University of Pennsylvania

# ScholarlyCommons

Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) Service Learning Projects

Positive Psychology Center

4-30-2020

# Mission Meaning: Fostering Employee Well-Being and Engagement at The Travis Manion Foundation

Haley Barrows
hbarrows3@gmail.com

Darlene Marshall
darlene@darlene.coach

Adam Reiber
adreiber@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/mapp_slp

Part of the Other Psychology Commons

# Mission Meaning: Fostering Employee Well-Being and Engagement at The Travis Manion Foundation

## Abstract

The Travis Manion Foundation is a 501c(3) foundation dedicated to serving military veterans and their families, as well as fostering character in our nation's youth. Travis Manion Foundation (TMF) promotes positive psychology by asking employees to take various introductory courses and take the VIA Signature Strengths test. While staff take the VIA Signature Strengths test, they do not learn how to apply their signature strengths. As such, we recommend a workshop that uses Character Strengths Interventions with the aim of increasing meaningful experiences at work. By increasing meaning at work, we predict TMF employees will experience more well-being and engagement at work.

## Keywords

character strengths, signature strengths, happiness strengths, meaning, positive organizational scholarship, engagement, well-being

## Disciplines

Other Psychology | Psychology

**Mission Meaning: Fostering Employee Well-Being and Engagement at The Travis Manion Foundation**

Haley Barrows, Darlene Marshall, and Adam Reiber

University of Pennsylvania

A Positive Psychology Service Learning Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for MAPP 714: Applying Positive Interventions in Institutions

April 6, 2020

Abstract

The Travis Manion Foundation is a 501c(3) foundation dedicated to serving military veterans and their families, as well as fostering character in our nation's youth.  Travis Manion Foundation (TMF) promotes positive psychology by asking employees to take various introductory courses and take the VIA Signature Strengths test.  While staff take the VIA Signature Strengths test, they do not learn how to apply their signature strengths.  As such, we recommend a workshop that uses Character Strengths Interventions with the aim of increasing meaningful experiences at work. By increasing meaning at work, we predict TMF employees will experience more well-being and engagement at work.

*Keywords:* character strengths, signature strengths, happiness strengths, meaning, positive organizational scholarship, engagement, well-being

**Contents**

**Situational Analysis**

The Travis Manion Foundation (TMF) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to strengthening America's national character through two primary pathways: helping veterans and the families of fallen heroes to foster meaning and doing so by training those individuals to develop character in our nation's youth. TMF was founded in 2007 by Travis Manion's mother, Janet Manion, after Travis was fatally wounded while pulling his wounded teammates to safety in Fallujah, Iraq. For 13 years, TMF has sought to embody Travis' words before departing for his final deployment: "If Not Me, Then Who…"

Through six primary program offerings, TMF seeks to create a "nation of purpose-driven individuals who thrive by living with character and using their strengths and passions to serve others" (Dame, personal communication, January 23, 2020). Additionally, TMF relies heavily on the positive psychology literature to not only shape their programming, but to also shape their culture. As such, TMF is a values-driven organization fueled by purpose, passion, gratitude, and learning ("TMF Values", n.d.). TMF was originally incorporated in Pennsylvania and currently has regional offices in Washington DC, Houston, Raleigh, Chicago, Atlanta, Seattle, Philadelphia, San Diego, and New York City. The 54-person staff is spread across these offices, as well as some working remotely from home (Mullaney, personal communication, January 23, 2020).

**Overview of Service Sector and Population Served**

TMF primarily serves the Post-9/11 era veteran who has a continuing passion for service both in and out of uniform (Dame, personal communication, January 23, 2020). According to staff members, TMF attracts higher-functioning veterans who are navigating their military transitions well (Mullaney, personal communication, January 23, 2020). A majority of the

veterans that interface with TMF are employed and engage with TMF as a way to build

connection, further develop meaning, increase well-being, and serve their communities

(Mullaney, personal communication, January 23, 2020).  TMF currently serves 22,617 veterans

consisting of Active Duty, Reservists, and National Guard (Mullaney, personal communication,

January 23, 2020).  Additionally, TMF serves 1,877 Survivors (i.e. those that have lost a family

member or loved one in service).

More broadly, TMF addresses a need that many veterans struggle to fulfill post-military

service: finding a new sense of meaning in civilian life and cultivating well-being.  Serving in

the military provides many built-in sources of well-being for service members, such as a strong

social support system, opportunities to find meaning, and structure (Ahern, Worthen, Masters,

Lippman, Ozer, & Moos, 2015).  Past research highlights many of the struggles that veterans

face in their transition to civilian life: losing their social support, a lack of structure, and a loss of

purpose (Ahern et al., 2015).  While limited research exists on increasing well-being in veterans

transitioning to civilian life, some studies have shown that veterans who engage in meaningful

work experience increased well-being (Doenges, 2011).  As such, TMF strives to provide

veterans with meaning and purpose by engaging with youth and serving their communities.

**TMF: Strengths and Challenges**

TMF works with a variety of Military Transition Programs, including Onward to

Opportunity, FourBlock, Hiring Our Heroes Corporate Fellowship Program and regional specific

programs like USO Pathfinders in the Virginia and Maryland area.  Similarly, organizations such

as the Wounded Warrior Project and GORUCK have much overlap, with many Wounded

Warriors also serving as Spartans (TMF term for volunteers).  They also partner with GORUCK

and their RUCK clubs for Operation Legacy Service projects (outlined below).  Notably, most

military transition programs are specifically career-placement programs that prepare

transitioning veterans for the civilian workforce.  A major strength of TMF is its unique focus on

providing veterans volunteer opportunities to develop meaning, which few other transition

programs currently do (Mullaney, personal communication, January 23, 2020).  Additionally,

TMF utilizes the evidence-based science of positive psychology to help improve veterans' well-

being, while most other transition programs are focused on employment opportunities. TMF also

differentiates themselves in the active commitment to the wellbeing of their staff, volunteers, and

the broader community with multiple layers of impact.  Through providing wide-spread

offerings, their volunteers can engage in the way that feels most meaningful to them.  TMF also

readily welcomes civilians, further bridging the gap between the transitioning veteran and the

community.  TMF currently offers six primary programs to prepare Spartans to better serve their

communities:

*1. Character Does Matter*:

      a. A 45-minute presentation to school-aged students on the importance of living a life of

         character.  This is delivered by a veteran, family of the fallen, or first responder.

      b. Character and Leadership Courses: ranging from one day to ten weeks; mentors work

         directly with students to target character strength development and engagement,

         putting strengths into action through service learning.

