

## 2018 BLUE STAR FAMILIES MILITARY FAMILY LIFESTYLE SURVEY

## **COMPREHENSIVE REPORT**

In collaboration with



Funding for the 2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey is provided through the generosity of our presenting sponsor USAA and from supporting sponsors Lockheed Martin Corporation, CSX Corporation, Facebook, BAE Systems, Northrop Grumman Corporation, and the Walmart Foundation.

#### **BLUE STAR FAMILIES (BSF)**

Blue Star Families builds communities that support military families by connecting research and data to programs and solutions, including career development tools, local community events for families, and caregiver support. Since its inception in 2009, Blue Star Families has engaged tens of thousands of volunteers and served more than 1.5 million military family members. With Blue Star Families, military families can find answers to their challenges anywhere they are. For more information, visit bluestarfam.org.

#### THE INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES (IVMF)

The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) is the first interdisciplinary national institute in higher education focused on the social, economic, education, and policy issues impacting veterans and their families. Through its professional staff and experts, the IVMF delivers leading programs in career, vocational, and entrepreneurship education and training, while also conducting actionable research, policy analysis, and program evaluations. The IVMF also supports communities through collective impact efforts that enhance delivery and access to services and care. The Institute, supported by a distinguished advisory board, along with public and private partners, is committed to advancing the lives of those who have served in America's armed forces and their families. For more information, visit ivmf.syracuse.edu.

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## Acknowledgments

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#### PARTNER ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The widespread distribution of this survey through, partner organizations and others in the military community, greatly contributed to the high level of response and helped achieve a diverse sample of military personnel across all branches, services, ranks, geographies, ethnicities, and military experiences.

Blue Star Families and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families are honored to have the assistance of the following partner organizations for this year's survey:







LICR















connecting military spouses to health and wellness resources and support







A Jewish Response To Hunger







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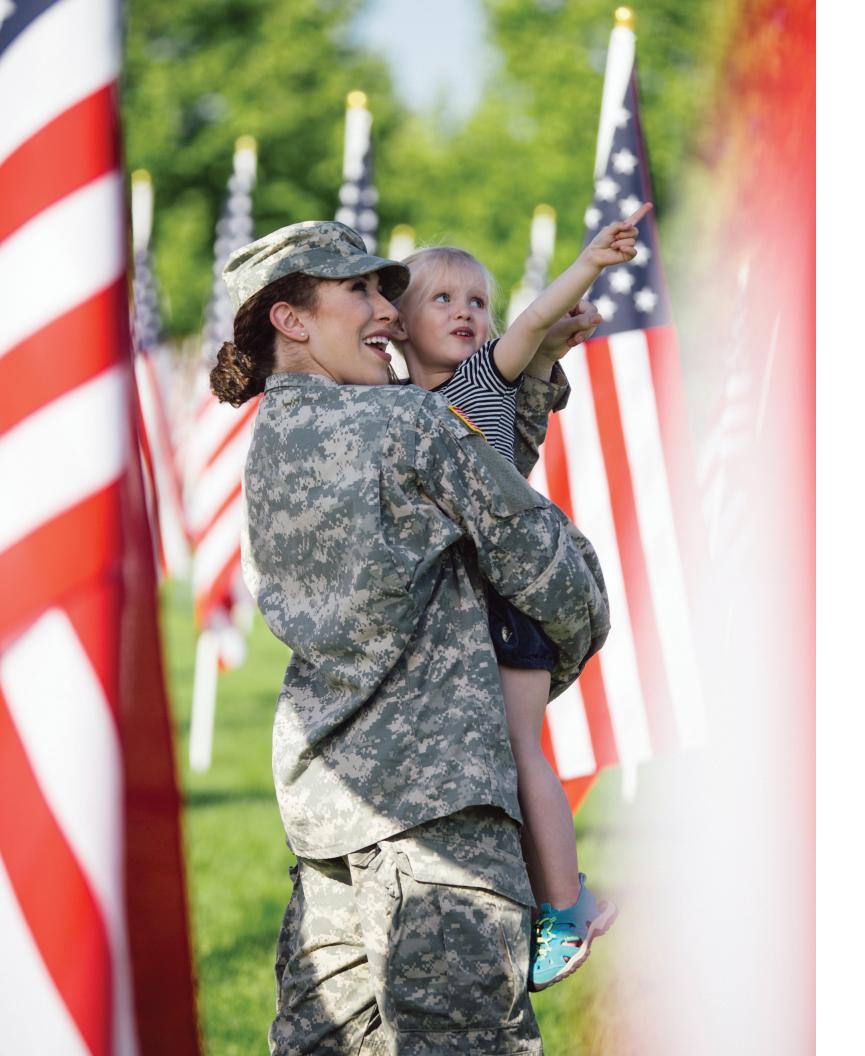












