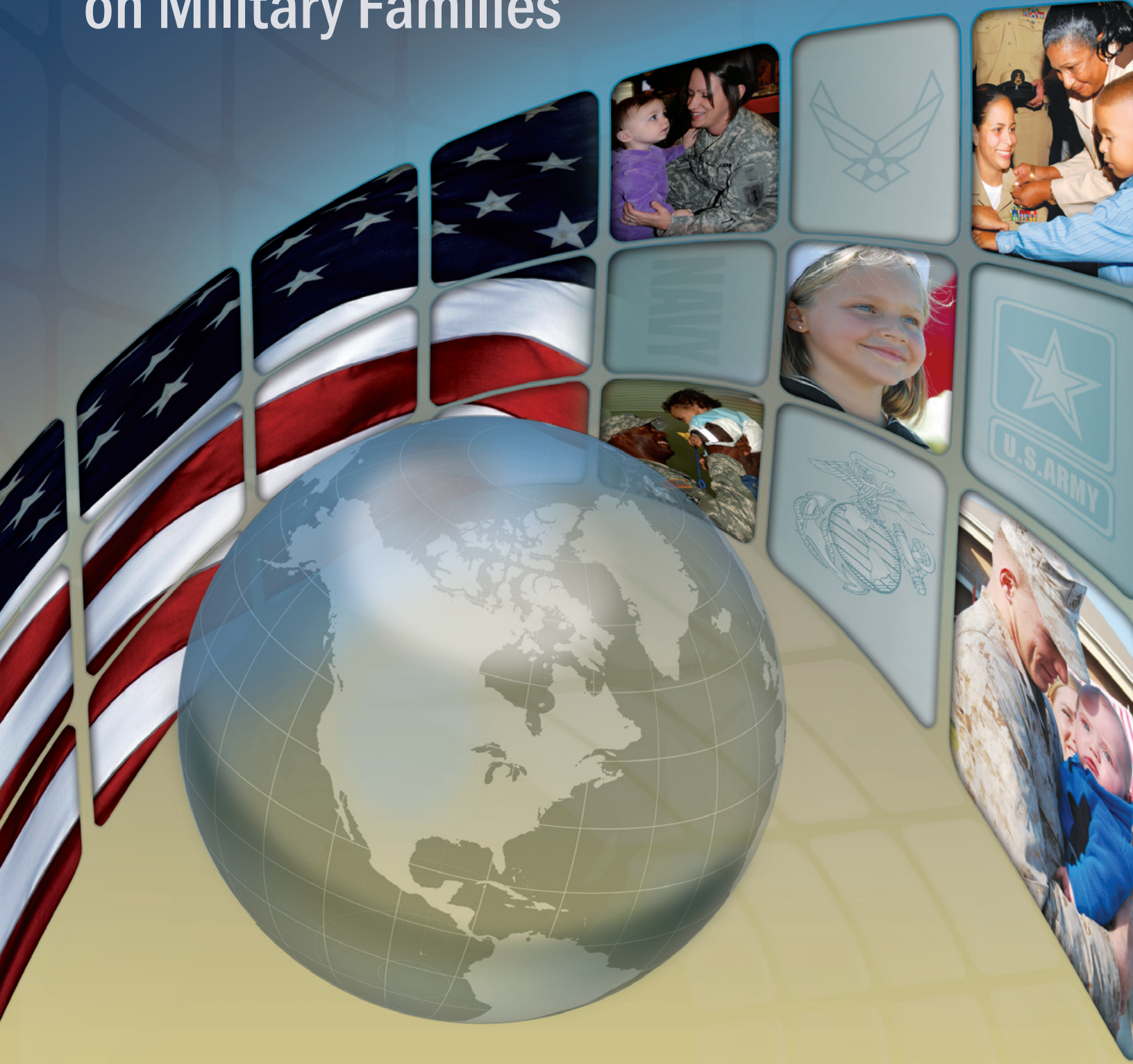


National Leadership Summit on Military Families



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National Leadership Summit on Military Families

Final Report

Prepared for

the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense,
Military Community and Family Policy

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I. Introduction

Introduction

Background

The National Leadership Summit on Military Families (the Summit) is one of the steps in an ongoing process to transform military family support and readiness programs and eventually lead to more effective coordination and implementation. The Summit was held November 9 - 10, 2009 at the University of Maryland University College Inn & Conference Center in Adelphi, MD. The Summit was a partnership between Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the University of Maryland.

This innovative partnership grows out of recognizing the value of using the unique resources of these organizations to benefit the quality of life of military personnel and their families. These organizations include agencies that conduct research on military families, provide direct services to military personnel and their families, and possess the potential to provide even more knowledge and services to enhance military family well-being.

Participants

Summit participants included senior military family policymakers, family program leaders and their staff, military family researchers, and military family members. Additional participants included faculty from the University of Maryland and other land grant universities, and staff from USDA who have ties with military family programming. All of these participants share common interests in strengthening the well-being and resiliency of military families during an era of persistent conflict, and the goal of transforming family support and readiness programs in ways that enhance their effectiveness, efficiency, and overall impact. All the military service components were represented at the Summit (including the Department of Defense, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard and Reserve components), as were land-grant universities and other non-governmental partners.