*2. Operation Legacy Service Projects*:  volunteers identify needs in their local community and

leverage the TMF network and resources to complete the service project.

*3. 9/11 Heroes Run:* volunteer-led 5k races held on the anniversary of 9/11 in memorial of those

who have fallen during the attacks and the wars since.

*4. Expeditions – Survivor and Leadership*: service projects and journeys in honor of fallen heroes.  Survivor families come together to complete a community service project or expedition in line with the legacies of the fallen.

*5. Leading with Your Strengths*: a transitional workshop for active duty members and veterans to leverage VIA Character Strengths in the shift to the next phase of life.

*6. Spartan Leadership Program*: currently in development.

Additionally, TMF partners with traditional employers and transition programs.  The *Leading with Your Strengths* workshop is specifically designed as a personal and professional development workshop that allows participants to look at their military service and the transition to life post-service through a strengths-based lens.

TMF is looking to expand its offerings by developing the Spartan Leadership Program and Spartan Development Center, as well as adding new professional development opportunities to their staff and volunteers.  TMF also offers its annual Spartan Leadership Summit, bringing together staff, volunteers, and guest speakers for training and leadership development.

**TMF: Challenges and Areas of Opportunity for Positive Psychology**

Because TMF has such a robust program offering, they have been rapidly growing and currently use 90% of their donations to directly fund / sustain programs.  With such a heavy focus on fundraising, staff have noted that there is less of a focus on staff development. Strength-based training implementations and improvements for staff have primarily focused on those onboarding to TMF, and less so on seasoned staff development (Mullaney & Dame, personal communication, 2020).  Currently, all staff new to TMF take the VIA Character Strengths assessment and the programmatic staff are asked to complete the Coursera University of Pennsylvania courses on Positive Psychology.  In theory, this ensures that staff have a

fundamental knowledge of Positive Psychology, can converse with the volunteers, and understand the theory behind their various programs.

While positive psychology is certainly a tenet of TMF's mission, some staff members feel that there is a disconnect between their teachings of positive psychology, and how they can incorporate these learnings into their lives on a daily basis. Indeed, there currently are no opportunities for additional development or support within the organization for how Positive Psychology can benefit the individual staff members, working culture, and more broadly TMF's performance. For example, while staff members take the VIA test, there is no follow up on how these values can be put into actionable steps or behaviors to flourish in their daily lives. Similarly, while staff take the introductory positive psychology course on Coursera, it is viewed more as a step to complete in training rather than a resource they can lean on and fully understand. The lack of follow up on some of these initiatives creates ample opportunity for the creation of programs to more deeply engage with positive psychology, helping staff "practice what they preach" (Dame, personal communication, January 23, 2020).

**Literature Review**

Currently, all TMF staff take coursework in positive psychology to ensure a baseline understanding; however, there is little use of that knowledge within the organization. Similarly, they take the VIA Signature Strengths test, but do not receive any education or application plan on their specific strengths. TMF staff thought that one helpful implementation of positive psychology into their programs could be helping employees resonate more deeply with their Character Strengths in order to build out effective teams and increase well-being / engagement. As such, we are interested in how Character Strengths can aid in pursuing a sense of meaning,

and how the interplay of these two concepts can be applied to TMF through positive

organizational scholarship (POS).  We explore these three concepts below.

**Character Strengths**

Research on character has debunked the theory that character is dimensional (i.e. you are

a good person, or you are not) (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019).  Indeed, Peterson argued that

character is actually plural, in that we all possess unique combinations of strengths that make up

our personality (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019).  These strengths, also known as Character

Strengths, are the parts of our personality that people tend to admire and respect (Niemiec &

McGrath, 2019).  The work on Character Strengths originated when Peterson and Seligman

(2004) sought to make a science of human personality strengths that make a good life possible,

classified over human historical and cultural records.  Attributes of our personality (such as love,

kindness, humor, etc.) were categorized into 24 strengths that in turn fell under six virtue

categories (courage, justice, temperance, humanity, wisdom, and transcendence) (Peterson &

Seligman, 2004). Seligman and Peterson (2004) posited that our Character Strengths are

psychological routes to express virtues, which were evolutionarily created to help us survive.  In

the 16 years since the creation of this classification, much work has been done to build on its

validity and efficacy, especially through the identification and exploration around different

groups of Character Strengths.

Signature Strengths (usually our top five strengths) are those strengths which we strongly

identify with and utilize, and typically, their use is intrinsically motivated and satisfying

(Peterson & Seligman, 2004).  Indeed, the utilization of our Signature Strengths offers a myriad

of health benefits.  For example, a meta-analysis supports that the use of Signature Strengths has

a significant positive impact on positive affect, happiness, life satisfaction, and flourishing, as well as a negative impact on depression (Schutte & Malouff, 2019).

