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Bringing in the National Champions: The Albertson Foundation aids rural veterans

The J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation stands out from the other philanthropies in this guidebook in that it's fully focused on Idaho, a predominantly rural state that ranks 39th in the U.S. by population. Idaho is a less expensive location for most kinds of programming. And its size and lack of bureaucracy make it possible to create high-impact, state-wide programs relatively quickly. The flip side is that low population density can make it hard to maintain

offices and staffing in convenient locations across the state, and challenging to find or home-grow nonprofit service providers that can carry out specialized work.

Since it was established in 1966 from the fortune of grocer Joe Albertson and his wife, the Albertson Foundation has invested \$700 million in promoting education and “limitless learning for all Idahoans.” Under the current leadership of Jamie Jo Scott, Albertson’s great granddaughter, the foundation doesn’t just cut checks to organizations and ideas it likes. It often incubates campaigns in-house before spinning them off into separate organizations.

Many prior initiatives have focused on improving K-12 education, like bringing Teach For America to the state, and developing “Don’t Fail Idaho,” an awareness campaign to make education reform a top local priority. “We view the investments we make,” says Scott, “as a vehicle to a better economic outcome for Idaho’s future.” Oftentimes, “that involves recruiting talent, and keeping it here. With homegrown talent we want to make sure they have opportunities, and don’t have to leave to take advantage of them. To new talent we want to send a message: ‘You’re a leader, you’re a student, you’re an entrepreneur—we want you.’ It’s trying to sell the state we believe in.”

A new effort to serve veterans

In 2013, the foundation started looking at places beyond education where it could have these effects. There was a willingness to consider cultivating veterans as a source of talent in Idaho. The board invited me, as The Philanthropy Roundtable’s program director on veterans, to speak at one of the meetings. I encouraged the foundation to treat veterans as civic assets, not damaged goods.

This resonated, because, as Scott put it, “we have a bit of a leadership drought in Idaho.” The idea of cultivating veterans as local leaders appealed to Blossom Johnston, the program officer at the foundation who had overseen many of its education projects. “In some of our rural communities, for instance, we have problems getting good school board members. It’s a lot of work and a very thankless job. But with the right people, we could see the education system turn around in a big way.” The foundation also envisioned veterans helping to transform communities through their work in businesses and government. “We want veterans or their spouses on city councils, chambers of commerce, the state legislature,” Johnston notes, “or in the governor’s office.”

Despite its enthusiasm for cultivating veterans as state leaders, the foundation had not found any local organization around which it could build much momentum. Then Scott and Johnston attended a talk at a 2014 Philanthropy Roundtable meeting featuring two founders of stellar national organizations for vets. Eric Greitens is founder of The Mission Continues, a group that encourages and enables civilian service by former members of the military. Jake Wood is co-founder of Team Rubicon, which organizes veterans to offer volunteer assistance to communities after disasters hit. Inspired by their presentations, Scott and Johnston saw these groups as the kinds of organizations they could build statewide efforts from. So they committed the foundation and began to map out an approach.

Johnston's mandate was to do the most she could for the largest number of Idahoans. In practical terms this meant the foundation would not consider high-cost, long-horizon programs like health care or mental-health treatment. An Idaho veteran and businessman advising her, Joe Forney, warned that issues like mental health could become a "black hole," with a high risk of entangling the foundation with problems endemic to the dysfunctional V.A. bureaucracy. Three focus groups of Idaho veterans commissioned by Johnston urged the foundation to focus on important practical aspects of the transition from military to civilian life, like jobs and community involvement.

Recruiting the nation's best

On the surface, it seemed like there were lots of veterans' organizations in Idaho. But looks were deceiving. Many of the existing groups fell prey to the "veterans as victims" approach, or didn't meet the foundation's emphasis on building up people and organizations into self-sufficiency, or lacked the strong leadership needed to expand. This left two options: build up groups from scratch, or find national nonprofits that were doing great work and convince them to come to Idaho. For Johnston, the choice was obvious. Convincing successful charities to expand to Idaho would be less difficult and less risky. So her team began looking for the very best nonprofits for veterans in the country.