Summit Objectives

The objectives of the Summit were to bring together those most knowledgeable about contemporary military family issues and challenges—and the programs/services in place to support service members and their families—to candidly discuss areas of strength, opportunities for improvement, and methods to enhance collaboration within and across the Department of Defense (DoD), the military services, USDA, the land-grant universities, and the Cooperative Extension Service. The Summit also challenged participants to identify barriers to effective support and to create specific action steps based on group consensus. The action steps developed at the Summit, which are described in this document, represent the participants' collective vision about which areas in military family support must be considered top priorities and what specifically needs to be done to ensure (a) military family programs are relevant to the challenges families face today, and (b) programs are appropriately configured and resourced to produce meaningful, measurable outcomes.

The component organizations have resources that can be used to support military personnel and their families. For example, there is the potential for utilizing Department of Agriculture cooperative extension agencies at land-grant universities, programs and agents dispersed throughout the U.S. They already involve thousands of military children in 4-H programs on military installations. Several land-grant universities have active programs of research on military personnel and their families. For example, faculty and graduate students at the University of Maryland's (UMCP) Sociology department have been conducting such research for more than 40 years, and its Center for Research on Military Organization has an active program of research on military families. The UMCP Family Science department conducts research, provides counseling services to military families, and trains counselors to work with military families at the Center for Healthy Families. University of Maryland Extension conducts educational programs for youth through its Operation Military Kids program along with financial management education for military personnel and families. Purdue University is the home of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI), where University researchers are currently conducting research on life after deployment and the needs of Reserve and National Guard families. Faculty in the Human Development department at Virginia Tech University lead an ongoing program of research and evaluation focused on the needs of military children and youth and the programs designed to support them, and are at this time developing an evaluation of DoD non-medical counseling programs

Activities and Process

The format of the Summit combined (1) presentations from senior DoD and USDA leaders, military family members and researchers, (2) a series of “breakout” sessions that engaged participants in small working groups, and (3) follow-up “general” sessions held immediately after the breakouts that involved all Summit participants. Below we provide a brief summary of each of these three components

of the Summit. The detailed results of the breakout sessions and general sessions are described in Section II (Summit Outcomes).

Presentations

The Summit was opened with a “call to action” by Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (MC&FP), Mr. Tommy Thomas. In his remarks, Mr. Thomas emphasized the attendees’ role as active contributors in helping chart the way forward for military family support, and encouraged them to use the next two days to collectively define the top issues and challenges facing military families and the family support community. He also encouraged participants to craft and prioritize the actions required to address these needs.

The Summit keynote address was delivered by the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans Mrs. Gail McGinn, then performing the duties of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. She emphasized the progress that has been made in supporting military families since Army Chief of Staff John A. Wickham’s seminal white paper “The Army Family” was published in 1983. Mrs. McGinn acknowledged that the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are placing military families under more strain than at any time in the era of the All-Volunteer Force, and that more needs to be done to ensure that programs and policies are able to meet current challenges. These challenges, which would also surface in the breakout sessions, included ongoing, repeated deployments, a geographically dispersed military population, and changes in the ways military families communicate and access information.

These speakers were followed by an introduction and welcome from University of Maryland President Dr. Dan Mote, who emphasized the university’s commitment to America’s service members and veterans, and described the unique role played by the land grant universities in national defense and the opportunities to continue that tradition through Cooperative Extension Service programs.

Following these tone-setting remarks, participants were provided an overview of research findings on military families from Dr. Shelley MacDermid-Wadsworth, Director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, and Dr. Beth Ellen Davis, retired chief of Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics at Madigan Army Medical Center. Additional research findings from recent and ongoing studies and surveys of military families were provided by Dr. Angela Huebner of Virginia Tech University’s Department of Human Development, and Dr. Rachel Mapes, Special Assistant for Policy, Planning and Evaluation in the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Plans).

Following the first research overview, a panel of nine military spouses from across the various military service components shared their reflections and experiences on being in a military family during a time of persistent conflict. A Q&A format was employed, in which both a MC&FP moderator and audience members posed questions to the panel.



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Though these military spouses described numerous challenges that they had faced and were facing as a consequence of military family life, the panel as a whole exhibited a high degree of resilience and commitment to helping improve the quality of family support.

On the Summit's second day, Mr. Thomas opened the day's activities by summarizing the information gathered at other key events, including the DoD Joint Family Readiness Conference held in Chicago, IL in September 2009. Following lunch, the role of USDA and the Cooperative Extension Service in supporting military families was highlighted in an address by Dr. Rajiv Shah, Undersecretary for Research, Education and Economics, USDA.