Past research has also supported that the utilization of Character Strengths offers occupational benefits.  When employees or volunteers are both aware of and mindfully use their Signature Strengths, they experience increases in meaning, well-being, life satisfaction, and job satisfaction (Littman-Ovadia & Steger 2010; Harzer & Ruch, 2013).   In order to examine these concepts, Littman-Ovadia, Lavy & Boiman-Meshita (2017) conducted a Strengths at Work Intervention, in which 1,031 working individuals were asked to either focus on their Signature Strengths or their Happiness Strengths (the strengths most highly correlated with happiness: humor, zest, hope, social intelligence, and love).  Results showed that the use of Signature Strengths was most highly positively correlated to work performance and organizational behavior, as well as negatively correlated to counterproductive work behavior (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017).  In contrast, focus on Happiness Strengths had a higher positive correlation than Signature Strengths to well-being psychological outcomes such as work meaningfulness, engagement, and job satisfaction (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017).  These findings could indicate that we need to utilize our Signature Strengths as well as our Happiness Strengths in order to maximize our well-being at work.  Further, Happiness Strengths typically produce the most significant benefit to outcomes related to positive affect, so it's possible traits reliant on positive affect, such as meaning, engagement, and satisfaction, benefit directly from this boost (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017).

Of important note, some research shows that simple awareness of strengths may not be enough to increase well-being, and that we also need to focus on application of strengths.  For example, in a study of 100 adolescent volunteers and 100 adult volunteers, Littman-Ovadia and

Steger (2010) found high correlations between identifying strengths and well-being but found

higher correlations between strengths *deployment* and life satisfaction, well-being, and meaning

at work.  We can interpret this finding to mean that while strengths identification is helpful, its

benefits can be further enhanced through the intentional application of said strengths. This

finding is consistent with Niemic's (2017) *Aware - Explore - Apply* model for

interventions.  First, the individual takes the assessment to identify their ranking on Character

Strengths.  They then explore their unique strengths makeup.  This can take the form of

Signature Strengths identification or Happiness Strengths awareness and exploration.  It is the

*apply* step that Littman-Ovadia and Steger (2010) found to be significant in increasing

satisfaction, well-being, and meaning at work.  Though there is a boost in positive affect from

awareness and exploration, the significant contribution comes from the mindful application of

one's strengths.  These findings are relevant to TMF as they currently are aware of their

strengths but have not yet learned how to explore and apply them.  As such, we are encouraged

by these findings as we seek to explore how to increase meaning at work through utilizing

Character Strengths.

**Meaning**

As mentioned, while TMF employees take the VIA Character Strengths survey, they lack

further exploration of how these results may apply to their everyday lives (Mullaney & Dame,

personal communication, February 19, 2020).  In order to help employees more deeply resonate

with their Character Strengths, we are interested in exploring the connection of Character

Strengths to *meaning*.

Seminal work on meaning began with Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor

Frankl's (1963) *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he recounts his time living in a Nazi

concentration camp. Frankl (1963) describes meaning as the "why" to our existence and argues that the way in which we accept our fate allows us to add a deeper meaning to our lives. Indeed, Frankl (1963) attributes these elements of meaning to the reason he survived his time in the concentration camp. Frankl's work marked the first time that meaning was seen as not only crucial to survival, but also to well-being (Schulenberg, Nassif, Hutzell, & Rogina, 2008).

More recent work on meaning has defined it as a way to impose stability on the various challenges and changes in our lives (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Indeed, Baumeister and Vohs (2002) describe meaning as "an imposition of a stable conception onto a changing biological process." In other words, our ability to establish connections between elements and changes in our lives helps us develop a sense of stability. For example, an individual may switch jobs multiple times, but prescribe meaning to this as aligning with their career (a more stable concept). Past research has argued that different levels of meaning exist, and an individual who has a lower level of meaning is more easily influenced by change and focuses more on specifics and details (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). In contrast, individuals who possess a high sense of meaning may use this to guide their lives, focusing more on broader goals across longer time spans (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

Foundational work on meaning has argued that in order to live a meaningful life, we must satisfy four basic human needs (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). First, we need purpose in our lives. When we have a sense of purpose, we are more able to recognize meaning in current events in order to draw connections to future events (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Baumeister and Vohs (2002) posit that the second human need is to have a set of values, also known as the beliefs that motivate and guide our behavior. When we have a strong set of values,

we can better discern "right" from "wrong" and better understand the meaning of different

events, helping us live a more meaningful life. Third, our need to build self-efficacy, or the

belief that we are capable, helps us live a more meaningful life by helping us feel accomplished

and giving us a sense of control over events (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Finally, our need for

self-worth helps us live a meaningful life as we have a sense of belonging and are better able to

foster connection (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Importantly, individuals do not need to satisfy all

needs from one source and can instead draw on multiple facets of their lives to find meaning. In

fact, having multiple sources of meaning may be more beneficial to the individual so that they

have other elements of their life to turn to if one aspect goes awry (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

This research is relevant to TMF as TMF can offer viable pathways for employees to satisfy

different aspects of their needs through promoting self-worth, self-efficacy, strong values, and

perhaps even purpose.

    Because individuals spend so much time at work, the workplace has been explored as a

source of meaning for individuals. Many view their job as a simple means to maintain economic

stability for themselves and/or their families, but Wrzesniewski (2003) posits that we can cull a

deeper meaning from our work. While traditional research has argued that meaning at work is

drawn from an individual's attributes or the job attributes and duties, Wrzesniewski (2003)

argues that we can find meaning through shaping our jobs to fit our individual orientation. In

line with this argument, three different orientations toward work exist: viewing our work as a

job, viewing it as a career, or viewing it as calling (Wrzesniewski, 2003). When we view our

work as a job, every day is just a means to a financial end. When we view our work as a career,

we are more focused on the progress we are making toward a higher pay or status (Wrzesnieski,

2003). In contrast, when we view our work as a calling, we are intrinsically satisfied by the

work, itself, and often believe that our work is making the world a better place (Wrzesniewski, 2003).  Indeed, employees who view their work as a calling have reported stronger overall identification with the team, less conflict, more faith and trust in management, more commitment to the team itself, and a healthier group process (Wrzesniewski, 2003).  While we understand not all employees will have a "calling orientation," we hope to move them more toward this end of the spectrum by creating opportunities for meaningful experiences.