# Introduction

The advent of the All-Volunteer Force ushered in a new era of American defense. The end of the draft resulted in a stronger, more professional U.S. militar however, it has also decreased understanding of military service and sacrifice within the broader American society.

Roughly 0.5% of the American public has served on<br/>active duty at any given time since 9/11; this number<br/>is expected to continue to decline as a result of<br/>continued voluntary service and evolving technology.The 2018 survey was designed and analyzed by a<br/>team led by the Department of Applied Research<br/>at Blue Star Families, in collaboration with Syracuse<br/>University's Institute for Veterans and Military<br/>Families (IVMF).While the smaller percentage of Americans in martial<br/>service alone is not a cause for concern, the resulting<br/>decrease in understanding between the military<br/>and the broader U.S. society presents significant<br/>challenges for the future of American defense.The survey results are intended to:<br/>• identify the key aspects of military life to<br/>effectively target resources, services, and

Blue Star Families' annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by military families. Military families are, first and foremost, American families. As such, they are very similar to their civilian neighbors. Many need dual incomes to be financially secure, are concerned about their children's education and well-being, and want to establish roots and contribute to their community. However, the unique demands of military service mean families must serve and sacrifice along with their service member, which results in exceptional issues and challenges for the entire military family.

	Supporting military families strengthens national
	security and local communities, and is vital to
ry;	sustaining a healthy All-Volunteer Force. Toward this
	end, Blue Star Families, with help from its valued
	partners, conducts a survey and produces an annual
	report on the state of military families.
٦	The 2018 survey was designed and analyzed by a

- identify the key aspects of military life to effectively target resources, services, and programs that support the sustainability of military service and the All-Volunteer Force; and
- facilitate a holistic understanding of service member, veteran, and military family experiences so that communities, legislators, and policymakers can better serve each of their unique needs.

# **Executive Summary**

#### Blue Star Families' annual Military Family Lifestyle

Survey (aMFLS) provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by military families. The survey is a yearly "snapshot" of the state of military families, offering crucial insight and data to help inform national leaders, local communities, and philanthropic actors. Most critically, the survey is an opportunity to increase dialogue between the military community and broader American society, minimizing the civilian-military divide and supporting the health and sustainability of the All-Volunteer Force.

Blue Star Families conducted its 9th annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey in April-June 2018 with **over 10,000 respondents,** including active duty service members, veterans, and their immediate family members. The annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey's response rate makes it the **largest and most comprehensive survey of active duty service members, veterans, and their families.** 

### **Top Military Family Issues**

- For the second year, amount of time away was the top concern for military families
- Quality of life and well-being concerns related to amount of time away, military child education, and impact of deployment on children are three of the five top issues for military families
- Financial concerns related to military spouse employment and pay and benefits are two additional top five issues for military families