Breakout sessions

During the afternoon of the first day of the Summit, attendees participated in the first of three breakout sessions, which constituted the main work of the Summit. The breakout sessions were small group discussions among 10-12 participants with specific questions to be addressed. Participants were assigned to each breakout session by DoD organizers of the Summit, based on the topic of the session and the interests/professional roles of each attendee. The topics of the three breakout sessions were:

- ★ Breakout session one: Unique issues and challenges for military families
- ★ Breakout session two: The goals and scope of family support and readiness
- ★ Breakout session three: Identifying action items and next steps

Facilitators and recorders, mostly University of Maryland faculty and graduate students, were present in each session to ensure that the questions to be addressed were consistent across groups and a transcript was captured reflecting the discussion and recommendations. (Detailed descriptions of the work and findings from each of the breakout sessions are provided in Appendix E). By design, the focus of the last two breakout sessions built on the results and conclusions developed in the prior sessions.

General Sessions

After each breakout session (with each group deciding on its major issues, challenges, and/or recommended action steps), participants reconvened in the main auditorium for a general session. The purpose of the general sessions was to "report out" (i.e., present the work accomplished by the individual breakout groups), and collectively determine the major family readiness challenges, appropriate goals and scope of family programs, and the action steps. (For a detailed description of each general session, see Appendix A).



Each breakout group chose a speaker for the general session to describe their group's top issues and findings. All participants then had an opportunity to vote via electronic clickers on priority issues and action steps, with the resulting selected priorities being displayed in real time on a large screen. Armed with the priorities/issues selected by majority, group members then were tasked to address these specific subjects when developing recommended courses of action in subsequent breakout sessions.

The final general session, held on the second day of the Summit, brought to the stage a representative from each breakout group to summarize their group's recommended action steps. Using the process described above, all Summit participants registered their vote on which of these actions steps should represent the top priorities for DoD family support and readiness programs. These action steps, and the major findings and conclusions of each of the breakout and general sessions, are presented in the next section.



Introduction

II. Summit Outcomes

Findings presented here are those that emerged as the top issues and priorities from each breakout, as determined by a collective vote that took place during the general sessions. The complete range of findings and issues discussed in these breakouts (including many issues that did not surface as a top priority during the voting) can be found in the individual breakout group transcripts in Appendix E.

Breakout Session One: Critical Issues Affecting Families

The first breakout session provided a forum for participants to use their own knowledge and experiences, reinforced with the findings from recent research presented by invited speakers, to identify the major challenges facing military families. The discussion in this session also focused on ways that major challenges and stressors that affect family readiness and well-being might be reduced, particularly through changes in family support policy, services or programming.

Identifying the Challenges and Stressors for Military Families: Key Questions

- ▶ What are the critical challenges and stressors for military families that have negative effects on family well-being?
- ▶ What factors in military life may contribute to these challenges and stressors?
- ▶ Which of these factors could potentially be minimized, eliminated, or transformed to lessen negative impact on military families' quality of life?

Participants were divided for these sessions into 11 groups by service component and program and interest areas: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard, Reserves, family programs, child/youth programs, veterans, medical programs, and policy/leadership. While the groups produced a diverse list of issues, and the priorities of the different groups reflect their special areas of concern, there were issues that crossed these boundaries.

Participants noted that some of the challenges and stressors are due to mission requirements and are not within the purview of program providers to change. However, there was consensus that some of the unavoidable features of military life during wartime lead to serious problems for families, and solutions must be found to increase resiliency within military families and communities so that they can adapt and thrive in the face of these challenges. Other challenges were not directly connected to the exigencies of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and were seen as well within the capacity of DoD and the military services to change, given the resources and will. Whether or not the family readiness and support community can realistically address the causes of the major challenges and stressors was

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widely discussed; however, participants agreed that providing families with resources to help them manage and overcome these stressors must be a top priority for DoD and the military services.

The top five issues and challenges as determined in the general session following breakout session one are described below.

1. Challenges of the Deployment Cycle

There was consensus among participants that service members and their families are experiencing severe strain due to wartime deployments. The length and frequency of these deployments and lack of sufficient dwell time for recovery and reintegration has no parallel in the history of the modern all-volunteer force, or in the extent to which they tax Reserve component families. Many have minimal knowledge of military support systems and are widely dispersed, living far from military installations. These deployment-related factors present perhaps the greatest challenges to individual and family health, well-being, and readiness. Participants discussed a wide range of difficulties that families are facing as we face the ninth year of the Overseas Contingency Operations, including:

“Service members are not getting enough time to reintegrate once they are back in the country; they are on training and there is not enough time for families.”

— Breakout Session One

- ★ Service members returning with mental health problems, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
- ★ The requirement for many spouses to take on the role of full-time caregiver for an injured veteran
- ★ Lack of sufficient child care to remain employed, and the great need for respite care during deployments
- ★ Financial stress as families lose the non-deployed members income if he/she must stop working to manage home and family full-time

A number of participants strongly believed that policymakers should strive to reduce the length and frequency of deployments as much as possible given mission requirements, and perhaps seek additional personnel resources to meet defense needs. Many acknowledged, however, that it was the responsibility of military families to be prepared to recognize and value the reality of today's rapidly deploying force. For these participants, a major part of preparation and readiness for deployment consists of knowing what services are in place to support the family and how to access these resources, as well as staying connected with informal and formal support networks. Making this vision a reality, they suggested, is a shared responsibility between the family support community and families themselves.



