civilian first responders and non-responder civilians to join its ranks. Though not advertised, there is no quote for the ratio of veterans to civilians, and this ratio is currently about 80/20.

The story and success of Team Rubicon, however, highlights a few factors which potentially differentiate veterans from the civilian population – or at least illustrate particular strengths worthy of highlighting among the veteran population.

As discussed above, TR's success in recruiting veterans is due in large part to veterans' thirst for camaraderie, teamwork, mission, and sense of purpose. The strength of peer networks and a sense of renewed identity for this generation of veterans is paramount, and the ability to re-join a “pseudo military” to deploy again – to do something both adventurous and in service to others – is extremely attractive. Photos of TR veterans on operations often show volunteers wearing camouflage pants and combat boots with their TR t-shirts – that is, they wear a common “uniform”. They buy common gear from the TR store online. And like many post-9/11 veterans who got tattoos with unit insignia while in the military, many Team Rubicon volunteers have now gotten TR logo tattoos, as well. A member of the TR communications team highlighted this commitment to the organization: “I know of no other organization, especially in the veterans' space, that has that sort of engagement with their volunteers where they'll want to go onto the store and buy the hoodie, buy the coozie, get the tattoo, you know? We've got tattoos left and right, and that shows that—I mean, this is something that's not just like, 'It was a great experience.'” This deep commitment to the TR brand, mission, and team is potentially quite

unique to the veteran community and likely to be difficult to find among other social service providers, though one might argue that other communities who have also survived common hardship (breast cancer survivors, for example) could be similar.

In its earlier days, the TR team was sometimes criticized by other disaster relief organizations for their perceived cavalier approach and, likely due to their youth as an organization, some branded them “cowboys.” This can be potentially attributed to what the training team refers to as the “rough edges” which they state that many veterans have – the notion that many veterans wear their former experiences as a badge of honor today and carry an attitude of, “Screw you, I don’t need to cooperate. I’ve done my piece.” They state that, “We’ve got a lot of attitude about us, and those rough edges, for us to integrate into the civilian world and to be successful, they have to come off. We’re very outspoken and very easily put on our guard. For us to collaborate, for us to work, for us to be accepted by all of these other agencies—FEMA, the Southern Baptists, American Red Cross, in the Philippines the Filipino Government—we have to become a lot more humble. We kind of have to look at collaboration also as, ‘How do we get back into the workplace? How do I function as a good civilian? I was a great soldier. How do I be a good civilian now?’”

In a dichotomy unsurprising to those familiar with members of the US military, these “rough edges” are also matched with a humility characteristic of those who have served. TR’s veterans understand that ahead of personal pride among disaster response agencies, the fundamental purpose of participating in the organization and in operations is to serve others. TR volunteers typically use vacation days from their regular employers to take time to respond to disasters, doing whatever is necessary to support the cause. The training team describes this level of dedication to the mission: “You get out there, you are not at all mistaken – these people are the real deal. They have dropped everything, and they are doing whatever it takes. I was one of the fortunate ones who got a chance to go to the Philippines, and it was just jaw-dropping service and humility and commitment.”

This humility is not just limited to the veterans’ commitment to service, but in the execution of the missions as well. CEO Jake Wood described a culture ingrained in veterans during their service – that they serve at the pleasure of the commander and do whatever is asked of them – which carries over to disaster scenarios. When the incident commander or mayor interacts with TR leadership on the ground, Wood expects that they will respond as they would while in the military: “Hey, sir, if this is what you want me to do, this is what I’m going to do. I’m going to execute this to the best of my ability. I respectfully ask if we’d consider doing this as a course of action.” Likewise, they understand that they cannot dictate what tasks they are asked to accomplish, but must do whatever will be most useful for the situation at hand. Wood states, “I think a lot of people think that we, they initially don’t like us until they interact with us, and then they go, ‘Wow, these guys are hardworking, they are humble, they’re respectful.’ We show up, and we just say, ‘Guys, here’s what we can do. How can we serve you?’ And if the city says, ‘Listen, we’ve got control. Here’s the little thing that you can do.’—‘Hey, let’s go do it. Let’s go burn trash. We’ll be the best goddamn trash burners you have.’”