TOP ISSUES	Active Duty Spouses	Active Duty Members	Veterans
Time away from family	51%	52%	34%
Military spouse employment	45%	28%	19%
Military child education	42%	34%	22%
Impact of deployment on children	39%	35%	28%
Military pay & benefits	35%	33%	37%
Military family quality of life	33%	35%	21%
Change in retirement benefits	19%	22%	26%
Veteran employment	10%	14%	36%
PTSD/combat stress/TBI	14%	10%	33%
Service member & veteran suicide	11%	9%	26%

#### SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES STRENGTHENS NATIONAL SECURITY AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Military families are assets to national defense and The DoD is not alone in providing strong family their local communities, and their health and wellsupport. The majority of military families live in being are central to sustaining the future of American their local communities, not on military installations. defense and the All-Volunteer Force. With decreasing Communities play a joint role in ensuring the building understanding of military service and sacrifice within blocks of community health and well-being are firmly in the broader American society, there are significant place for all military families. challenges for how to best meet the needs of today's The 2018's Comprehensive Report identifies three military family. While military families want to serve, key topics central to building healthy and resilient responses suggest the majority of military families military communities: assessing the impact of military are closely examining the impact of service on their service on military family well-being; community family's quality of life and well-being. Amount of time connectedness and sense of belonging to withstand away was the top concern for the second year, and military lifestyle challenges; and the evolution of issues related to children and economic stability were military service in society. It is designed to provide a additional concerns. deeper understanding of today's military families and promote improvements to their quality of military life.

One human need that is critical to health and wellbeing remains unmet for many military families: belonging. While they feel connected to institutions and networks within their communities, many still do not feel they belong in them. Length of time in a community, and the physical and emotional barriers military families face arising from their unique lifestyle, can impact this feeling. There are ways that the Department of Defense (DoD) and local communities can help.

The DoD has made efforts to adapt to the evolution of military families since the inauguration of the All-Volunteer Force. However, there continue to be policy prescriptions, specifically surrounding quality of life and personnel issues, that are not aligned with what military families need or want. The DoD must carefully consider how to incorporate military families into its current thinking and future planning as it increases its lethality, fortifies partnerships and alliances, and reforms its business practices.



#### **TOP TRENDS AND FINDINGS FOR 2018**

Financial issues/stress was the top lifestyle stressor for the first time among military family

**respondents.** Millennial military family respondents (70%) were significantly more likely to report having two incomes as vital to their family's well-being than older military family respondents (63%), regardless of rank. Military family respondents reported higher rates of difficulty making ends meet than civilian families (13% vs. 7%), suggesting the need for two incomes is not just an expectation but a need for financial security.

Relocation was the top stressor for service member **respondents for the first time.** Nearly a third (31%) of military family respondents spent over \$1,000 in unreimbursed expenses during their last military move. Relocating means having to adjust to a new location, which can be especially challenging for female service members with children. 79% of female service members who relocated in the last year could not obtain reliable childcare.

#### Diverse health care and mental health care improvements are top ways to increase satisfaction with this highly-valued benefit. 32% of service

member respondents cited obtaining timely appointments as their top solution to improve their health care satisfaction, and veterans and service member respondents indicated improving appointment availability would make seeking mental health care more comfortable. Military spouse (32%), veteran (25%), and veteran spouse (37%) respondents identified having fully covered alternative care options as a top improvement. Roughly a third (32%) of military family respondents who identified as LGBT indicated improving health care was the most important change for their quality of life.

A majority of respondents reported they feel connected to institutions and networks within their communities, yet many do not feel they belong in them. 48% of military family respondents indicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging to their local civilian community and 43% felt the same about their military community. Military family respondents identified increasing the availability of military spouse jobs as their top recommendation for improving a sense of belonging to their local civilian community.

Out of all groups surveyed, military spouse respondents were significantly less connected to and had a significantly lower sense of belonging within their military and local civilian communities. Military spouse respondents felt a greater sense of belonging to their local civilian community the longer they resided there; however, the inverse was true with regard to their military community. Military spouse respondents residing at their current location for more than two years were significantly less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their military community than those who lived there for less than two years.