Importantly, meaning in life is also associated with increased engagement at work. Rothman and Hamukang'andu (2013) found that in 150 basic and secondary school teachers in Zambia, viewing work as a calling significantly impacted work engagement, impacting psychological meaningfulness indirectly via work role fit.  In regard to work role fit, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) found that when employees can change cognitive tasks and relational boundaries in their work, the social environment and job design change, contributing to work meaning and work identity.  For example, a study of hospital cleaning staff found that staff who defined their jobs as only completing necessary tasks and minimal interaction disliked their job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).  In contrast, staff who added additional work tasks and frequent interactions with patients and visitors liked the job more, found more meaning in the work (they believed they were an integral part of healing patients) and engaged in tasks to help patients (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).  These findings could be explained through Steger and Dik's (2009) argument that in order to increase motivation, engagement, and ultimately transcend immediate interests, you must develop a sense of self that understands how your work can help you accomplish your objectives.

Similarly, we are encouraged that theory supports the link between Character Strengths and finding meaning at work (Dik et al., 2015).  While research examining Characters Strengths

and meaning in life is relatively new, Seligman (2002) argued that using your strengths at work could turn your job into a calling.  In one study of volunteer and paid adults, the use of Character Strengths was associated with meaning (Littman Littman-Ovadia & Steger (2010).  Similarly, a study sampling 111 employees from various occupations found that the number of positive experiences employees reported at work as well as viewing their job as a calling was higher when Signature Strengths were used (Harzer & Ruch, 2012).  Because TMF employees are already aware of their Signature Strengths, we foresee that teaching them how to utilize these strengths could have similar positive outcomes as the research above.

**Positive Organizational Scholarship**

In a 2017 *Gallop* study, it was discovered that only a startling 30% of the United States workforce is engaged at work (Clifton, 2017).  Further, results showed that when millennials (born between 1980 and 1996) were asked to envision the "American Dream," they ranked their job as more important than their family (Clifton, 2017).  While millennials highly value their work, research shows that they also demonstrate higher anxiety and depression, as well as a higher external locus of control (Macky, Gardner, Forsyth, Twenge & Campbell, 2008).  Because TMF employs many millennials, and millennials place such high importance on occupation, the workplace is a prime location to implement well-being strategies to address these alarming statistics.

Given the above statistics, we examined the application of Character Strengths and meaning through Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) to increase employee well-being at TMF.  POS bridges the gap between theory and practice, providing structure and an evidence-based approach to enhancing employee well-being while maintaining (or enhancing) business success.  POS focuses on unlocking the generative dynamics in the organization to help it

flourish (Rothbard & Patil, 2012). Indeed, Cooperrider (personal communication, January 10, 2020) defined positive institutions as organizations that focus on developing our strengths to refract out into the world. To help determine what is meant by the term "positive" in POS, Cameron and Spreitzer (2012) outline four areas of convergence that help specify the organizational domain, outlined below.

The first area of convergence is to re-shape the way an organization looks at problems (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Appreciative inquiry is the method of asking generative questions to solve organizational challenges (Stavros, Godwin, & Cooperrider, 2016). Methods like appreciative inquiry help reframe challenges from a deficit-based approach to a positive approach by using the 5D model. First, in the 5D model, the challenge is defined as an appreciative topic. Next, the organization tries to discover the best of that topic from past experiences or even the present. Third, they dream of the best possible outcome for that topic. Then, they design actions, products, and projects based on the best of the dream. Finally, they experience what it means to live out the best possible outcome in an organizational setting (Lewis, 2016).

The second area of convergence that helps define the positive in POS is to focus on the extraordinary and investigate organizations that have exceeded expectations or performed exceptionally well (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). By closely examining these organizations' processes, one can model the best of these companies' strategies, replicating outcomes. Of important note, while we want to focus on organizations that have had positive outcomes, we also must ensure they endorse practices of well-being in order to truly be considered a positive organization.

The third area of convergence is that POS fosters a sense of resourcefulness (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012).  This can be accomplished through implementing aspects of Frederickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory.  Broaden-and-Build has shown that inducing positive emotions increases peoples' momentary thought–action repertoires and enduring personal resources, compared to individuals with negative affect shown to have more limited awareness (Huppert, Baylis, Keverne & Fredrickson, 2004).  In an applied setting, environments which offer opportunities for positive emotion are created (for example: staff socialization, offsites, etc.), helping increase employees' general awareness of their environment, in turn enhancing their resourcefulness.

The fourth and final area of convergence is virtuousness (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012).  POS is based on the idea of eudaimonia, also often referred to as subjective well-being.  Aristotle uses the term eudaimonia to describe the act of being happy (versus feeling happy) and notes that it is the key to living a virtuous life (Melchert, 2002).  Cameron and Steger (2012) argue that organizations should pursue "the good" or virtuousness for its own sake (i.e. in which eudaimonia is the ultimate goal).  Further, Cameron and Spreitzer (2012) explain that providing meaning, purpose, and enhancing Character Strengths to help others flourish in an organizational setting is crucial to achieve a eudaimonic organizational state.

**Application Plan**

Our situation analysis and discussions with Travis Manion Foundation (TMF) revealed that staff members could benefit from further education and interaction with the Character Strengths materials. Additionally, staff members have noted that in order for positive psychology to truly make a difference within the organization, leadership needs to "buy in" to the benefits of

positive psychology and see that positive psychology will not only improve employee well-

being, but also drive engagement and better outcomes for TMF.

The staff within TMF is diverse in situation and location.  While it might be ideal to train

the entirety of the staff on the tools of Character Strengths, our objective is to decrease reliance

on our cohort's work, providing TMF with a foundation to develop both its immediate training

opportunities, and a platform for further growth.  To that end, we propose a workshop aimed at

TMF's internally identified leaders, fully described in Appendix A.  The rationale is outlined in

detail below, but its purpose is to foster meaning at work through a developing a deeper

understanding and application of one's Signature Strengths and Happiness Strengths.  Currently,

TMF gathers for an annual summit where staff receive ongoing training, as well as quarterly

educational webinars and other ongoing opportunities.  Our workshop is intended to be delivered

to TMF's internal team leadership at the annual summit.  The intended interventions are outlined

below, and more fully detailed in Appendix A.