Finally, when interacting with members of the community, Wood believes that post-9/11 veterans have learned a humility through their military service that makes them uniquely qualified to come into unfamiliar communities, build relationships, learn what needs to be done, and accomplish the task at hand. He states that, “The type of warfare that we fought for ten years required young men and women to go into villages and interact with a population of strangers—you know, culturally different, language

barriers, and all those things. Luckily, the cultures may be different, the language barrier doesn't exist when we do it, but there's a nuance to walking into somebody else's backyard and saying, 'We'd like to help, and here's how we can do that.'"

### Employment and Education

For some of Team Rubicon's volunteers, participation is not just a way to give back to communities, find a sense of purpose, and once again feel like a member of a team, but also a way to develop skills which may eventually lead to employment. Over time, Team Rubicon has developed its training modules to enhance the training level of its volunteers, but it has worked to develop its own certifications system which it is working to align with some system of accreditation. Because each module requires quizzes and learning outcomes, and each results in a completion certificate, the team hopes to identify a way to provide continuing education credits for the successful completion of each module. Likewise, as part of the five year vision to build the "TR Academy", Team Rubicon envisions a physical campus where volunteers could come to train in person on all of the skills involved in disaster response to get education credits and certifications which could help lead to employment.

One challenge for those members of Team Rubicon who are already employed, however, is managing their participation in disaster response operations with their employers. While, anecdotally, most employers are supportive of veterans' desires to participate, it can at times be challenging to store up the necessary vacation time to participate. Additionally, some uncertainty in the activation process can leave volunteers having taken vacation but not having deployed. COO Ken Harbaugh explains: "We see a tornado touch down in an area, and we put out the word, 'Hey, we're going to need people in this area. We're not sure yet.' What a lot of people do as soon as they get the email—they start packing. They take off work, and they sit around the phone for three days desperate, you know, to go on the deployment, and then we say, 'We don't need you. We've got the team,' and they are just heartbroken. And we're like, 'Did you read the initial activation? It didn't say 'quit your job,' it didn't say 'pack your bags,' it said 'heads up.'" So we clearly haven't struck that balance appropriately yet because it happens with every deployment somebody says, 'Hey, I was there for you guys, and you didn't use me. And I took off work, and I burned vacation days.' So that's frustrating for everybody."

### Independent Sector Involvement

As mentioned above, Team Rubicon's most important strategic partner is Home Depot, as when disaster strikes, the two organizations work together to immediately identify the nearest store to coordinate a response, where Home Depot can donate space, and sometimes tools if necessary. Additionally, TR is developing a partnership with the Home Depot Foundation, Habitat for Humanity and Student Veterans of America, to identify projects for TR veterans to volunteer on while not conducting disaster response missions and for TR to identify veterans who Habitat can build for.

### Reintegration with Family

While Team Rubicon mentioned no specific efforts to integrate veterans' families into their program, they also do not exclude families from participating, as both veterans and civilians are welcome to volunteer as members of the team. One might infer that TR deployments and the desire to deploy could create tension in a family as it could create stress on the family member who is not deployed (increased child care responsibilities, for example), or could reduce stress on the family, as the cathartic effect of participating in TR operations could present a healing and transformative influence on the family which might have previously been dealing with difficulties arising from the service member's transition-related

challenges.

### Women Veteran Efforts

There was no discussion of women veterans, their unique needs and concerns, or the extent of their participation in Team Rubicon during the team's site visit. It was not apparent to what extent women veterans are involved in TR operations and programming relative to male veterans or what potential accommodations TR may need to make (or what they do make) while deployed for their female members. One might assume that, similar to those which arise during military operations and deployments, certain hygienic and privacy issues might need to be accommodated with regard to lodging, though these issues were not discussed.

## 4. Key Learnings and Reflections

### Catalysts of Impact

In just four years, Team Rubicon is emerging as one of the leading disaster response organizations in the country, but also as one of the more publicly prominent veterans' service organizations, though this secondary mission was never their stated intent.