Designing flexible employment opportunities that work with the demands of the military lifestyle is a top improvement for military **spouse un/underemployment.** Military spouse un/underemployment remained the top obstacle to financial security among military family respondents, with the percentage of military spouse respondents who indicated they were unemployed (not employed, but actively seeking work in the past four weeks) increasing to 30% in 2018. 56% of working spouse respondents reported they were underemployed. Frequent relocation was cited as

the cause for underemployment.

**Employment in early transition positively impacts** veteran families' community connections and

**belonging.** The longer it took veteran respondents to find employment after transitioning, the lower their feelings of connectedness to their local civilian community. For veteran spouse respondents, feelings of connectedness and belonging were significantly higher for those who were employed full- or parttime than those who were not employed but were looking for work at the time of transition.

Military family respondents recommended quality of life improvements as the top way to obtain more eligible recruits and improve their current quality of life. The top three ways military family respondents recommend the DoD can improve their current quality of life: offer better housing/ increase BAH; maintain adequate manning levels/ reduce high operational tempo; allow more control over service member's career.

#### Female service member respondents may decide earlier in their careers that they do not see military service as a viable long-term career.

A third of female service member respondents selected retirement benefits as their primary reason for joining compared to 43% of male respondents. There was a significant difference in the age of separation for male and female veteran respondents, with female veterans reporting they separated at a younger average age (32 years) than their male counterparts (37 years). Unlike their male counterparts, female service member respondents identified military family quality of life as a top issue of concern (their second top concern following time away from family), and a quarter of female veteran respondents cited lack of childcare during time in the military as their biggest stressor, compared to

#### 5% of male veteran respondents.

Proclivity to recommend service was related to gender; survey respondents indicated changes to cultural norms were needed to increase their willingness to recommend service to their

daughters. 51% of respondents were likely to recommend service to their sons, yet 39% indicated the same for daughters. In order to recommend service to daughters, respondents noted these top changes were needed: ending sexual assault, harassment, and sexism in military culture; improving the quality of life; and improving work-life balance.

Caregiver respondents seek improvements to support resources, particularly access to childcare and financial assistance. Fewer than one-third of caregiver respondents felt the support services provided by the nonprofit community were adequate to support caregivers. Military spouse caregiver respondents identified improving access to childcare as their top improvement; 78% indicated needing some form of childcare. Caregivers also identified access to health care and mental health services and help finding financial assistance resources as top recommendations.

Honest messaging about military family realities and sacrifices was the top identified strategy to increase the general public's understanding of **military service.** 18% of military family respondents felt the general public truly understands their sacrifice and 19% felt the general public was aware of the significant challenges military service places on families. Respondents sought increased messaging that all members of the family bear military sacrifice.

# Top Military Family Concerns

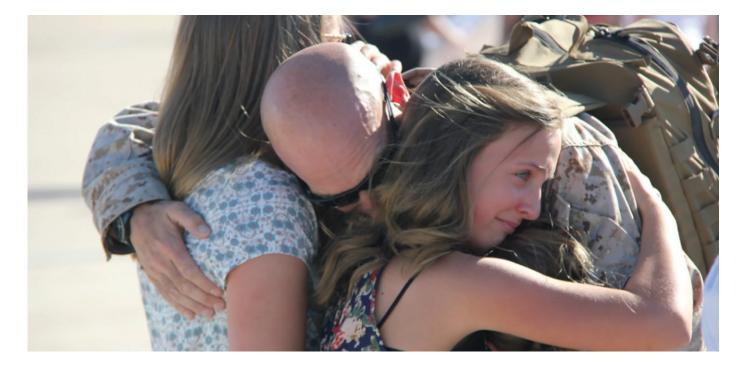
#### TOP MILITARY FAMILY ISSUES OF CONCERN BY SUBGROUP

