



July 2004

NMFA 
National Military Family Association

SERVING THE HOME FRONT:

An Analysis of Military Family Support
from September 11, 2001 through March 31, 2004

FOREWORD

July, 2004

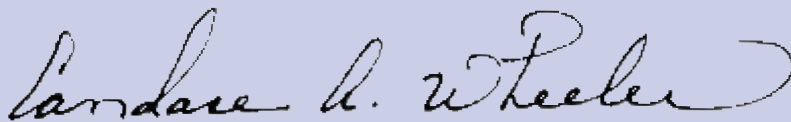
The National Military Family Association (NMFA) is a private, nonprofit organization serving the families of the seven uniformed services. Its primarily volunteer staff is made up of military family members, active duty and retired personnel, and civilians who care about military families. We understand the unique dynamics of the uniformed services families because we live that lifestyle.

This year the National Military Family Association celebrates 35 years of serving military families. NMFA has been honored to be the “Voice for Military Families” and will proudly continue to be that voice. Through our mission of education, information, and advocacy, we have strengthened and empowered military families. That is why we have adopted the motto “Strong Families, Strong Force” for our 35th anniversary year.

At NMFA we believe that to obtain a strong military force, we must have strong military families. It is especially fitting during this anniversary year that NMFA has conducted a family support analysis project. The analysis team, all military family members, examined issues of concern to military families and the availability of support services. This report summarizes the findings of the analysis team.

Uniformed service families all over the world serve on the home front to make their communities a better place. They serve their country proudly just as their servicemembers do. That is why we feel very strongly that the recommendations contained in this report should be adopted to further strengthen our families, our force, and our nation.

Sincerely,



Candace A. Wheeler

NMFA President

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

NMFA extends its heartfelt thanks to those who contributed to this project, especially to all of the military families serving the home front. Without you, this report would not have been possible.

All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The mission of the National Military Family Association (NMFA) is to serve the families of the seven uniformed services through information, education, and advocacy. Since September 11, 2001, when the Global War on Terrorism began, the operational tempo (OPTEMPO) of the uniformed services has increased dramatically.

Military families have faced daunting challenges in maintaining a stable home life while supporting their servicemembers engaged in the national defense mission. As servicemembers have gone to war, so too have families and support providers.

Following Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990's, the NMFA Government Relations Department compiled a summary of lessons learned and recommendations for future family support programs and initiatives. As in its previous analysis, NMFA builds on its intimate knowledge of military family life to capture information about current military family support issues in this report. It examines issues of concern to families and the availability of family support for both the active duty and reserve components.

This report focuses on four main themes: communication, training, partnerships, and community support.

- Commitment to effective communication is the key to coordinating family support programs. This communication needs to be a continuous flow of accurate, timely information from the highest levels of the military to the individual servicemembers and families.
- Training is a continuous step in ensuring that programs are working and that services are consistent and utilized. There are many people offering wonderful programs, but the challenge lies in reaching the families who need them.
- The development and continuation of partnerships are central to ensuring an overall successful effort to help military families. These partnerships include military to military, military to community, and military to employers.
- Finally, community support has helped fill the gaps in military family support services. Military families are encouraged by and grateful for the efforts of their fellow citizens.

Selected issue discussions highlight special areas of concern and responses to those concerns. These issues—TRICARE, the need for preventive mental health services, access to affordable child care, and communication innovations through the “One Source” employee assistance program—point the way to further research and/or additional support activities.

The report also identifies some underlying themes related to transforming military family support services, expectations, and the importance of command involvement.

- The expectations of servicemembers, family members, and “the military” all need to be established and communicated. Expectations of families regarding support in general should mesh with the reality of support services and programs that can be provided. Families must maintain some sense of responsibility for their own readiness.
- The importance of command involvement in all facets of family readiness cannot be emphasized enough. This includes not just unit commanders, but also installation and headquarters command levels.
- Military families understand that the Global War on Terrorism will entail a long commitment for them and their servicemembers. As the military services are transformed to meet the unexpected and uncertain missions of this war, all aspects of family support need to be transformed as well.