The strength of Team Rubicon's performance as a disaster relief organization can be traced to its use of its human capital – veterans. Veterans themselves, the founders realized early on that their skillsets developed in the military were uniquely suited for disaster response – that not only were they motivated by the call to serve and comfortable operating in potentially dangerous or unstable environments – but that their rapid risk-assessment, mission planning, and small-unit leadership skills were critical to the mission at hand. These are skills that almost any service member develops at any level, as even a corporal is charged with leading two to four service members, and can transfer those skills to a disaster response. Further, Team Rubicon applies those planning and leadership skills in a structured and formalized way through the development of operations orders which they call Instant Action Plan (IAP). These plans contain contingency information such as emergency evacuation routes, hospital contact information, etc.

By tapping into this skillset, Team Rubicon motivates a specialized veteran workforce to use a set of strengths and abilities which many good-hearted, non-veteran disaster response volunteers may not otherwise have. The notion that TR taps into a veteran's drive to serve, be a member of a team, and to be around fellow veterans has been discussed, but tapping a veteran's military skillset – planning and leading – also awakens a drive within them which makes them feel “at home” doing this kind of work. Veterans feel like once again they are doing what they are good at, and in the “real world” they may either be looking for work or may have “civilian” jobs which do not require them to take on similar levels of responsibility or leadership to those they had in the military. This often leaves veterans disaffected and disappointed with civilian life and civilian employment. Serving with Team Rubicon places them back in a position of such significance – helping, serving, and, importantly, leading. Matching their technical skillset, their leadership skills, and their passion for service, Team Rubicon motivates a powerful workforce to accomplish its mission of disaster response.

Likewise, a common trait of post-9/11 veterans lauded by those advocating for their employment is their comfort with and ability to leverage technology and established organizational frameworks and systems. To establish itself as a leader in the field, Team Rubicon has adopted the use of the leading

technologies and software in the disaster response industry, including cloud computing and Palantir, as well as integrating with the National Incident Management System (NIMS). They also operate within the FEMA-prescribed Incident Command System (ICS) framework, which differentiates them from many other nonprofit disaster response organizations. Describing the value of training their veterans on these systems, COO Ken Harbaugh states that, “We want all of our people to be able to show up onsite and know what they're looking at, know what's expected of them and be able to add value. That's one of the things that differentiates us from other disaster-relief organizations that have a lot of bodies, but often they take more than they give.”

CEO Jake Wood expands on the impact that the use of these systems has had on their reputation in the community: “The emergency-management community is so outdated and outmoded it's unbelievable, particularly on the non-profit side. So yes, the fact that we even know how to use Cloud computing to collaborate in real time blows people's minds. So Palantir, and then by and large, we are 100 percent differentiating ourselves from all of the other major players in the space...There's an organizing body called the National VOAD—National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters. It's a coalition of the major national players in disaster response. Red Cross, Samaritan's Purse, Salvation Army, Southern Baptists, you know—their bylaws restricted us from getting access to that coalition for another two years. They basically threw the bylaws out the window and brought us in. We've been presenting at their national conferences. I mean, they in many ways are pointing at us saying, ‘This is where we need to be going.’”

While taking advantage of the skills and passion of their veteran volunteer “workforce” to execute the TR mission, Team Rubicon clearly acknowledges and understands that veterans can face transition challenges. While this could be seen as a potential liability or weakness in their model, one of the strengths of TR's infrastructure is the addition of mental health resources to support its veterans. The leadership team discussed a time when they faced a crossroads, deciding whether to focus solely on becoming an elite, highly-professional disaster relief organization, or to acknowledge the impact that their mission has on transitioning veterans who may be suffering from some mental health challenges, and to embrace a slightly less professional, but more inclusive workforce, incorporating mental health resources to support these veterans. Director of Program Operations Matt Runyon explains:

“We had a large philosophical debate last year, just to give some context—are we going to be a professional organization? Are we going to be inclusive?...I think when you start professionalizing to the nth degree, you certainly cut out a number of people in this organization that for a multitude of reasons specific to post-traumatic stress and sometimes TBI, the challenges that they're facing as a result of them coming home from war, they are unable to professionalize to the same extent as some of our more resilient individuals, at least at the early onset, right?...It's a chink in the armor of some folks that are unwilling to address mental health on their own and giving us the opportunity to be suggestive in the sense that they can go and seek out these resources. These folks that are struggling aren't calling me. They're aren't calling Ken. They're not calling Jake. They're calling their battle buddy from their deployment, and they're saying, ‘Hey, I'm really struggling,’ and then that person's like, ‘Holy \*\*\*\*, what do I do?’ Now then they're calling us, and we have resources that are available that are then able to help inform and guide and give clarity to the person that in the moment. Well, we're trying to break down those barriers by creating a bunch of resources that are available—tools for our folks, guidelines, points of contact. We're building a consultancy relationship. The way that all works is because this peer relationship, organic peer relationship is occurring through our membership. They're creating

friendships that they don't have on the outside.”

These resources include the addition of Dane Frost, brought to Team Rubicon from partner organization Give an Hour, which is a national network of mental health providers who agree to donate one hour of mental health services to service members, veterans, and their families, per week. Dane is essentially a full-time employee of Team Rubicon, deploying with the organization on disaster relief missions, and providing counseling to volunteers on site as necessary. Dane's presence has been so successful that TR is hoping to deploy a Give an Hour resource like him to every region within the organization. In addition, TR has instituted ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) in a train-the-trainer model, such that the regional managers are trained and push the training down to the veteran volunteer levels. In the scenario described above, each veteran should know what to do if one of his or her friends posts on Facebook or suggests in conversation that he or she intends to do themselves personal harm.

Finally, the sum of all of these strengths makes an incredibly compelling public narrative: returning veterans coming home, using “hands trained for war” (as CEO Jake Wood says) to serve their fellow citizens in peace; leveraging skills learned in combat overseas to respond to dangerous and sometimes deadly situations at home; and binding the wounds of disaster victims while healing some of their own in the process. This narrative draws recruits to their ranks, funding to their coffers, and talent to their organization.

This last point actually creates a problem, where TR attracts talent which is overqualified for the positions it advertises for, it then can have difficulty retaining that talent because the highly qualified individuals find the work they were hired to do unsatisfying. CEO Jake Wood explains: “People were leaving their own organizations were coming to us saying, ‘I'm willing to take an associate-level position with the hope of growing.’ Just to be a part of this cultural phenomenon, whatever was happening here. The ability of our organization to attract the top tower is shifted drastically the past year I think. It's hard to stay at a level of performance when you keep raising the bar of individuals joining the team, right? Their expectations are high. They're going to be personally motivated, professionally challenged. I mean, how do you live up to those expectations? I think one of the biggest issues with that is how do you keep that person? We're hiring associates because we have associate-level work. We can fill that with, for instance, somebody who's got a JD and used to run his own law firm and was corporate counsel at a start-up that got acquired. Now I'm a big believer in talent density, right? The more sharp minds we can bring in here, the better at all levels of the organization; but that associate-level work still needs to get done. How can you keep that person hungry by providing them with meaningful, high-level work? That's something that we're working through right now.” To the outside observer, this is a good problem to have.

### Barriers to Impact

The story of Team Rubicon's challenges is largely that of an organization in the early stages of an organization's development – transitioning from informal to formal processes and structures, implementing new systems, and wrestling with the competing challenges of resource allocation. Accelerating from zero to 16,000 volunteers in four years would put a strain on any organization, and Team Rubicon's leaders are working to build the infrastructure to support and solidify such rapid growth, as well as to build a plan to enable their eventual goal of reaching 75,000 volunteers in the future.



The leadership of Team Rubicon was straightforward with the organizational challenges they face, and are fully aware that they are in a period of transition from a startup to a more stable, long-term operation. Planning, reporting, and communication of expectations has been largely ad hoc until this point, and strict delineation of roles has sometimes been lacking, as in a rapidly growing organization, an “all hands on deck” mentality is often necessary. During steady-state operations, a once-per-week staff meeting was sufficient to keep the staff informed and informal communication was adequate. When disaster struck (literally), many organizational processes often came to a halt to facilitate the operational response and the deployment of volunteers and supplies. Chief Operating Officer Ken Harbaugh states that, “A year ago when an operation, any operation, kicked off at TR, everything stopped. Program operations stopped. Finance stopped. Everything stopped, and we focused on the operation. We’re very quickly getting to the point now where operations happen almost as an afterthought, which is really cool considering that’s our primary mission. They just sort of happen automatically. So we’re starting to have the mental space to be able to do exactly what you implied there and plan and have a strategy working toward that 75,000.”