- Amount of time away was the top concern for military families for the second year
- Quality of life and well-being concerns related to amount of time away, military child education, and impact of deployment on children are three of the five top issues for military families
- Financial concerns related to military spouse employment and pay and benefits are two additional top five issues for military families

ES	Amount of time away from fami	ly	519
spous	Military spouse employment		45%
	Dependent children's education		42%
<b>MILITARY</b>	Impact of deployment on childre	en 3	<b>39%</b>
MIL	Military pay/benefits	35	5%

%	RS*	Amount of time away from family	/	52%		Military pay/benefits	37%
	MEB	Military family quality of life	35	%		Veteran employment	36%
	ME	Impact of deployment on children	n 359	%	NS	Amount of time away from family	34%
	VICE	Dependent children's education	349		ERA	PTSD/combat stress/TBI	33%
	SER	Military pay/benefits	33%	6	VET	Impact of deployment on children	28%

\* Top issues for service members differ by gender



## Тор Stressors

#### TOP MILITARY FAMILY STRESSORS RELATED TO TIME IN THE MILITARY

To better understand the impact of individual stressors common to the military lifestyle, respondents were asked:

Please select up to 5 top stressors."

TOP STRESSORS	Active Duty Members	Military Spouses	Veterans	Veteran Spouses
Financial Issues/Stress	36%	49%	44%	54%
Deployments	36%	47%	37%	48%
Relocation Stress	37%	42%	24%	21%
Isolation from Family and Friends	30%	39%	23%	22%
Separation	34%	37%	38%	37%
Job Stress	35%	17%	24%	12%
Spouse Employment	22%	33%	13%	22%
Worries about Children (Parent Time Away and Impact of Military Life)	34%	30%	23%	26%
Marital or Relationship Issues	23%	14%	25%	18%
Lack of Childcare	24%	29%	13%	14%

#### "During your time associated with the military, what were the biggest stressors in your military family?

**TOP 5 STRESSORS FOR EACH SUBGROUP IN BLUE** 

# Impact of Service on Well-Being

#### **FINDING 1**

For the first time, "Financial issues/stress" is the top stressor among military family respondents. Respondents report higher expectations of dual incomes being vitally important to their family's well-being—especially among younger generations, regardless of service member rank.

#### **FINDING 2**

Military spouse unemployment/underemployment remains a top financial obstacle for respondents with the likelihood of underemployment for military spouses increasing with the number of military moves.

#### **FINDING 3**

Military children who experience family separation due to deployments face behavioral challenges, which can be further compounded when the non-deploying spouse also reports an increased level of stress.

#### **FINDING 4**

Frequent moves are associated with out-of-pocket costs with every move. Service member respondents indicate relocation stress as their top stressor this year.

#### **FINDING 5**

Health care benefits are a top reason respondents stay in the military, but respondents seek diverse health care and mental health care improvements to increase satisfaction.

#### **FINDING 6**

Respondents value the unique experiences intrinsic to the military lifestyle and feel it is important to engage in their local communities.



**FINANCIAL SACRIFICES** 

two incomes vital to family's well-being

### **RELOCATION IS TOP SERVICE MEMBER STRESSOR**



**31%** of families spent \$1K+ unreimbursed expenses during last move

#### **TOP HEALTH CARE IMPROVEMENTS**

SERVICE MEMBERS

Obtaining appointments when needed

**VETERANS, MILITARY & VETERAN SPOUSES** 

Full dependent alternative care coverage

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 3. Offer military spouses flexible/virtual employment

#### **FREQUENT RELOCATION CAUSES SPOUSE UNDEREMPLOYMENT**

### 52%

spouse un/underemployment top financial obstacle

### 30%

unemployed

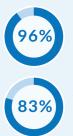
### 56%

of employed military spouses underemployed



**79%** of female service members who relocated last year cannot obtain reliable childcare

### MILITARY FAMILIES ARE **GOOD NEIGHBORS**



working with neighbors to improve communities is important

volunteered in civilian communities

1. Better understanding of today's military diversity to provide strong family support

2. Hold military leadership accountable in implementing support initiatives/legislation to promote military family stability/increase military move "lead time" and flexibility

Finding 1

For the first time, "Financial issues/stress" is the top stressor among military family respondents. Respondents report higher expectations of dual incomes being vitally important to their family's wellbeing especially among younger generations, regardless of service member rank.