As the third anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack approaches, the resiliency of military families remains strong. However, according to one military spouse, “the normal of what [we] used to know is no more.” The strength of military families serving on the home front to endure this changed environment is wearing down. In addition to dealing with routine experiences of military life, such as relocating, achieving consistency in their children’s education or seeking employment opportunities

for spouses, military families face even more unique challenges due to the ongoing high OPTEMPO. As servicemembers deploy more frequently, for longer periods of time and at unpredictable intervals, it is essential that military families have a comprehensive, responsive, and flexible system of support to prepare and sustain them.

COMMUNICATION

The first essential component of a family support system is effective communication to enhance the sharing of information and outreach to military families. Families need realistic expectations about the frequency and type of communication they will have with the deployed servicemember. Communication expectations must also be established and information easily and openly exchanged between the official chain of command and families. Processes of communication should include families geographically dispersed from the servicemember's unit, as well as families of servicemembers augmented to another unit or Service. When in place, institutional means of raising family support issues can heighten the Service leadership's awareness of concerns and lead to solutions at all levels. Effective and easy to use websites should be available to all family members; volunteer efforts to provide input to these sites should be facilitated. Outreach initiatives are needed to raise awareness among all military families of available support programs and services designed to enable them to thrive during a higher pace of military operations.

Key communication recommendations

- Establish realistic expectations regarding communication both between the servicemember and family and the command and families prior to deployment.
- Ensure that command responsibility includes geographically dispersed families and families of augmented servicemembers in the unit communication process.
- Implement a Service-wide, institutional means of raising family readiness and deployment issues from the ground level up through the headquarters level and facilitate Service solutions to problems at various levels.
- Provide a far-reaching system to include extended family members in unit communications.
- Create and maintain Service, installation and unit websites that are user-friendly and contain timely and accurate information.
- Recognize the importance of and facilitate unit volunteer efforts to reach out to family members. Assign a point of contact for posting unit volunteer information on installation and/or unit websites instead of spending additional resources for off-line websites.
- Develop a Department of Defense (DoD)-wide comprehensive marketing outreach plan to make all military families aware of available support services, regardless of their Service affiliation or proximity to an installation.
- Continue efforts to educate families about TRICARE benefits and rules.
- Ensure continuity and accessibility of medical care, especially for Guard and Reserve families.

TRAINING

Standardized and continuous training throughout the military family support system is the second element in this comprehensive effort to provide families with the help they need during more frequent and lengthier deployments. Formal training will enable unit commanders, rear parties, and volunteers to work together more effectively to make the support system of true benefit to military families. Servicemembers must be trained by the command to make family readiness a priority. Required Family Care Plans should be agreeable to all involved and commanders held accountable for their implementation, as well as all other aspects of family readiness. Military family support providers must tailor programs and services to meet changing needs of families as servicemembers return and families reunite. They should adapt the location and hours of support programs and services to be accessible for the families they serve. Individuals involved with children need training to recognize and support their deployment-related needs. All individuals involved with the Guard and Reserve must know of rights, benefits and entitlements and how

to find information throughout the stages of mobilization and deployment. Families and servicemembers need information to know when to seek professional help and, when needed, preventive, confidential, and robust counseling must also be easily accessible.

Key training recommendations

- Require formalized training of unit commanders, rear party personnel and unit volunteers together so all receive the same core information, have similar expectations, and understand the role of each party.
- Train servicemembers that family readiness is part of servicemember readiness.
- Require servicemember Family Care Plans to be reasonable, workable, and agreeable to the parties named as family care providers.
- Enforce measures of command accountability to make the entire concept of family readiness work well.
- Provide robust return, reunion and reintegration programs for servicemembers and families as the nature and length of deployments continue to change.
- Ensure military family support providers are trained to adapt support service location and hours so they are most accessible to the families they serve.
- Furnish training to parents, school personnel, and child care providers about ways to help children cope, especially with longer deployments and repeated deployments. Include ways that local military entities and units at installations can assist.
- Continuously train all entities involved with the Guard and Reserve to know rights, benefits, and entitlements from mobilization through demobilization.
- Provide more robust, preventive counseling services for servicemembers and families, especially children. Train servicemembers and families to know when to seek professional help related to their circumstances. Ensure that commanders encourage participation in these services without danger to the servicemember's career.
- Expand child care services to meet the changing needs of families and to facilitate their participation in training opportunities. These may include hourly care, respite care, care for children with special needs or mild illnesses, evening care, weekend care, or continuous care under certain circumstances.

