

Family Strength and the Military Community

The family is just as much a part of the military as the service member they support. Their care and devotion is integral to the continuing efforts of our men and women in uniform. This support is not without cost, however. The sacrifices made by military families are great: relocation, deployment and reintegration, in particular, pose tremendous challenges, and often negatively affect the well-being of the family unit and, consequently, the community in which they reside. In order to strengthen our communities and repay their devoted service, we must ease the difficulties faced by military families.

Overview of the Issue

The majority of those in the military have at least one dependent family member. Indeed, family members constitute a greater portion of the military community than service members themselves. Family strength is not a small issue; it affects a large portion of our armed forces, and is of pivotal importance to the well-being of millions of Americans.

- There are approximately 1.4 million active duty service members and 850,000 Reserve and National Guard members with a combined total of 3.1 million dependent family members
 - 55.8 percent of active duty service members are married, while 48.5 percent of Reserve and National Guard members are married
 - 43.7 percent of active duty service members have dependent children, while 42.7 percent Reserve and National Guard members have childrenⁱ
- 37 percent of families live on military installations; the remaining 63 percent live in more than 4,000 communities across the countryⁱⁱ
- More than two million service members have deployed since 2001
 - 40 percent have served in multiple deployments
 - More than 263,000 have served three or more deploymentsⁱⁱⁱ

Family Struggles

The cohesion of the family as a whole is among the most important aspects of family strength. Reintegration, deployment and relocation can have dramatic effects on each and every member of a military family.

- Military families relocate at four times the rate of non-military families, and are significantly more likely to relocate over a long distance or overseas^{iv}
- 80 percent of Reserve and National Guard families report problems within the family related to deployment
 - Emotional or mental struggles, difficulties with household responsibilities and problems related to children were the most common
 - 90 percent relied on outside resources, such as community programs or extended family involvement, in order to cope with deployment^v
- Among veterans with behavioral health concerns, as many as 75 percent report difficulty reintegrating with their family
 - 40.7 percent feel “like a guest within their home”; 25 percent report “their children acting afraid or not being warm towards them”; 37.2 percent are “unsure of their family role”
 - Among those separating or recently separated from their spouse, 53.7 percent report conflicts involving “shouting, pushing or shoving”; and 27.6 percent report their partner is “afraid of them”^{vi}

- 92 percent of military families agree, “the general public does not truly understand or appreciate the sacrifices made by service members and their families”^{vii}

Spouses

Spouses face a particular set of difficulties not shared with service members or children. Many spouses find relocation, deployment and the reintegration of their service member to be a heavy burden.

- Frequent relocation negatively impacts the employment prospects of military spouses
 - Military spouses face an average wage deficit of 42 percent compared to equally experienced, non-military workers
 - The wage gap rose to 47 percent for those who had relocated within a year of beginning their current employment
 - The wage differential varies with education, from 23.6 percent for those with a post-graduate degree to 30.6 percent for those with some college, but no degree
 - The overall gap between civilian and military spouses employed full-time was 25 percent^{viii}
- Deployment poses a tremendous challenge to many spouses, and is associated with increased emotional difficulty and elevated stress
 - 38 percent report significantly elevated stress levels, and more than half report some problems with overall mental health^{ix}
 - 47 percent feel they have too many responsibilities at home, while 30 percent report concern about changing roles in their marriage and 25 percent feel they are growing apart from their deployed spouse^x
- Veteran status is associated with an increased risk of marital strife
 - 32 percent of ever-married veterans report engaging in extramarital sex, as compared to 16.8 percent of non-veterans
 - 38.5 percent of ever-married veterans have been divorced, as compared to 28.9 percent of non-veterans^{xi}

Children

Family strength is of great importance to the children of military families. Younger children may not appreciate or understand their family's service, while older children must cope with issues like relocation and deployment during the critical adolescent stages of social and emotional development.

- 1.89 million children have at least one parent in the military
- Children with a deployed parent exhibit significantly increased risk of behavioral and emotional problems such as increased aggressiveness, higher levels of internalizing behaviors, and generalized anxiety
 - 30 percent display elevated anxiety levels, compared to 15 percent of non-military children
 - 26 percent of spouses report that their children display increased behavioral and emotional problems during deployment
 - Older children report more difficulties academically, while younger children are more likely to struggle with anxiety
 - Caregivers who are coping well with deployment are more likely to have children who are coping well^{xii}

- A separate study found an 11 percent increase in outpatient visits for behavioral health issues among a group of 3- to 8-year-old children of military parents
- The same study found an 18 percent increase in behavioral health disorders and a 19 percent increase in stress disorders for children with a deployed parent^{xiii}
- Relocation has not been shown to definitively impact military children in a permanent manner, but has shown a strong correlation with short-term increases in anxiety and depressive disorders, as well as with lower levels of academic performance^{xiv}

Existing Services

Interest in family strength as a subject of study has surged in the years since the 9/11 attacks. So, too, has the level of support available to military families.