**Intervention One: Strengths Alignment**

Given the developments discussed above, we have developed a workshop to benefit both

TMF leadership and staff members.  As previously mentioned in our Literature Review,

employees are *aware* of their Signature Strengths, but do not necessarily know how

to *apply* them, a crucial step in Niemiec's (2018) *Aware-Explore-Apply* model.  In this

workshop, we propose first focusing on Niemiec's (2018) Strengths Alignment intervention.

This intervention will leverage employees' Signature Strengths in order to boost the number of

meaningful experiences they have at work, as well as increase engagement, sense of calling, and

productivity (of interest to leadership) (Niemiec, 2018).

During the *Strengths Alignment* intervention, workers intentionally connect their

Signature Strengths to their job duties. This involves listing the top five tasks you perform most

frequently at work, reviewing your top five strengths from the VIA Survey, and then writing

down one way you can use each strength with each of your five work tasks, explaining how you

can incorporate each strength into your daily work life (Niemiec, 2018). Exact steps are outlined

in Appendix A.

We chose the Strengths Alignment intervention as past research has already supported its

efficacy in boosting meaning for employees at work (Harzer & Ruch, 2016).

Specifically, Harzer and Ruch (2016) instructed 83 randomly assigned employees to use their

four highest Character Strengths more often at work for four weeks. Similarly, the control group

of 69 employees was asked to reflect on four situations outside of work in which they excelled.

Results showed that sense of calling significantly increased in the group that utilized their

Character Strengths at work, but not in the control group (Harzer & Ruch, 2016). Additionally,

past research has highlighted that utilizing Signature Strengths is beneficial to increasing work

performance (of specific interest to leadership at TMF). For example, Dubreuil, Forest and

Courcy (2013) found that use of Signature Strengths in 404 French-Canadians was significantly

associated with greater work performance.

**Intervention Two: Best Possible Self**

Our second proposed intervention in this workshop will be to complete Niemiec's

(2018) *Best Possible Self* intervention in order to boost Happiness Strengths at work. This

intervention asks employees to consider the future in order to set goals that are personally

meaningful and can be linked to Character Strengths. In this exercise, employees envision a

future period (e.g. 6 weeks later, one year later, etc.) in which they feel they are expressing their

best possible self.  Imagining the details of this best possible self, employees are also prompted

to think about a logical structure for accomplishing future tasks and how their character strengths

can help aid in making this future vision a reality (exact steps outlined in Appendix A).

We chose the Best Possible Self intervention because we are also interested in boosting

Happiness Strengths at work.  Research supporting this intervention has shown that participation

in this exercise boosts positive emotion, happiness, optimism, hope, coping skills, and positive

views of the future at work (Niemiec, 2018).  For example, a study asking 54 Dutch-speaking

participants (ages 18-43) to imagine their best possible selves in their personal, relational and

professional domain over a two-week period found significant increases in optimism (Meevissen,

Peters, Alberts, 2011).

**Limitations and Considerations**

While we consider this workshop to be of minimal risk to participants, there are a few

limitations to these interventions that we would like to address.  First, research has highlighted

the importance of continuing to practice mindfulness around strengths to increase efficacy

(Niemiec, 2018).  However, due to the limited bandwidth of TMF, our workshop is only

intended to be delivered in one session.  As such, we will encourage staff and leadership to look

for more informal opportunities to discuss their Signature Strengths to continue development at

work.

Additionally, this workshop was originally planned to be delivered in person.  However,

with the current spread of COVID-19, it is possible that this workshop will be delivered

virtually.  While we believe this work can be completed virtually (and have integrated virtual ice

breakers into our workshop), it is possible that these interventions will be less effective if TMF

leadership cannot be physically present to interact with their employees in-person.

Finally, while much of the research we reviewed involved participants working in

corporate settings, we are cognizant that study differentials may exist from research participants

to TMF staff, hindering result replication. However, most research on positive psychology has

been conducted on WEIRD populations (western educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic),

which generally matches the population of TMF staff members (Hendriks et al., 2019; Dame,

personal communication, January 23, 2020). Similarly, general research on Character Strengths,

Meaning, and POS has been conducted on a wide variety of individuals, but our literature review

focused specifically on corporate settings.

**Measurement**

Lastly, our proposal will include an analysis of how Character Strengths increase

productivity and anchor these practices to specific metrics within TMF that we will use to gauge

the efficacy of the interventions (outlined in Appendix B). By providing leadership tangible

feedback to performance outcomes, we increase their buy-in that positive psychology and POS

strategies are good for business as well as for well-being.

**Conclusion**

As a result of this proposed workshop, we predict that TMF will experience an increase

in employee well-being and engagement. By teaching employees to utilize their Character

Strengths, we hope that we can help them create more meaningful experiences at work, and in

turn flourish.  By helping employees flourish, we seek to help further TMF's overarching

mission of helping veterans and families of fallen heroes, as well as build our nation's youth.

**References**

Ahern, J., Worthen, M., Masters, J., Lippman, S. A., Ozer, E. J., & Rudolf, M. (2015. The

challenges of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans' transition from military to civilian life and

approaches to reconnection. *PLoS One, 10*(7), e0128599.

Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *Meanings of life.* New York, NY: Guilford.

Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2002). The pursuit of meaningfulness in life. In C. R. Snyder,

& S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 608-618). New York, NY:

Oxford University Press.

Bundick, M. J. (2012). The benefits of reflecting on and discussing purpose in life in emerging

adulthood. *New Directions for youth development, 2011*(132), 89-103.

Cameron, K. S., & Spreitzer, G. M. (2012). Introduction: What is positive about positive

organizational scholarship? In K. S. Cameron & G. M. Spreitzer (Eds.), *The Oxford

handbook of positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 1-14). New York, NY: Oxford

University Press.