CEO Jake Wood recognizes these challenges and the notion that everyone in the organization may not see TR’s organizational development through the same lens. He tells a story of a funder who passed him a decades-old article from Harvard Business Review about the phases of organizational development, which Wood then distributed to his team for professional development and discussion. Through conversation, Wood realized that not everyone on the team agreed as to where the organization sat, and particularly that those who had been there longest saw the organization as further along on the developmental spectrum than new arrivals. He states, “I had a couple of people approach me and say, ‘You know, it’s funny, I saw where you thought we were in this, but people at this level think we’re here. They don’t think we’ve gone through this phase yet, and other people think we’re here.’ Your perspective is always going to be different depending on what department you’re in or what level you sit at. Or when you came into the organization. You know, because you guys are seeing how far you’ve come, whereas if I’m only six months here and I’m thinking, ‘Man, I’ve been banging my head against the wall for six months.’”

To push the team further along this developmental spectrum, Wood and his leadership team are restructuring the regional model, hiring more administrative staff, instituting more formal communications procedures, and instituting a more formal meeting schedule to ensure adequate strategic planning well in advance of the annual leadership summit, which has traditionally been the catalyst for thinking about such matters. A barrier for such professionalization, however, is the long-standing informal culture of the organization, which many members have appreciated. Members of the leadership team have mentioned that this has sparked some resistance within the organization, but that the changes are necessary. According to one, “One of the pitfalls of professionalizing is – walls. Closed doors. I hate closing the door.” There is a sense among some that perhaps the pendulum has swung too far in the “professionalization” direction and away from the culture which defines the organization; finding this balance will be critical moving forward.

In addition to formalized processes, in its rush to rapid growth, Team Rubicon has focused mostly on hiring personnel to support operations and communications rather than to support the core infrastructure of the administration of an organization, such as finance, accounting, and development. Part of this was driven by their desire, as a young organization, to ensure that their administrative costs were low for fundraising purposes – they wanted to protect their ratings in systems like Guidestar and

Charity Navigator while seeking needed resources. But this was also driven by an earnest need for support in the field. CEO Jake Wood explains their decision making process: “We felt like if we were going to continue to safely respond to disasters, we had some needs in field operations that we had to address. Increased capacity in field operations increased our operational tempo, which had this huge disproportionate impact on [our administrative staffer]. Because now you have massive operations taking place, which means that she shuts down bookkeeping to make sure that the operations are getting paid, people have money when they need it, and then you're under a mountain of expense reports on the back end.”

TR’s human capital challenges are heightened by their heavy reliance upon volunteer leadership in the regions. Disparity in quality across volunteer leaders leads to disparity in quality of engagement with volunteers across the country. TR leadership isn’t certain for how long the momentum that they currently have will last, so they feel a real pressure to figure out the structures and processes to standardize quality of engagement across the country to ensure that they are properly harnessing the motivation of their volunteer base and solidifying the membership of the organization in the case that current momentum does wane. Two outcomes are possible, according to CEO Jake Wood: “When people join TR, they either have an incredible experience from the moment they join—they join in a region that's got a strong leadership team that's having constant engagement activities, that has multiple disasters annually that gives them an opportunity to respond to—or they join a region with a dysfunctional leadership team that doesn't have engagement opportunities in between disasters. And they come in. They're motivated as hell. They're inspired by the mission, inspired by the brand; six months later, they don't even remember what Team Rubicon is because they've never been engaged.” This disparity arises because of the varying quality of leaders – either high-quality, professional leaders who have little time to devote to the organization because of their professional success outside of Team Rubicon or leaders who have 40 hours to devote because they are unemployed and lack the same leadership skill set. This can be a difficult trade-off to face.