Albertson spent about a year vetting different organizations, getting to know their leadership, culture, operating procedures, and measures of success. Scott identifies four major themes that run through all of the organizations the foundation eventually invited to Idaho:

"First, they don't see veterans as victims, and they try to target a population of veterans who truly want to be helped. They don't see

themselves as enabling vehicles; they see themselves as leading to self-betterment. They talk about themselves differently, they attract a population that is not interested in being dependent.”

“Second, they operate with a true sense of being really good at one thing, or maybe two things. They have mastered the work they care about, and don’t try to do everything. Some organizations that tackle complex issues flounder into doing hundreds of things, none of them well. It’s easy to fall prey to mission creep.”

“Third, the groups we chose make important changes in the way they operate based on what they see is and isn’t working. They have business acumen, carefully measure their effects, and care about the impact they’re having.”

“Last, these groups have built incredible leadership teams. Leadership is the key to everything else.”



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Once it had identified the most promising partners, Albertson faced the challenge of convincing each group to expand to a place it had not previously considered. Scott and the team were undaunted. “We do this all the time,” because Idaho is not on many must-include lists. “It’s easy for us, because we love our state,” and it has discovered that the more people learn about it, the likelier they are to be impressed.

Their pitch as evangelists for Idaho went something like this: You can have big, unambiguous effects here. We recruited Teach For America here under the same premise, and it proved out. We have so much less scar tissue and sclerosis and bureaucratic inertia—you can come here, work for a year, and transform a community. When you go to bigger states and cities there are often a variety of services that already exist. We have nothing like your services here, and there is a hungry audience. We’ve done this with education-reform groups, we’ve done this with venture-capital groups. You will see clear successes.

Not every organization responded to this message, but the ones they most wanted to convince did. Initially, Albertson recruited three national veterans’ organizations and one local organization. When the foundation

realized the smaller local organization was unable to keep pace with the others, it was replaced.

The three national nonprofits are groups that come up repeatedly in this book: Hire Heroes USA. Team Red, White, and Blue. And Team Rubicon.

Hire Heroes USA is the employment pillar. It offers a combination of one-on-one job coaching for veterans and spouses, group workshops focused on employment for individuals leaving the military, and cultivation of employers. The nonprofit decided to sign on after some initial hesitation because, as COO Nate Smith explains, “we discovered that the underemployment rate for veterans in Idaho was actually quite high. That information, combined with JKAF’s unique ability to influence the Idaho market, was an attractive proposition for us.”

Team Red, White, and Blue builds camaraderie and mutual-support networks among veterans, organized around physical fitness and social life. Its chapter-based approach helps veterans befriend others in their area, keeps them fit, connects them to other community members, and overcomes some of the feeling of isolation that many new veterans say is the strongest feeling early in civilian life, after the intense teamwork of military service.

Team Rubicon, which organizes veterans to respond to disasters, has clear practical value in a state vulnerable to forest fires. It also builds the esprit de corps that helps vets keep the best of their military experience alive, and hones skills that can be useful to emergency-medical services and fire departments in a far-flung state.

Finally, the Albertson Foundation recruited Guild Education, a private company, to help veterans and military spouses make it to and through college. The company provides college counseling for students seeking the right schools for their needs, and “intrusive advising” throughout their education to make sure they stay on track.

Mission 43

Beyond inviting these groups to expand to Idaho, the Albertson Foundation asked them to work together in what Johnston calls an “ecosystem” where each organization pursues its own specialties, but coordinates with the others. They called it Mission 43, a nod to Idaho’s status as the 43rd state to join the Union. The ecosystem isn’t designed to be all-encompassing. The goal is emphatically not to address every potential veteran need, or to try to squeeze every service provider dealing with

veterans under one roof. Rather, Albertson aims to help a small number of highly capable and philosophically aligned organizations make Idaho a great place for veterans to thrive and contribute to their state. As Johnston put it, “These organizations are excellent because they are focused on mastering certain tasks. We don’t ask them to do anything differently, we just ask that they do it in Idaho.”

Here’s what participation in the ecosystem means:

- *Funding.* After each organization sets goals with Albertson, the foundation provides it with the resources needed to get the job done. There is no competition between the groups.
- *Marketing.* Albertson provides professional marketing so each nonprofit can advertise the opportunities and services it offers across the wide spaces of rural Idaho.
- *Cross-referrals.* Leaders in each organization are trained on what the other partners provide, and are responsible for making referrals to one another wherever needed.
- *Institutional support.* Albertson provides its imprimatur as the major philanthropy in the state, which lends legitimacy and network connections to each participating group and the overall Mission 43 effort.