Clifton, J. (2017, June 13). The world's broken workplace. *The Chairman's Blog, Gallop.*

http://www.gallup.com/opinion/chairman/212045/world-

brokenworkplace.aspx?g_source=EMPLOYEE_ENGAGEMENT&g_medium=topic&g_

campaign=tiles

Cooperrider, D. (2017). The gift of new eyes: Personal reflections after 30 years of appreciative

inquiry in organizational life.  In D.A. Noumair & A.R. Shani (Eds.), *Research in

organizational change and development, volume 25.*  Bingley UK: Emerald Publishing.

Csikszentmihalyi, M.  (1990).  *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience.*  New York, NY:

Harper Perennial.

Deiner, E., Emmons, R.A., Larsen, R.J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction With Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 49*(1), 71-75.

Dik, B. J., Duffy, R. D., Allan, B. A., O'Donnell, M. B., Shim, Y., & Steger, M. F. (2015). Purpose and meaning in career development applications. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *43*(4), 558-585.

Doenges, T. (2011). *Calling and meaningful work among student military veterans: Impact on well-being and experiences on campus* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from google scholar. (Order no. AAI3468765).

Dubreuil, P., Forest, J., & Courcy, F. (2014) From strengths use to work performance: The role of harmonious passion, subjective vitality, and concentration. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 9*(4), 335-349.

Forest, J., Mageau, G. A., Crevier-Braud, L., Bergeron, É., Dubreuil, P., & Lavigne, G. L. (2012). Harmonious passion as an explanation of the relation between signature strengths' use and well-being at work: Test of an intervention program. *Human Relations, 65*(9), 1233-1252

Frankl, V. (1963). *Man's search for meaning*. London, England: Hodder & Stoughton.

Fredrickson, B. L. (2001).  The role of positive emotions in positive psychology:  The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions.  *American Psychologist, 56*(3)*,* 218-226.

Harter, K. J., Schmidt, F. L., & Hayes, T. L. (2002). Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 268-279.

Harzer, C., & Ruch, W. (2012). When the job is a calling: The role of applying one's signature strengths at work. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 7*(5), 362-371.

Harzer, C., & Ruch, W. (2013). The application of signature character strengths and positive experiences at work. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 14*(3), 965-983.

Harzer, C., & Ruch, W. (2016). Your strengths are calling: Preliminary results of a web-based strengths intervention to increase calling. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 17*, 2237-2256.

Hendriks, T., Warren, M. A., Schotanus-Dijkstra, M., Hassankhan, A., Graafsma, T., Bohlmeijer, E., & de Jong, J. (2019). How WEIRD are positive psychology interventions? A bibliometric analysis of randomized controlled trials on the science of well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 14*(4), 489-501.

Huppert, F. A., Baylis, N., Keverne, B. & Fredrickson B. L. (2004).  The broaden–and–build theory of positive emotions. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B: Biological Sciences, 359*(1449), 1367-1377.

Lewis, S. (2016). *Positive psychology and change: How leadership, collaboration, and appreciative inquiry create transformational results*. West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Littman-Ovadia, H., Lavy, S., & Boiman-Meshita, M. (2017). When theory and research collide: Examining correlates of signature strengths use at work. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 18*(2), 527-548.

Littman-Ovadia, H., & Niemiec, R. M. (2016). Character strengths and mindfulness as core pathways to meaning in life. In R. Pninit, S.E. Schulenberg. & A. Batthyany. (Eds.) *Clinical perspectives on meaning* (pp. 383-405). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

Littman-Ovadia, H., & Steger, M. (2010). Character strengths and well-being among volunteers

    and employees: Toward an integrative model. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*(6),

    419-430.

Macky, K., Gardner, D., Forsyth, S., Twenge, J. & Campbell, S. (2008). Generational differences

    in psychological traits and their impact on the workplace, *Journal of Managerial

    Psychology, 23*(8), 862-877.

Mcknight, P. & Kashdan, T.B. (2009). Purpose in life as a system that creates and sustains health

    and well-being: An integrative, testable theory. *Review of General Psychology, 13*(3),

    242-251.

Meevissen, Y. M. C., Peters, M. L., & Alberts, H. J. M. (2011). Becoming more optimistic by

    imagining a best possible self: Effects of a two week intervention. *Journal of Behavior

    Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry, 42*, 371-378.

Meyers, M. C., & van Woerkom, M. (2017). Effects of a strengths intervention on general and

    work-related well-being: The mediating role of positive affect. *Journal of Happiness

    Studies*, *18*(3), 671-689.

Niemiec, R. M. (2017). *Character strengths interventions: A field guide for practitioners*.

    Boston: Hogrefe Publishing.

Niemiec, R. M. & McGrath, R. E. (2019). *The power of character strengths: Appreciate and

    ignite your positive personality.* Cincinnati, OH: VIA Institute on Character.

Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Strengths of character and well-

    being. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 23*(5), 603-619.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification* (Vol. 1). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2006). The values in action (VIA) classification of strengths. *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology,* 29-48.

Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H.Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 30*, 91-127.

Rothbard, N. P., & Patil, S. V. (2012). Being there: Work engagement and positive organizational scholarship. In K. S. Cameron & G. M. Spreitzer (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 56-69). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Schulenberg, S. E., Nassif, C., Hutzell, R. R., & Rogina, J. M. (2008). Logotherapy for clinical practice. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 45*(4), 447-463.

Schutte, N. S., & Malouff, J. M. (2019). The impact of signature character strengths interventions: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 20*(4), 1179-1196.

Seppälä, P., Mauno, S., Feldt, T., Hakanen, J., Kinnunen, U., Tolvanen, A., & Schaufeli, W. (2009). The construct validity of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale: Multisample and longitudinal evidence. *Journal of Happiness studies*, *10*(4), 459-481.

Stavros, J. M., Godwin, L. N, & Cooperrider, D. L. (2016). Appreciative Inquiry: Organization development and the strengths revolution. In W. Rothwell, J. Stavros & R. Sullivan (Eds.) *Practicing organization development: Leading transformation and change* (pp. 96-116).