The final challenge facing Team Rubicon is the paradox of any disaster relief organization – a lack of disasters to respond to is good for the country, but harmful to the organization, in that it leads to lack of volunteer engagement with the organization; finding ways to manage “down-time” between disasters becomes a challenge. TR leadership worries that people join the organization, motivated by their drive for continued service and seeking to respond to disasters, and they lose momentum if there is not a near-term opportunity to take advantage of that motivation. Without a disaster to respond to, a social activity to incorporate them into the group, training to increase their skill set, or a volunteer activity to provide an outlet for their desire to serve, volunteers may leave the organization before long. In the case of Team Rubicon, this necessity to manage “down time” may in fact be particularly urgent at times, given the possible challenges some of its volunteers are facing (recall Clay Hunt’s desire to participate in TR more frequently). Some veterans who develop a particularly strong attachment to Team Rubicon activities due to their loss of identity or disaffection with civilian life feel a compelling need to connect with other members of the group and to deploy in support of TR. Without frequent engagement, these members may feel at risk.

### Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

In addition to more formalized planning and communications processes mentioned above, as well as developing the human capital resources necessary to support a more robust administrative infrastructure, Team Rubicon is making efforts moving into 2015 to expand their ability to conduct more

operations by pushing greater autonomy to their regional levels. By granting greater financial, staffing, and operational autonomy to the regions, TR leadership believes there will be less reliance upon headquarters and therefore the organization will be able to conduct more operations simultaneously. Director of Program Operations Matt Runyon states that, “I would like to see in 2015 regions able to call their own operation, do everything it takes to plan the operation, and then also staff the operation.” In order to accomplish this, regions must make use of the Incident Command System to plan the operation from inception to execution, so training more people in the organization on this system will be critical.

Likewise, TR seeks to grow the organization’s volunteer base, not only in size but in geographic reach, such that when disasters strike TR will be able to deploy local teams more cost-effectively. Chief Operating Officer Ken Harbaugh states that, “We want to have 75,000 fully engaged—vetted, engaged, and trained—members...The end result is to be able to respond to disasters, domestic disasters, whenever we want, and 75,000 will give us the volunteer density to be able to draw people to any disaster in the country within I think 100 miles. There’s an economy of scale when you have that many vetted, engaged, and trained members...We had a failed operation, one of the only operations that we cancelled, when members were en route in Alaska because we didn’t have the density...With 75,000, our guess, and it’s an educated guess but still a guess, is that we’ll have that density, we’ll have those relationships, we won’t have to cancel missions or say no when a disaster that we can respond to happens.”

In addition to increasing organizational effectiveness through procedures and structures, Team Rubicon is making efforts to measure their impact on both the communities they serve and their own volunteers. For example, in the communities they serve, TR tracks the number of volunteer hours worked, which FEMA values at \$22 per hour. This provides an estimate of the cost of services saved by the community by TR’s presence. In addition, TR has worked to establish estimates of the cost of their services, from home demolition to home muck-outs, though they acknowledge that this cost would vary by home size and geographic location. These cost estimates are provided both to their donors as an estimate of economic impact as well as to communities, which then report the estimates to the federal government for reimbursement purposes.

Seeking to measure impact on their own volunteers, Team Rubicon has recently developed a survey instrument to measure quality and impact of engagement through a behavioral self-assessment. This tool measures the effect deployment has on TR members – how they feel on deployment as compared to before, and how they feel after as compared to on deployment. Does deployment, in fact, have a positive effect on them, as hypothesized, and/or does this positive effect fade? Does this positive effect wear off, or leave a net positive in the end? Does participation in TR activities improve members’ outlook on life, relationships with friends and family, connections with the community, etc.? In addition, TR seeks to identify the “right” amount of engagement with Team Rubicon. Director of Program Operations Matt Runyon hypothesizes that there is a tipping point – prior to this point, as engagement increases, the mental health benefits of engagement increase, but after this point, the member’s relationships with family and their employer begin to suffer as they neglect their responsibilities to everyday life in favor of the organization. Through increased surveys and measurement, TR leadership seeks to better understand the organization’s relationship and effect on its membership and better advocate for healthy engagement, as well as best articulate TR’s value to stakeholders and funders.