2. Psychological Health of Military Families

Deployments and other stresses of military life are negatively affecting the mental health of service members and their families. For example, research presented at the Summit and elsewhere acknowledges the high rates of diagnosis of “invisible” injuries such as PTSD and TBI. These conditions can profoundly affect service members’ cognition, ability to reconnect with their families emotionally, and their opportunities to continue their military career or pursue a civilian occupation. Each of these potential consequences of PTSD and/or TBI can have profound effects on the psychological health of family members, who must adjust to the changes in their service member, often become full time caregivers, and/or endure a long and difficult period of reintegration. Additionally, there is not yet full understanding of the impact of these injuries on the development of children and youth in military families.

“Families experience stigma in asking for support across all realms of support – mental, behavioral, financial, medical...”

– Breakout Session One

In addition, participants recognized that there are barriers to receiving mental health services, particularly the stigma associated with seeking help. They recommended that leaders encourage service members to seek help, by de-stigmatizing and normalizing such action and being the first to sign up for mental health screening.

3. Access to Services and Consistency of Support

Participants noted various barriers to accessing programs and services that are provided for families. In addition to the stigma of seeking help noted above, barriers include geographic dispersion, especially for Reserve component families, veterans, and others in isolated locations. Travel distances can be long. Some groups specifically focused on problems of access to health care, including the length of time for appointments through TRICARE, and in some locations a dearth of providers who accept the military health care plan.

There was also consensus that there is a lack of consistent, predictable, continuous, and high quality programs and services from one location to another, both within and across the different branches. Participants explained that military families should know what level and type of support they can expect as they transition from one location to another, regardless of their military service branch or whether they serve in the Active or Reserve component. This lack of consistency is most visible to families who must undertake the frequent Permanent Change of Station (PCS) relocations required by the military. Some groups identified the need for more grassroots level cooperation (an idea that arose frequently in the later breakout sessions).



4. Communication challenges

Communication problems of various kinds arose in breakout session one, and in the subsequent sessions also, making it one of the major themes that resurfaced throughout the Summit. Participants acknowledged that many programs and services exist to support the needs of military families, and more programs continue to emerge within the military itself and in the outside community as new challenges surface and/or the needs of specific sub-groups of families (e.g., families of the severely wounded) become more visible. However, most participants expressed concern that many families are not aware of what is available to support them, in spite of the level of resources committed and the growth in family programs.

“[We need] better integration among units and support structures – more open communication between commands and support services to ensure all commands know what services are available that may meet their specific needs.”

– Breakout Session One

Participants expressed frustration over the difficulty involved in reaching some families with information about what programs and services are available to them, and others noted the challenge of communicating to families realistic expectations of what can and cannot be done for them. A widespread concern is that the families who need support services the most are often the most difficult to reach. Much discussion focused on marketing, outreach, use of multiple methods of communication, and tailoring messages to reach diverse families.

5. Frequent relocation

As noted above, frequent mandatory relocation produces hardships on families. Children’s education is disrupted and they must leave established friendships, sports activities, and other sources of support. There are difficulties with accessing child care, and in some areas, families may have to resort to low quality care. Care for family members with special needs is also disrupted, as not all locations have programs and/or facilities to accommodate families with special needs (such as the Exceptional Family Member Program). Even in those areas that do have the necessary programs, relocations require the family member to adjust to new situations and new care providers. Spouses suffer negative employment consequences, including unemployment, underemployment, and lower earnings, leading to dissatisfaction and lower family financial well-being.

“Incessant transfers are an issue. It’s hard to sell/buy a house. Geo-bachelors are on the rise and many are going into debt paying for two places.”

– Breakout Session One

The concerns that participants raised regarding the challenge of frequent relocation are not new and are documented by a great deal of previous research.

For example, moving has been shown to disrupt spouse employment and the longer a family stays at one location, the better the spouse's employment outcomes. Like deployment challenges, geographic mobility is a common characteristic of military life. However, participants noted that policymakers must examine critically whether all the relocations are necessary for mission accomplishment and service member career progression.

The challenges identified and discussed in breakout session one were addressed again in subsequent sessions, with the focus on the goals and scope of family readiness and support programs and the development of action plans to address them.

Breakout Session Two: Goals and Scope of Family Support and Readiness

Having clarified in the first breakout session the major challenges affecting military families and the resources currently in place to provide support, participants used breakout session two to clarify and define the goals and scope of family support and readiness programs. This process involved discussion and debate around how well current programs are aligned with the needs of families, the types of outcomes that programs should be expected to deliver, changes in policy, resources, program design or delivery needed to meet program goals, and opportunities for partnership and collaboration that could improve the overall chance of success (see Key Questions below).

To allow participants to collaborate with as many of their colleagues as possible, and to cover new ground on these topics, member composition of each of the breakout groups for breakout session two was randomly assigned.

Identifying the Goals and Scope of Family Support and Readiness Programs: Key Questions

- ▶ What are the ultimate goals for family support and readiness programs in terms of what families need to know or be able to do?
- ▶ What should the scope of family support and readiness be? Are there issues which programs should not address?
- ▶ Given these goals, which of them are not presently addressed by DoD and/or other service programs and policies?
- ▶ How can partnerships and collaborations among the military and other agencies and groups contribute to attaining these goals?