In a recent study conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), money was ranked as the second top stressor (62%) experienced by Americans, closely following stress over the future of the nation (63%).<sup>1</sup> This year's survey also reflected similar results as 62% of military family respondents reported experiencing stress regarding their family's current personal financial condition, and financial stress was ranked the top stressor for the first time among military family respondents.

The financial stress military family respondents are feeling may be due in part to the growing

expectations of dual-employment. Civilian workforce research indicates the Millennial generation (those age 37 and under as of 2018) has greater expectations of dual employment than their predecessors. Additionally, Millennials are more likely to be part of a dual-career family than their Baby Boomer counterparts.<sup>2</sup> This was also reflected in this year's survey as 70% of Millennial military family respondents reported having two incomes was vital to their family's well-being, compared with 63% of those over 37 years old. This expectation persisted regardless of rank, with younger officer and enlisted family respondents both agreeing at higher levels than older military family respondents.

#### **TWO INCOMES VITAL TO FAMILIES' WELL-BEING**



**Regardless of rank**, Millennial officer and enlisted family respondents both agree at higher levels than military family respondents over 37 years old. believe that they can be fulfilled without meaningful work opportunities."

civilian counterparts, military family respondents also reported higher rates of difficulty making ends meet than civilian families (13% of military family respondents compared to 7% of civilian families),<sup>3</sup> suggesting that the need for two incomes is not just an expectation but a need for financial security. In this year's survey, 37% of military family respondents reported feeling moderately or very insecure about their financial future; among military spouse respondents who were not working but would like to be, only 10% reported they were financially okay with just their service member's paycheck.



### "Women (and most male spouses) grow up believing and thinking they are their own person, and the American ethos includes the idea that work is intrinsically healthy and good and valuable. You cannot expect to ask half of your military community to all of [a] sudden

#### - ARMY SPOUSE

- When comparing military family respondents to their It is important to note that even with these reported financial difficulties, military families were less likely to face poverty and food insecurity than their civilian counterparts. Only 7% of military family respondents reported being food insecure in the past year,
  - compared to 12% of U.S. households who are food insecure.<sup>4</sup> In order to lessen the impact of financial
  - stress and associated challenges, it is important for the Department of Defense (DoD), philanthropies, and community leaders to identify ways to protect families against this—one of which is to continue to help military spouses secure employment.

Finding 2 Military spouse unemployment/underemployment remains a top financial obstacle for respondents with the likelihood of underemployment for military spouses increasing with the number of military moves.

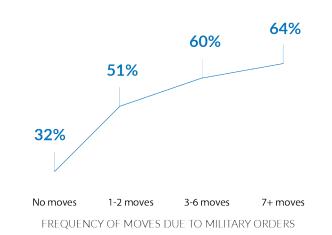
Military spouse unemployment and underemployment continue to persist despite national efforts, demonstrating the complexity of a problem that many military spouses face today.<sup>5,</sup> <sup>6,7,8</sup> Consistent with previous years, military family respondents identified military spouse un/ underemployment as the top obstacle to financial security (52%). In this year's survey, 30% of military spouse respondents reported they were unemployed (not employed, but had actively sought work in the past four weeks). Among the 46% of military spouse respondents who were employed full-time or part-time, over half (56%) reported that they were underemployed (meaning they may be overqualified, underpaid, or underutilized in their current position).