Steger, M. F., & Dik, B. J. (2010). Work as meaning: Individual and organizational benefits of engaging in meaningful work. In P. A. Linley, S. Harrington, & N. Garcea (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology and work* (p. 131–142). Oxford University Press.

Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (in press). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 53,* 80-93.

Stillman, T. F., & Baumeister, R. F. (2009). Uncertainty, belongness, and four needs for meaning. *Psychological Inquiry: An International Journal for the Advancement of Psychological Theory, 20*(4), 249-251.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment.* New York, NY: Free Press.

"TMF Values." (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.travismanion.org/assets/Uploads/TMF-Values.pdf.

Twenge, J. M., Cooper, A. B., Joiner, T. E., Duffy, M. E., & Binau, S. G. (2019). Age, period, and cohort trends in mood disorder indicators and suicide-related outcomes in a nationally representative dataset, 2005–2017. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *128*(3), 185-199.

Vallacher, R.R. & Wegner, D.M. (1985). *A theory of action identification.* Hillsdale, JK: Erlbaum.

Wrzesniewski, A. (2003). Finding positive meaning in work. In Cameron, K., Dutton, J.E. & Quinn, R.E. (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 296-308). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

**Appendix A: Strengths Alignment & Best Possible Self**

**Workshop Outcome Statement:**

TMF will apply Character Strengths to cultivate meaning for increased well-being of employees while achieving greater engagement and business success.

Note – we chose the word apply over value because we are trying to move the learner along Bloom Taxonomy of learning. The application domain of Bloom's is best defined as the learner uses information to relate or apply the knowledge to a new situation with minimal instructor input. The term value doesn't address action. We want to move toward action with this character strengths workshop.

**Objectives for this Workshop:**

- The learner will link observed behaviors to character strengths in an experiential learning event.

- The learner will identify ways to cultivate meaning and engagement by operating more intentionally in their signature strengths.

- The learner will link character strengths to life goals; create pathways to a positive future.

**2020 TMF Business Objectives –** As a facilitator of this workshop we must be able identify the Character Strengths that best align to these business objectives for optimal performance. Throughout this workshop you must discuss with the learners how their strengths can be used to help achieve the following objectives:

**Objective 1:** Improve the member experience for veterans and families of the fallen and deepen spartan engagement across programs.

- TMF is more than any one program. We are a community. Each initiative is an opportunity to engage members, and our program evaluation shows that the more

involved our Spartans are at TMF, the greater the personal physical and mental benefits they enjoy. We will provide additional training, support and engagement opportunities to our members, and improve the quality of our programs and events.

**Objective 2:** Strengthen brand awareness: Leverage veterans to develop and activate character

- We want to highlight the great work that our members, especially veterans and families of the fallen, are doing. We want to share their stories, the ways in which they are impacting others and encourage others to join this mission.

**Objective 3:** Improve ability to demonstrate impact on youth & the community

- Preliminary research demonstrates the positive impact TMF is having on youth in the short, medium, and long-term. We want to continue to capture youth activation and measure their success outcomes after their exposure to TMF, and likewise deepen the impact TMF is having on specific communities over time.

**Objective 4:** Increase capacity in order to prepare to scale in targeted cities

A) We want to ensure that our training and support are best in class, and that TMF is the preferred way for veterans and military families to continue to serve and maintain a strong community. To that end, we will work to create more volunteer leaders, improve our support of chapters, and improve our technology and data-capturing processes.

**Objective 5:** Increase TMF's recurring and multi-year revenue

- TMF wants to ensure our funding is sustainable so that we can support our members for the long-term

**Requirements/Task(s):**

**Task 1** Due to our current situation with COVID-19 we provided two options for the icebreaker

event, one in-person and one virtual:

a) Ice Breaker In-Person Experiential Learning Event

b) Virtual One Good Thing; 30 minutes

**Task 2** – Strengths Alignment (60 minutes)

**Task 3** – Best Possible Self (60 minutes)

**Task 1 a):**

**Icebreaker** (In-Person; 30 total minutes, 15 minutes problem solving, 15 minutes debrief). We

will provide a virtual demonstration and Q&A session in an effort to create clarity for this

icebreaker exercise. Seeing it performed helps with understanding.

**Objective** – Experiential workshop designed to force collaboration and draw out observable

behaviors. During the feedback session the learners will talk through what they were feeling and

how that relates to their Character Strengths. This is meant to be a fun introduction into

Character Strengths.

**Important Note** - The buzzer and the battery must be in different bags to force

collaboration. Teams will work in their respective teams until they realize that they don't have

all the parts necessary to complete the exercise. Once they realize they are in this together they

will collaborate to complete the exercise.

**Room Set-up** – It is best if the learners sit in their organic teams for the ice breaker exercise.

**Equipment** – buzzer, wires, wire strippers, switch, battery and various distracting equipment.

**Instructions** - The facilitator will begin by reading the instructions: "No Talking.  You are now being held captive by (Insert Witty Rival Name Here).  If you are caught talking you will be removed from the room.  Your group has managed to smuggle in various communication equipment.  You have 30 minutes to fabricate an SOS signaling device to send a message to high headquarters so that they can rescue you.  You may begin."

**Facilitators** – At this point the facilitators will drop bags of communication equipment throughout the room.

**Whiteboard** – On a whiteboard in the room draw the following diagram:
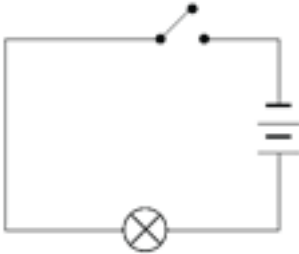


**Observed Behaviors** – Facilitators will record observed behavior to elicit discussion about Signature Strengths.

**Open Ended Question Suggestions:**

1. What do you believe the purpose of that exercise was?

    a) Try to get the learner talking in terms of strengths by link observed behavior to signature strengths.

2. How did you feel during that exercise?

    a) Look for Signature Strengths (SS) i.e. love of learning, leadership, creativity. How did operating in you SS contribute to the way you were feeling?  If they were not able to use a SS ask how that felt.