As with the first day's session focusing on needs and challenges, participant perspectives on the goals and scope of support programs were complex and diverse. A core set of themes clearly emerged, however, from the individual sessions in response to the key questions. These themes are presented and summarized below.

1. Evaluate support programs to learn which models are effective and build on success

In many groups, participants acknowledged that, particularly within the period spanned by Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), a wide range of well-intentioned family support programs and initiatives have been created across the



military services and DoD. Occasionally implemented in response to congressional mandates or ad-hoc needs identified by the components, some programs functionally overlap with one another, creating redundancy among providers and confusion among military family members about which option is best. Moreover, most programs (with a few exceptions) have not undergone scientific evaluation to determine

if they are having an impact on their target outcomes. Participants in multiple breakout groups called for a major reexamination and evaluation of the full suite of family support and readiness programs; with the aims of:

- ★ Determining which are most effective, building on programs and models that demonstrate results, and sharing best practices
- ★ Reducing overlap by reallocating resources used by ineffective programs
- ★ Ensuring the sustainability of effective programs
- ★ Establishing consistency and predictability in the level and quality of family services and support across the various components
- ★ Assessing the needs of families at different stages in the life course, tailoring programs that target specific needs and which can also adapt to changes in the external environment

2. Communicate critical information to military family members

Participants within every group believed that communication of information is a central goal of the military family support and readiness mission. There was general agreement, supported by research, that many difficulties faced by military families are created or exacerbated by a lack of information, such as what to expect during a

time of war, what specific resources are available for certain situations and/or for certain kinds of families (e.g., those with young children), and where and to whom families can and should turn for support. Participants acknowledged that the realities of military life in the 21st century make it a very demanding profession, and families must know what they will face and what the armed forces can and cannot do for them.

“Program evaluations are happening, but not strategic in scope and approach – program evaluations should be built in to program funding”

– Breakout Session Two

“A well-supported and ready military family is one that is informed of the resources available and equipped with tools for managing various problems and issues.”

– Breakout Session Two



Thus, a fundamental goal of family support and readiness programs involves identifying and implementing effective tools, methods, and strategies to communicate to families:

- ★ What to expect (the nature of military life—e.g., deployments, relocation), and what DoD and the military services can and cannot provide for families
- ★ Which specific resources/programs are available to support families, depending on the individual characteristics of family as well as the stage of the deployment cycle
- ★ How to access formal support resources, as well as the informal support of peers and social networks, to build resiliency

Additional aspects related to communication included the need for support and readiness programs to utilize available technology and new media (e.g., social networking sites like Facebook) to enhance opportunities and quality of contacts with and among military family members, foster more resilient communities through partnerships and collaboration with non-military resources, and ensure that communication runs in both directions—so that support providers remain knowledgeable about emerging concerns and trends that could affect the family support mission.

3. Establish collaborative partnerships

There was widespread agreement in the Summit that there exists an enormous pool of resources, programs and goodwill, both within and outside DoD, to support military families across the nation. In addition to military programs, participants acknowledged the military family support initiatives of groups like the Red Cross, Cooperative Extension and 4-H, non-profit advocacy groups such as the National Military Family Association, and various state and local government programs. While the DoD has made enormous progress developing partnerships with these outside agencies and groups to benefit service members and families (Fisher Houses providing lodging for families of the wounded, and 4-H military child and youth programs are just two examples), participants acknowledged that barriers remain that prevent the full potential of collaboration between the military and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to come to fruition. From the perspective of participants, a main goal of DoD family support must be to continue to reduce administrative barriers and to encourage private organizations to support service members and families.

“Sometimes we (DoD) make it difficult for private organizations to help.”

— Breakout Session Two

Participants also emphasized that enhancing collaborative partnerships is especially important in ensuring support for Guard and Reserve families, since most are geographically dispersed and are unable to conveniently access large installations and the support services located there. Quality, accessible child care, programs for children and youth, and access to medical and psychological care all surface as critical family support concerns when Reserve



component service members are activated and deployed. Each of these areas, and others, emerged as major focal points for military-civilian collaboration that warrant increased emphasis and attention from DoD family support providers and policymakers.

4. Address psychological health needs of military families

Research presented at the Summit and elsewhere indicates that the length and pace of deployments for OEF/OIF expose service members and their families to increased risk of stress and other symptoms that can harm their psychological health. Adding to the complexity of these challenges is a widespread perception within the force that requesting or accessing mental health services is stigmatized by the military and can negatively impact the career progression or future prospects of those who ask for help. Participants in the second breakout session expressed that important goals of family readiness and support programs are to help family members recognize the signs and symptoms of deployment-related stress and maladaptive reactions and behaviors (e.g., substance abuse) among themselves and other family members; confront and overcome the stigma around help-seeking; increase the community's knowledge of and access to available resources to support psychological well-being and resiliency; and encourage the use of resources by all who need them.

“We need to find a way to alleviate and remove the stigma of seeking mental health. [We must] provide help and support that ensures a service member is supported and not afraid to seek help.”