Military and veteran spouse respondents qualitatively identified frequent relocations/permanent change of station as the cause for their underemployment, which was also reflected with the higher percentage of underemployed spouse respondents the more times military spouses relocated. This is consistent with recently published research.<sup>9</sup> Multiple efforts have been made to improve the prospect of employment for military spouses, many of which consist of employers adopting existing veteran hiring strategies and applying them to military spouse hiring initiatives. However, current strategies do not adequately factor in the impact of relocation and the corresponding need for job portability—one of the many reasons why unemployment and underemployment have remained high for military spouses.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of new resources, military spouse respondents need employers to offer flexible jobs allowing them to work with their service member's job demands. Military spouse respondents (47%) identified working with large corporations to design military spouse-friendly work options (i.e., flexible hours, job-sharing options, remote/virtual work options) as the top suggestion for improving the unemployment/underemployment of military spouses. "The impact on my career and the constant career sacrifice begins to weigh on me and negatively affects my family life/marriage. We are PCSing in a few weeks and I am again interviewing for jobs that are a step backward for me while my spouse experiences promotion. I will not continue to make these sacrifices. Either my marriage will end or I will stop moving with my spouse."

Recent changes to the personnel and management system <sup>11</sup> may provide insight into how such policy shifts affect military spouses and should be closely monitored in the coming years. Meanwhile, the DoD, other government agencies, philanthropies, corporations, and community leaders can explore creative ways to provide or replicate geographic stability to improve the unemployment and

#### LIKELIHOOD OF MILITARY SPOUSE UNDEREMPLOYMENT INCREASES WITH NUMBER OF MOVES



"I have two master's degrees. Due to moving, I have been unable to transfer my licenses in a timely manner. Additionally, the salary in our current state for my particular field is so low that it is not worth the cost of childcare to work outside the home. At previous duty stations, I made enough in my actual field to pay for childcare and still have a take-home salary."

- MARINE CORPS SPOUSE

#### - AIR FORCE SPOUSE

underemployment of military spouses. Finally, organizations seeking to understand how to best help military spouses combat employment challenges can start by differentiating between military spouse and veteran employment challenges as a key component of any national conversation on military spouse employment initiatives. **Finding 3** Military children who experience family separation due to deployments face behavioral challenges, which can be further compounded when the non-deploying spouse also reports increased levels of stress.

Military families are aware of the compounding impact separation has on their family. For the second year in a row, "amount of time away from family" was ranked as the top issue of concern for service member and military spouse respondents. The "impact of deployment on dependent children" remained two of the top five issues identified in 2018. At the time of the survey fielding, of those military family respondents who had experienced a deployment or other military-related service member separation of greater than three months in the previous fifteen months, over half (72%) reported their child had lived at home during this time. While 24% of military



family respondents indicated their child experienced personal growth or resilience, 11% reported their child had increased pride or confidence, and 14% indicated that prolonged service member absence had no effect on their child, the majority of respondents reported their child experienced difficulties as a result of their military parent's deployment(s). Difficulties included separation anxiety or sleeping problems (57%), behavioral problems (53%), reintegration challenges upon the service member's return (30%), decreased academic performance (18%), and depression (16%).

This year's survey results align with decades of existing research, which has found that the key differentiator in determining the degree to which children experience difficulties and personal growth is the state of mind of the non-deploying parent.<sup>12, 13,</sup> <sup>14, 15</sup> Military spouse respondents who reported one or more diagnoses of anxiety, depression, substance abuse/addiction, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder selected a significantly greater number of negative child outcomes related to deployment (i.e., behavior problems, depression, etc.) than those military spouse respondents who reported no mental health diagnoses. Similarly, there was a significant difference in the number of both negative and positive deployment-related outcomes selected across stress levels of military spouse respondents. As stress levels increased, so did the number of negative child outcomes selected. However, as stress



Increased stress

*Increased* number of *negative* child outcomes selected

Decreased stress

*Increased* number of *positive* child outcomes selected

levels decreased, the number of positive child outcomes (i.e., increased personal growth) selected increased.