Related to managing optimal engagement with the organization, Team Rubicon has established goals to

best manage the problem of “down time” between deployments which leads to decreased volunteer engagement. In addition to organizing social events and volunteer opportunities with Habitat for Humanity as mentioned above, Team Rubicon is expanding its training program for volunteers. This serves the dual purpose of providing engagement opportunities as well as a more highly trained force for future deployments to enhance the organization’s capability. The three modules of training take TR members from “welcome to Team Rubicon” through hazards to look for in the field; values and culture; basics of operations like personal protective equipment; tools tactics and techniques; specific skills like chainsaw operations or skid steer training; and small unit leadership in the field. Modules will either be delivered online or both online and in-person, with some modules being developed with the goal of providing continuing education credits for their completion.

One challenge in the development of these training modules is curriculum development, as many of these skills must be adapted to the disaster environment. The training team explains: “We realized very, very early on that we’re playing on a very unique playing ground. The disaster ground is extremely unique, so taking a building down that’s structurally sound is completely different than taking a building down that’s suffered high-wind damage or severe water damage. We are working in an environment that is contaminant rich and hazard rich. For example, on chainsaws we could have used the logging industry. Unfortunately, we’re not taking down free-standing trees. We’re taking down trees that have metal embedded in them, that have wood imbedded in them, debris embedded in them; and if we make contact, which is inevitable with the chain, we are going to have kickback. We’re going to have chain disintegration. So we needed to first of all work out, do we write our own standards, or do we plagiarize what’s already out there? We decided we’d be doing a disservice to everybody, so we are writing a standard that we feel is going to be higher than many of the applicable standards out there.” Through the development of this unique curriculum, the training team seeks to both solve the problem of “down-time” as well as increase the TR skill set, further setting the organization apart in comparison to other volunteer disaster relief organizations.

Long-term, Team Rubicon seeks to shift its mission from solely disaster response to incorporating disaster preparedness and recovery as well. As it surveys the landscape of the disaster “industry”, the organization sees considerable amounts of faulty or misleading information about disaster preparedness, which it sees an opportunity to correct. TR leadership would like to prepare educational materials for families across America to help identify supplies they already own and instruct these families how to develop their own disaster kits, as opposed to currently-existing information which leads to kits that create what TR calls “secondary casualties”. The training team states that, “What we want to do is, and we’ve talked about this extensively, we want to be the sane voice of disaster. We don’t want to talk to people about guns and fighting off the hordes. Every disaster I’ve ever attended, people come together. What we’d like to do—you know, this is the ‘Dream the Dream’ kind of thing—what we’d like to do is through training, take TR to the point we are seen as credible, believable, reliable, and then say to America, ‘Hey, do you know what? We can actually save a hell of a lot more lives if you guys help us. You don’t need to go out and spend a fortune on disaster kits. You probably already have all this stuff,’ but if we can create the feeling that we are respected, we are credible, and we are not in it for anything, I think that we can get a lot of people in America to take our first step.”

With regard to disaster recovery, TR leaders see an opportunity to develop apprenticeship programs for their members, which could lead to long-term employment opportunities. Through working in years-long recovery operations in the wake of Hurricanes Sandy or Katrina, veterans could serve as apprentice



electricians, plumbers, masons, or carpenters. While this curriculum does not yet exist, TR leaders imagine a potential program in cooperation with an organization like Habitat for Humanity, or potentially making use of GI Bill benefits to get veterans credentialed and on the path to permanent careers.

Team Rubicon sees a future where it is thoroughly integrated into the fabric of the nation's disaster response infrastructure. TR leaders envision a world where their name is as synonymous with "disaster response" as the Red Cross, and hope that for at least a large segment of the American population, the compelling message of veterans giving back to their country in a new mode of service will compel donors to default to TR as their natural choice to support. With a target of 75,000 volunteers across the nation, when disaster strikes, TR hopes to be the first on the scene, and the trusted agent ready to manage the response.