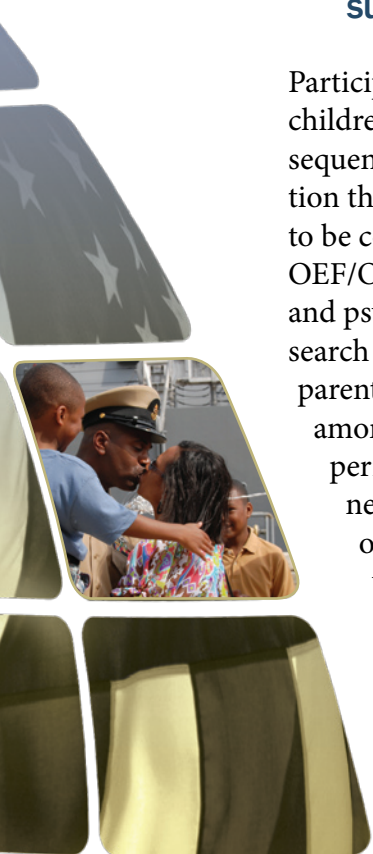
— Breakout Session Two

5. Develop and implement programs that support military children and youth

Participants spoke at length about the challenges that children and youth in military families face as a consequence of deployment and of the frequent relocation that is a part of military life. More research needs to be conducted to better understand the effects of OEF/OIF deployments on the developmental needs and psychological health of children and youth. Research presented at the Summit indicates that many parents report behavior and adjustment problems among their children as the family copes with long periods of separation from the service member and the challenge of transitioning to a new environment that accompanies a PCS. Participants believed that within the scope of fundamental family support is the goal of providing comprehensive programs for youth development and well-being, as well as developing a comprehensive strategy to understand and mitigate the effects of military missions on children and youth.

“It’s important to synthesize the research and develop programs to assist children with deployments and separations, including the loss of a parent to combat or traumatic or mental health injury, and ensure inclusion of all children in all age ranges”

— Breakout Session Two



Breakout Session Three: Action Steps

Breakout session three, the final group work session of the Summit, engaged participants in drafting specific action plans to address these top five goals. After a final presentation in the main auditorium of each group's top three action steps, the Summit participants voted a final time to prioritize recommendations for the Department's family support programs. The top three actions steps are listed and described below. For this breakout, participants were grouped into multidisciplinary issue-based groups.

Action Step 1: *Create a coordinated, strategic map of all existing programs to identify redundancies and opportunities for consolidation. Develop metrics of success and evaluate all programs to determine which are working.*

There was widespread agreement among participants at the Summit that there is a vast array of programs providing services to military personnel and their families. Programs exist at different levels and within varied organizations. Concern was expressed that resources need to be used more effectively by eliminating redundancies and identifying gaps. Participants believed that the first stage in this process is to identify existing programs and categorize them—for example, by their goals, providers, organizational locations, geographical locations, and other criteria (such as in person or online). This strategic map of existing programs would identify both redundancies and gaps, and would ideally be followed by a data call directed by the Department, to all military service components and NGOs for which it provides funding, to identify existing programs and their stated objectives.

Action Steps: Key Questions

- ▶ What are the most promising ideas heard over the course of the Summit?
- ▶ What are the greatest short- and long-term challenges to be faced for implementing change?
- ▶ What resources will be required to implement the group's action steps, and how can they be obtained?
- ▶ Who are the partners and collaborators needed to help implement the group's ideas?
- ▶ What additional next steps need to be taken?

Participants called for scientific, evidence-based evaluation of the success of every program in terms of whether it achieves its stated outcomes and meets service member and family needs, as well as the organizational goals of recruitment, retention, and readiness. The evaluation framework would also take into account the impact of each program on different segments of the force and various types of families (e.g., by branch and component, rank, family structure, life cycle stage). Participants expressed that evaluation should be conducted not by the program providers or the DoD itself, but by neutral, knowledgeable and experienced evaluation professionals.

The results of the strategic map and systematic evaluations would then be used to form the basis for decisions about actions to be taken. Programs demonstrated to be highly effective would serve as models for best practices, non-performing programs could be eliminated

and redundant efforts consolidated. Any remaining gaps in the support systems would need to be addressed, but any new or modified program would have an evaluation system built into its funding and charter. Participants noted that after determining needed programs, sustainment funding should be institutionalized, rather than funded through defense budget “supplementals,” as has been common in the past.

“DoD should collaborate with land grant universities to establish a vetting process and how to evaluate existing and proposed programs.”

— Breakout Session Three

Action Step 2: *Design and implement a strategic communications plan that will:*

- ▶ *Improve service member and family awareness of resources*
- ▶ *Shape realistic expectations among military families*
- ▶ *Share best practices between programs and providers*
- ▶ *Educate the civilian community/NGOs about military family issues and needs*

The theme of communication arose repeatedly throughout the Summit. Many participant concerns involved the need for improving the ways that the DoD and the military services conduct outreach and education with military families about available resources. Despite extensive efforts, not all families in need of support understand what programs and services exist, and how and where they obtain access. For example, while service providers may already attempt to advertise their services to families, participants emphasized the necessity to use multiple, “cross-channel” methods to reach potential clientele. This strategy would reflect a fundamental premise of contemporary strategic communications: the need to reach distinct segments or groups of people, with the right message, at the right time, using the media to which they are most attuned.