3. Were you able to identify Character Strengths at play in yourself/team?

       a)   Have a list of Character Strengths as a reference (see appendix C).

**Task 1 b):**

**Icebreaker (Virtual Option; 30 minutes)**

**Start with Cameras-on -** Seeing faces and smiles has a positive network effect and increases positive resonance (Huppert, Baylis, Keverne & Fredrickson, 2004). Positive emotions have a broaden and build effect on second order activities (the kids and laundry) and long-term well-being (Fredrickson, 2009).

**Share One Good Thing** - This micro-intervention is a version of the *What Went Well* exercise described in Seligman's (2011) book Flourish. By sharing *One Good Thing*, we are reframing our meetings to start on a positive note as opposed to a deficit-based approach. This is an example of appreciative inquiry which is the method of asking generative questions to solve organizational challenges (Stavros, Godwin, & Cooperrider, 2016).

**Task 2:**

**Strengths Alignment (60 minutes)**

1. List the five tasks that you do most frequently at work.

2. Review your Top 5 Strengths in your character strengths profile from the VIA Survey.

3. Write down one way you can use any one of your top strengths with each of the five work tasks.  Explain how you will bring the character strength forth in the given task.

4. When you are ready, repeat Step 3 with a different top strength. Repeat until you go through all five of your signature strengths.

**Note** - Remember to tie most frequent tasks to the TMF business objectives for optimal performance.  How does using your strengths achieve better business success?

**Task 3:**

**Best Possible Self (60 minutes)**

1. Take a few minutes to select a future time period and imagine that at that time you are expressing your best possible self.  Visualize your best possible self in a way that is pleasing to you and that you are interested in.  Imagine the details closely.  You might think of this as reaching your full potential, hitting an important milestone, or realizing one of your life dreams.  Reach high and be realistic.

2. After you have a clear image, write about the details.  Writing your best possible self-down helps to create a logical structure for the future and can help you move from the realm of foggy ideas and fragmented thoughts to concrete, real possibilities.

3. Write about the character strengths you observe in this image and in what you've written.  And, what character strengths will you need to deploy to make this vision a reality.

4. Write down your specific goal(s) and action plan that result from this exercise.

**Summarize what you learned:**

1. What are we doing to cultivate strengths in our teams?

2. Do I believe the strengths of my employees can be cultivated in the workplace to achieve greater business success?

3. Do I believe my employees want to make that effort, just as they want to find meaning and fulfillment in their lives?

4. How am I conveying these beliefs in my daily words and actions?

5. How can I shape my strengths conversations to align to business objectives?

6. Why is it important to cultivate strengths in our organization?

**Appendix B: Measurement**

Our interventions are designed to increase meaning, subjective well-being and engagement at work. As such, we have included three measures below to be used pre- and post-workshop (as well as in follow up one-month post-workshop).  Similarly, we invite TMF to utilize their own performance metrics to see if positive psychology may aid in business success. First, we suggest using Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler's (2006) *Meaning in Life* questionnaire, which consists of 10 items to assess meaning in life.  We also suggest using the *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale,* which can be shortened to nine items to assess well-being and engagement at work (Seppälä et al., 2008). Finally, we suggest using Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin's (2010) *Satisfaction with Life Scale* to assess subjective well-being.

Please note that we have included these suggestions, but if TMF should contact the original authors if they wish to use these measurements for commercial use.

**Appendix C: Character Strengths**

**List of Character Strengths:**

- Wisdom and Knowledge
    - Creativity
    - Curiosity
    - Open-mindedness
    - Love of learning
    - Perspective
- Courage
    - Bravery
    - Persistence
    - Integrity
    - Vitality
- Humanity
    - Love
    - Kindness
    - Social intelligence
- Justice
    - Citizenship
    - Fairness
    - Leadership
- Moderation/Temperance
    - Forgiveness and mercy
    - Humility/Modesty
    - Prudence
    - Self-regulation
- Transcendence
    - Appreciation of beauty and excellence
    - Gratitude
    - Hope/Optimism
    - Humor
    - Spirituality

**Appendix D: TMF Materials**

**TMF Mission Statement:** TMF empowers veterans and families of fallen heroes to develop

character in future generations.

**TMF Vision:** a nation of purpose-driven individuals who thrive by living with character and

using their strengths and passions to serve others.

**TMF Values:**

**Build, Measure, Learn, Repeat**.  We embrace an entrepreneurial spirit. When we see an

opportunity, we run with it.  There is no roadmap to achieving our bold mission, so we act with

confidence, courage, creativity and independence in pursuit of our goals. We have a bias for

action that empowers us to be agile.

**Be Accountable**.  We do the right thing at all times.  We deliver commitments to our members,

donors, and partners.  We ensure our internal values match our external actions. We take fiscal

responsibility seriously and maintain complete transparency.

**Purpose Begins with Passion**.  This is a calling, not a job.  We enjoy building relationships with

our members and take pride in having an impact on our community.

**Out of Many, One**. We treat everyone with respect.  At TMF, our team comes from all walks of

life. We have a wealth of experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds.  Our differences make us

stronger and a more unified community.  We may not always see eye-to-eye, but we work

shoulder-to-shoulder to accomplish the mission.

**We are Fueled by Gratitude**.  We understand that anything of great value, requires great

sacrifice to achieve.  We are deeply grateful for the sacrifices of our members--families of the

fallen, veterans, volunteers, donors, and staff.  This generous spirit fuels our mission and fortifies

our commitment.  We sacrifice to achieve our goals, we celebrate our victories, and we

acknowledge those who get us there.

**Failure is a Bruise, Not a Tattoo**.  With a mission as bold as ours, comes occasional setbacks.

When we fall short, we bounce back quickly.  We don't dwell on problems.  We find solutions.

We accept each other's well-meant shortcomings and we strive together to improve.  We are

resilient.  We are hopeful.  We stay in the fight.