- Nonprofit groups like Blue Star Families (www.bluestarfam.org) and the National Military Family Association (www.militaryfamily.org) provide an array of resources for the military family, ranging from support groups to explanations of military benefits to scholarships
- The Military Community and Family Policy (www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil) provides a government portal through which military families can access information on a wide variety of available resources
- Local Family Assistance Centers throughout the United States provide extensive services to military families, including official information regarding deployment, basic information on TRICARE benefits, child and youth activities and connections for support within the community

How You Can Help

Military families are a part of thousands of communities across the country. Their struggles are not isolated; they are the shouting voices next door, the door slammed across the street. By supporting military families, communities are not pursuing some distant goal or abstract concept, but are instead strengthening the interior bonds that form the community itself. Providing for military families leads to a happy, engaged and unified population. It is an expression of support not just for the military, but for each and every family within the community.

Military families serve our nation with just as much courage as our service members. The trials they face are no less taxing in their own way than the labors of our service members and veterans. Relocation, deployment and the reintegration of service members can be difficult and have long-term repercussions on the emotional well-being of all members of the military family. Though recent years have seen a surge in community assistance programs, many are still struggling to get the support they need. As citizens and communities, we must find ways to provide our military families with the strength, devotion and support that they have for so long provided us.

The Promising Practices provide a way for communities to support their military families and, by doing so, strengthen themselves. The Community Blueprint will help communities by addressing everything from childcare for service members and their families, formalizing military outreach efforts for local nonprofits and raising awareness of family strength issues. By undertaking these practices, communities will be able to simultaneously remedy the familial problems facing their service members, veterans and families; increase the overall cohesion and unity of the

community itself; and ensure the continued success of our military both at home and abroad.

Quotes

“It helps that families such as ours realize we're never alone, as I've seen this year how powerful the support of the community can be: A local restaurant provides pizzas at a welcome-home event; a minor league baseball team, the Wilmington Blue Rocks, dedicates a game night in support of our troops; one of our schools adopts a military unit... There are just so many ways that each American can lend a hand and make a difference.”

– Dr. Jill Biden

“Let me be clear, stronger military families will strengthen the fabric of America. By spotlighting their devotion to service, internal resilience and patriotism, all Americans will have examples to emulate. I will ensure that the commitments, partnerships and resources endure well after the guns are silenced and our service members come home.”

– President Barack Obama, in “Strengthening Our Military Families,” Jan.14, 2011

“We can do this. In every community, every day, we can find concrete ways to show our military families the respect and gratitude that each of us holds for them in our hearts. They deserve our support long after the welcome home ceremonies are over. You don't have to come from a military family, have a base in your community or be an expert in military issues to make a difference. Every American can do something.”

—First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, quoted in *USA Today*, Sept. 3, 2010

References:

- i U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense. (2010). *2009 Demographic report: Profile of the military community*. Arlington, VA, retrieved from http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/portal/page/mhf/MHF/MHF_DETAIL_0?current_id=20.20.60.70.0.0.0.0
- ii U.S. Department of Defense, Executive Office of the President. (2011). *Strengthening our military families: meeting America*. Washington, DC: Retrieved from http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2011/0111_initiative/strengthening_our_military_january_2011.pdf
- iii Bowling, U., Doerman, A., & Sherman, M. Oklahoma City VA Medical Center, Family Mental Health Program. (2011). *Operation Enduring Families: Information and support for Iraq & Afghanistan veterans and their families*. Oklahoma City, OK, retrieved from <http://www.ouhsc.edu/oef/>
- iv Military Homefront (2002). *Step into your child's world: How does relocation affect the military family?*. Retrieved from http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/dav/lsn/LSN/BINARY_RESOURCE/BINARY_CONTENT/1842451.pdf
- v Castaneda, L.W. (2008). *Deployment experiences of guard and reserve families: implications for support and retention*. Retrieved from <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG645.html>
- vi Sayers, S. L., Farrow, V. A., Ross, K., & Oslin, D. W. (2009). Family problems among recently returned military veterans referred for a mental health evaluation. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 70, 163-170.
- vii Blue Star Families. (2010). *Military family lifestyle survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.bluestarfam.org/resources/Surveys>
- viii Kniskern, M.K., & Segal, D.R. (2010). *Mean wage differences between civilian and military wives*. College Park, MD: RAND Corporation.
- ix Blue Star Families, 2010.
- x Chandra, A., et. al. (2011). *Views from the homefront: The experiences of youth and spouses from military families*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR913.html.
- xi London, A., & Wilmoth, J. (2011). *Veteran status, marital infidelity, and divorce* [Presented at the 106th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association]. Retrieved from http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/London_Wilmoth.pdf
- xii Chandra et. al., 2011.
- xiii Gorman, G.H., Eide, M., and Hisle-Gorman, E. (2010). *Wartime military deployment and increased pediatric mental and behavioral health complaints*. *Pediatrics*. peds.2009.2856v1-peds.2009-2856.
- xiv Military Homefront, 2002.