Groups that must be targeted by this new communications strategy include families, service providers, unit and installation commanders, and community agencies. Messages and channels needed to reach each of these groups are not always the same, and many participants believed the military lacks the overall capability to design and implement an effective approach. These participants suggested the

DoD go outside (e.g., perhaps to private sector marketing experts) for assistance developing effective communication methods and strategies.

“We have to figure out how to deliver the message, and the only way to do that is through analysis. [When you] segment the audience by population, Commanders and Sergeants Major want electronic info. But older families want printed newsletters...Figure out how to deliver your message, and then resource your communication.”

— Breakout Session Three

Participants noted that the communications plan must integrate “new media” channels, such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) and take



advantage of the latest technology (e.g., Web 2.0). In order to align with the expectations of the current generation, they explained that DoD's communication efforts must be interactive, rather than simply a one-way dissemination of information from the government to the service member and his/her family. While participants noted the important role of Military OneSource, they also observed that there was so much information on it that those in need of services can have trouble finding them. A clearinghouse was seen as a potential solution to help military personnel and their families navigate the system.

Some program providers expressed the need for communicating realistic expectations to military personnel and their spouses about what they can expect programs to provide versus what responsibilities families themselves have and should attempt to meet through reliance on their own personal and social resources. To avoid disappointment and a sense among military family members that the military is not sensitive to their needs, participants explained that the communication efforts of the DoD family support community must include a method to instill reasonable expectations about military life. The limits of formal support resources must also be communicated to military families. Participants noted that many family member expectations are impacted by the realities of the deployment cycle, which are not likely to change in the near future.

Part of the action plan around communication focuses on service providers communicating more effectively among themselves to ensure families are able to obtain the most effective solutions for their particular circumstances. Given the vast array of providers and resources, all providers need to be well-versed in what is available from other sources, so that effective referral can take place. Further, staying apprised of what is provided elsewhere helps program managers and policy makers reduce redundancy and conserve resources, as well as to identify gaps in coverage.

“Collaborate with other military services and determine if there are other positive programs that can be duplicated.”

— Breakout Session Three

Especially useful is sharing information on best practices. When an agency identifies a particularly effective program or service for families, or tries a strategy for communicating with families that meets with success, participants agreed that this information needs to be communicated to other agencies. For those whose function is to aid service members and families in preserving their well-being in the

“The G6 or CIOs block many of the networking sites and social media because of ‘risk’, so some of the most effective methods of social media are being blocked. This is an area that DoD could help us because if they came up with a way to do it for the services, then we could do it.”

— Breakout Session Three

Summit Outcomes

face of serious military life challenges, cooperation rather than competition among agencies should be the norm. Participants noted, however, that the military is often affected by a “stovepipe” mentality that does not reward cross-agency collaboration or innovative solutions when those ideas threaten existing bureaucratic or administrative boundaries. The group felt that these barriers needed to be overcome so that support professionals who are successful, and who share their strategies for success, are recognized and rewarded for their contributions.

Participants at the Summit emphasized using diverse agencies as resources for military families. There was recognition that collaboration among different organizations would pay dividends in increased military family well-being, provided that the agencies worked together to share information, avoid redundancy, and fill gaps. They expressed enthusiasm about partnerships among agencies within DoD, USDA, and land-grant universities. They saw this as especially beneficial in conducting research on military families and reaching geographically dispersed families with needed services. They also expressed the need to capitalize on civilian agencies—both governmental and private—to serve military families in their communities. To do so, the DoD and the military services must first effectively communicate the issues and needs of military families to the decision makers and the rank and file in these civilian and community agencies.

Action Step 3: Renew the Department’s focus on behavioral health services to ensure access, availability, and education to encourage early identification, and to reduce the stigma associated with mental health treatment.

Throughout the Summit, participants expressed concern about serious physical and psychological damage to service members as a result of long and repeated combat deployments without sufficient dwell time to recover and reintegrate with their families and communities. Further, these effects on military personnel also have negative effects on the well-being of spouses, children, and parents. Participants raised the issue of the inaccessibility of behavioral health services to those in need. This inaccessibility is partly caused by the stigma of seeking help that is part of the military culture, but additional barriers exist for those who are not near major installations that have the required services, and for those who have transitioned off active duty. Also noted was a shortage of mental health professionals with the training and experience to deal with the particular issues faced by military personnel and their families.

Participants made many recommendations on actions to address these problems, with a surprising degree of consensus among the groups. A common idea was that commanders be encouraged (or even required) to create a social climate that makes seeking help a norm. Indeed, many believe that leaders should show the way by going for help

“The role of leadership is critical to establish the framework for ensuring that there is no stigma attached to asking for assistance.”

— Breakout Session Three

themselves, even serving as models by being the first to go for screening and treatment. Another idea was that all personnel be required to go for psychological evaluations periodically—especially since symptoms often surface some time after the end of deployments.