PARTNERSHIPS

Effective partnerships, the third element in a military family support system, must be replicated across the board to implement an all-encompassing and responsive effort by military and community agencies and organizations to benefit military families. Joint accessibility and consistency of programs is needed and successful working programs should be emulated to help families during deployments. Partnerships between the military, installation agencies, and civilian entities must be enhanced to ensure the acceptance of powers of attorney as families access services. By working together, military public affairs officials and local media outlets can make families aware of available programs and services. The sharing of best practices and knowledge can strengthen the essential relationships between the command, parents, school officials, and community agencies necessary to meet the changing needs of military children. More partnerships between military and community religious leaders will further sustain servicemembers and families during all phases of deployments. Robust partnerships between the military and employers must also continue to facilitate understanding and support of Guard and Reserve members and families.

Key partnership recommendations

- Create more partnerships to enhance joint accessibility to and consistency of military family support programs and services, regardless of geographic location.
- Expand upon the model provided at the DoD headquarters level through the Joint Family Readiness Working Group to implement joint groups at state and installation levels.

- Enforce the requirement for One Source to provide feedback to military family support providers and commanders on trends in services requested by family members. Ensure installations and units provide updated information on available services to One Source on a regular basis.
- Form partnerships between the military, agencies on the installation, and civilian entities to ensure powers of attorney completed by military legal authorities are accepted.
- Develop working relationships between military public affairs and local media outlets to reach the widest audience possible about services available to families, common challenges families face and how to solve issues as they arise.
- Increase partnerships between command, parents, and school officials to best serve the changing needs of military children regardless of geographic location. Encourage more military-to-school and school-to-school partnerships to share expertise and best practices.
- Continue to cultivate partnerships with local community services to support child and youth needs especially during times of high OPTEMPO.
- Encourage expanded programs between the military and community religious leaders to support all servicemembers and families during all phases of mobilization and deployment.
- Establish additional support programs to facilitate understanding of and support between employers and Guard and Reserve members and families.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The broad effort to coordinate programs and services for military families must also include harnessing community goodwill and support on a global level. A continuous process of communicating between military and community leaders will enhance programs available through military family support providers. State and local government leaders must share information on supporting military families. Community support efforts must be funneled through a consolidated channel at installations to coordinate available offers of support and needs of families and avoid duplication of efforts. Community support efforts are the final piece in the comprehensive system of reaching out and helping families.

Key community support recommendations

- Recognize the importance of community support and encourage a continued commitment between military and community leaders to provide for the changing needs of military families.
- Encourage state and local government leaders to network and share programs that benefit military families.
- Appoint installation points of contact to coordinate and market available community support.

Military families understand and are prepared for particular uncertainties. To deal with uncertainties that go beyond their frame of reference, families need additional help. A comprehensive, responsive support system will ensure the success of military families as they continue to face the unique challenges involved with the high pace of military operations.

FOLLOW-ON ANALYSIS IS NEEDED

This report provides a snapshot of military family support from September 11, 2001 to March 31, 2004. While this broad view provides many insights into the needs of families and the responses of military and civilian agencies and organizations to meet those needs, the necessity for further research in at least two distinct areas becomes apparent. Further study is required to pinpoint the needs of children during times of high OPTEMPO, to determine the tools parents need to support their children, and to help children cope in the best ways possible. More research is also needed on the return of servicemembers from deployment and the reunion and reintegration of families. This includes the long-term effects of and the best ways to assist families during these phases, especially during and after repeated deployments.



Serving the Families of Those Who Serve

The National Military Family Association is the only national organization dedicated to identifying and resolving issues of concern to military families. Our mission is to serve the families of the seven uniformed services through education, information, and advocacy.



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Sears, Roebuck and Co. Through the Sears American Dream Campaign, Sears provided \$2 million to NMFA for programs benefiting military families. In addition to this report, part of the funding was used to sponsor "Operation Purple," a summer camp program that allows children from all branches of the military services to interact with and learn from each other in an effort to help deal with deployment-related stress. Separately, NMFA and Sears recently published a unique keepsake book, *A Tribute to Military Families: Letters of Thanks from Our Nation's Children*, with inspiring essays from children on the importance of military families.

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