What does being a finalist for this award mean for you and your organization?

When the DASH Board held a retreat in Fall 2019, we had a palpable sense that both the Board and broader DASH organization were “on the cusp.” Coming off several transitions and significant operational challenges in prior years, we had regrounded and felt poised to truly amplify our impact if we could harness the opportunities presented to us: securing our financial future through a capital campaign, broadening our impact with new services targeting youth survivors, and taking DASH’s successful model nationwide with technical assistance programs. At times, the challenges of this rapid growth have felt daunting.

Being a finalist for this award has provided recognition that the solid Board management practices we’ve diligently worked to put in place truly are a critical foundation for DASH’s programmatic success. We are also honored to have the opportunity to broaden the community of people who know and are supportive of DASH’s mission. The timing of this awards process feels apt, as we have seen dramatic increases in recent months for safe housing and services for survivors. The reflection and recognition of the award process had left the board feeling ready to rise to the occasion.

What have you learned through the application process for the Board Leadership Award?

The application process forced us to reflect and conduct a self-critique about whether and how we were actually ‘walking our talk’ as a Board.

Since 2017 DASH has experienced significant change, marked by tremendous growth and both staff and Board leadership transitions. As a Board, we inherently knew that these changes would require different capabilities and roles for all of us. We recognized the importance of being more deliberate and systematic in strengthening our board operations, so we took calculated moves to: improve operations and adherence to Board management protocols; improve our own capacity and ability to provide oversight and strategic guidance; critically examine our board composition and skills to align with DASH’s priorities; and make specific and quantifiable demands of ourselves in terms of financial commitments, level of participation, and engagement.

As we focused on implementation of those changes, we had not yet tracked how well we were doing at achieving the overarching goal of evolving our board to meet the needs of DASH. We
approached the application as a call to lift our heads up from our day to day work with DASH and critically evaluate our progress on what we set out to do.

More concretely, preparing our application in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic was enlightening. The fact that our Board was able to rapidly pivot when DASH needed us to help secure the organization in times of financial uncertainty was one such measurable example of the fruits of our labor.

The self-reflection, internal dialogue, and conversations had in interviews during the course of this application process helped us recognize the causes for celebration of what we have achieved. It has also sparked conversations among our board on emerging areas for continued improvement. We are better for it.

What advice would you offer for other organizations/board members striving for excellence in board leadership?

Excellence takes intention, strategy and consistent effort, so make self-assessment and self-accountability a regular part of board discussion and action. The mechanics of a good board are a critical foundation--appropriate governance, roles and responsibilities, controls, and board management. Don’t stop there--many boards check the boxes for the fundamentals and can look good on paper. However, it is often other components of a board that can take it from good to great. Be strategic and intentional about the board composition and culture you build, even if it takes time. Collegial and respectful board dynamics, inclusive and egalitarian board culture, commitment to ongoing development and improvement, diverse board members who are engaged and passionate about the mission, board members that are active ambassadors of the organization--these are all signs of great board leadership.

It may be difficult to build these structures solely within the board, so don’t hesitate to leverage external resources to support you. Consider engaging outside experts to help you assess your current state objectively, identify areas for improvement and help you build a strategic plan to become a high-performing board—some may even provide pro bono services. Leverage the many free resources available to educate all board members on what makes a great board. And while you do this important work, be present along the way to note and appreciate what the board is already doing well. Celebrate the small wins as well as the bigger milestones and enjoy the process of growing better together.