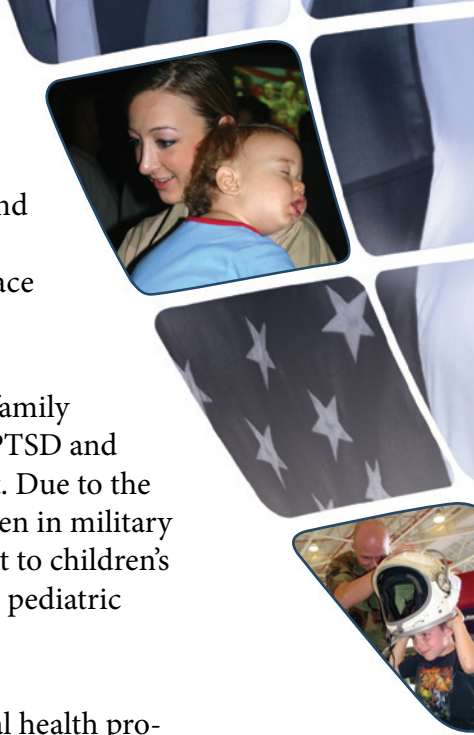
Participants also noted the importance of educating all military personnel, family members, and service providers about mental health symptoms, including PTSD and TBI. Identifying those in need of help is a major step in providing treatment. Due to the emotional and behavioral problems reported at the Summit for many children in military families, teachers constitute a special group to target so that they can be alert to children's need for help. One suggestion was to embed behavioral health specialists in pediatric clinics and community schools.

“We need to educate local community services (schools, churches, etc.) to understand family-related psychological and behavioral health issues that may be connected to military parent service.”

— Breakout Session Three

The shortage of qualified mental health professionals can be addressed by actions such as developing programs for certified psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers that train them specifically to treat military personnel and their family members. Participants mentioned that a long term need, but just as necessary, is for mental health training programs for civilian and military personnel with substantial attention to the special needs of those who live a military family lifestyle.

Summit participants also brought up the issue of problems facing family members who are serving as caregivers to military personnel (including, but not limited to, those with mental health problems and TBI). Caregivers often need to leave their jobs to care for their wounded service members, exacerbating financial difficulties and also requiring them to give up benefits such as health care. They also need help with child care, especially if they have to leave their homes to care for service members receiving treatment elsewhere. Actions recommended included payments to caregivers for their services, which can be in the form of special allotments.



III. Summary

Summary

More than 150 military family policy makers, senior leaders, service providers, practitioners, researchers, and family members participated in the National Leadership Summit on Military Families, offering their diverse insights and experiences. With a focus on the unique needs of military families in this “era of persistent conflict,” the participants worked productively with their colleagues during the course of the two-day event to craft proactive recommendations for DoD’s family support and readiness programs. Throughout the Summit, organizers encouraged participants to come up with innovative ways to enhance collaboration and partnership between agencies, both within and outside of the military. This would help in better meeting the current needs of military families and strengthening the capacity of the support system to anticipate and respond to future challenges.

Reinforced with the results of recent research on the impact of OEF/OIF on military families, Summit participants first defined and prioritized the specific challenges that military families are facing: the stress of repeated deployments, access to support for psychological health, obtaining information about the specific resources available and how to access them, a lack of consistency and predictability in support services, and issues related to frequent transition and relocation.

With a general consensus built around the major challenges, participants then worked to articulate the appropriate goals and scope of DoD family readiness and support programs, outlining specifically what families should be able to expect, and which areas are outside the limits of what can realistically be provided. Among the major themes that surfaced included: the requirement for evaluation to determine the effectiveness of programs (i.e., are programs meeting the goals for which they were created?); enhancing the DoD’s ability to communicate effectively with a range of stakeholders (including family members, service members, leaders, support providers and staff, NGOs and the general public); establishing and strengthening partnerships with community resources/agencies (such as the Cooperative Extension Service) to fill gaps and deliver the most effective solutions; addressing the psychological health of families and service members; and ensuring that effective programs exist to engage military children and youth.

Participants in the final breakout session were charged with identifying their group’s top three priorities for action. At the final general session on the Summit’s second day, a representative from each group articulated these priorities for the full audience regarding the top action steps for DoD military family support



and readiness programs. In this final session, the Summit participants put forward the following three priorities:

- 1** Categorize and evaluate programs to enhance effectiveness, consistency and return on investment;
- 2** Develop and implement a strategic communications strategy that reaches families with what they need to know, and connects them with those who have the capacity and resources to provide support;
- 3** Strengthen the Department's ability to provide for the psychological well-being of military personnel and their families (with a particular focus on the health of children in these families).

These major themes, challenges, and action steps—articulated over the course of the Summit by more than 150 individuals involved in policy and provision of services for military families—incorporated with the input from military family listening sessions and other data, can be seen as an organizational blueprint for improvement and change for the DoD family support and readiness community. Because this report is a summary of major themes, challenges and action steps represented at the Summit, it does not include all of the ideas or comments that surfaced during the two-day event. The appendices to this report, however, include detailed transcripts of each of the breakout sessions described, and these are recommended reading for those interested in reviewing all of the ideas as expressed at the Summit.

Summary





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