Albertson recruited a director to oversee all foundation grants for veterans, while also keeping Mission 43 as a whole moving toward its goals. West Point graduate, helicopter pilot, and National Guardsman Bryan Madden was hired soon after the original Mission 43 partner organizations were selected. In a very unconventional structure for a grantmaker, Madden works alongside his grantees, in the same office. He’s responsible for setting milestones and keeping track of progress, troubleshooting operational challenges, and overseeing projects that don’t fall into any one group’s purview yet benefit them all collectively.

For example, Madden supervises the marketing team responsible for publicizing Mission 43 and member groups. He runs regular meetings during which partner organizations synchronize calendars and eliminate conflicts. He identifies opportunities for piggybacking on one another’s work.

Madden describes Mission 43 as a “team of teams.” Every organization has its own area of specialty, but shares the same aspiration of creating broad opportunities for veterans in Idaho. Each participant’s success and credibility is bound to the progress of Mission 43 as a whole.

Operating in rural America

Establishment and growth of new entities is never easy, and there can be particular challenges in a rural environment. The Mission 43 partners worked hard to find the right people for full-time staff positions across the state, and even harder to fill volunteer and part-time roles. Where there are fewer people, and a much lower density population, it can be hard to find talent. Mission 43 is hoping to change that with time.

Grantees also had to adjust to working at a distance from their national leadership, and in coordination with other groups. It helps to have the four organizations co-located at the Albertson office, where the Mission 43 team meets every other week, and regional leaders of the different groups convene twice per year to share information and learn what the others can offer.



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The organizations had to adjust their operations to the realities of Idaho communities. Guild Education delivers its coaching over the phone and Internet, and its partner universities are top online colleges, so it adapted most easily. The job coaching provided by Hire Heroes USA is done in the same way, but the rural labor market presented its own challenges. The nonprofit had to identify potential employers in remote areas and build relationships with them, requiring “lots of shoe-leather work,” as Madden put it.

Team RWB and Team Rubicon are built on face-to-face relationships, so they had to set up new chapters with volunteer leaders all around the state, and engage dispersed veterans through them. Compared to chapters in more densely populated areas, it is asking more of veterans to congregate for bike rides or training sessions if that requires substantial travel. Mission 43 decided to hone its efforts and build momentum in the more urbanized Boise area, where it is based, then expand outward. Mission 43 emphatically wants to engage veterans all across their rural state, however, so regional expansion will be a long-term priority. Building a critical mass of participating veterans will make this easier.

Tracking progress

Madden produces a one-page performance dashboard every month. In addition to membership totals and marketing efforts, he tracks broad measures of service quality and quantity for each organization. For Hire Heroes USA this includes the number of veterans hired, their starting salary, and the percentage in full-time rather than part-time jobs. Guild Education tallies student enrollments, the rates at which they stay enrolled instead of dropping out, and the time it takes veterans to complete degrees. Team RWB counts membership growth and numbers of personal interactions. These are all indicators the organizations track anyway, but Madden has pulled out the ones that matter most to Mission 43's success. Each of his reports presents color-coded year-to-date percentages indicating how close or far each group is from their goals, alongside progress toward the annual Mission 43 goals. At a glance, the whole team can see where they are on track, and where they need to redouble efforts.

These monthly snapshots feed into the longer-term plan Albertson has for Mission 43. In Year One, the focus is on setting the organizations up in Idaho, getting them used to working with one another, and establishing a foothold in Boise, the state's capital and largest city. Year Two is all about expansion—reaching out to more distant corners of the state and trying to provide the same high-quality experience and outcomes. Year Three adds attention to sustainability, and starts asking whether particular undertakings are making enough of a difference in the lives of veterans to justify their continuation and expansion.

The Albertson Foundation kicked off Mission 43 with a \$2 million investment in four organizations, officially launching in early 2016. Within six months, 60 veterans had been hired at salaries averaging around \$50,000, more than 500 had participated in 2,100 exercise sessions with Team RWB, and 700 veterans had officially joined Mission 43. In a state with 37,000 post-9/11 vets, that's a pretty good start, but there's a lot more to do.