Despite decades of research supporting similar findings, the persistence of this problem suggests that existing policies and resources to support non-deployed military spouses and their children during family separation are either sparse or underutilized. In this year's survey, 54% of military family respondents did not feel the support services provided by the DoD were adequate to support their children in dealing with the unique challenges associated with deployments. Equipping parents A statistically significant difference was found in the number of both negative and positive deployment-related outcomes across stress levels of military spouse respondents

to regulate their emotions and to deal with their children's emotions is a critical need for military families,<sup>16, 17</sup> but it is also critical to set realistic conditions for parents to be successful during prolonged absences. Spouses are found to adapt well to deployment and prolonged absences when they are able to make meaning of the situation.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the DoD and other organizations offering and promoting programming for military spouses seeking coping strategies and emotional regulation skills, military families can help by identifying what is needed from these organizations to alleviate stress during their service member's prolonged absence and for using available resources to fill these needs. Finding 4 Frequent moves are associated with out-of-pocket costs with every move. Service member respondents indicate relocation stress as their top stressor this year.

Relocation to another duty station (PCS) due to military orders is a required aspect of the military lifestyle; however, it is often stressful and expensive for military families. Military family respondents reported relocating an average of four times due to military orders and, although the federal government covers the majority of expenses incurred by relocation, a third (31%) of military family respondents reported spending over \$1,000 in unreimbursed expenses during their last military move. This was an 11% increase from 2017. Recent media attention has illuminated the stress and financial impact of moving on military familiesparticularly those with lost or damaged goods and delays in receiving orders or household goods.<sup>19</sup>

Relocation stress can also involve issues associated with adjusting to a new location. Service member respondents ranked relocation stress (37%) as their top stressor for the first time this year, surpassing financial (36%), deployment (36%), and job-related stress (35%). Finding new childcare can be one of many adjustment challenges and is a commonly reported issue for both military spouse respondents and female service members. Among those service member respondents who resided in their community for less than a year, 79% of female service members were not able to find consistent childcare compared with 65% of male service members. However, for

female service member respondents, this percentage decreased the longer they stayed in that location. This data suggests that the biggest hurdle may be during the first year following a relocation.

In line with existing recommendations, increasing lead time given to military families prior to a relocation may alleviate some of the stress associated with moving and improve their overall experience. Installation and local community resources also have an opportunity to connect service members, especially female service members, and their families to the necessary child-related resources they need immediately upon relocating to support their adjustment process.

> **31%** reported spending *over* **\$1K** in *unreimbursed* moving expenses

Over an *average of 4 moves*, military families may spend *over* \$4K in out-of-pocket moving expenses

"Myself and several other military families I know are now routinely receiving PCS orders as little as three weeks out from the date we are required to report to the new command. This puts enormous stress on military families as it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to apply for military housing, make schooling decisions for children, and determine spousal employment without PCS orders ...." **NAVY SERVICE MEMBER** 

Finding 5 Health care benefits is a top reason respondents stay in the military, but respondents seek diverse health care and mental health care improvements to increase satisfaction.

Low-cost and quality health care is an increasingly important benefit for military families. Sixty-six percent of military family respondents ranked health care benefits as the second top reason for staying in the military following the retirement benefit (71%). Although the vast majority (81%) of military family respondents were satisfied with the cost share of military health care, the quality of providers (73%), and the quality of care (78%), they were least satisfied with the ease of access and timeliness of care (65%). Among all respondents, service member respondents reported the least satisfaction with ease of access and timeliness of care (43%) and the quality of care (61%).

When asked what would most improve respondent satisfaction with health care, respondents reported diverse health care and mental health care improvements. Service member and veteran respondents indicated improvements in obtaining appointments when needed for both mental health care services and health care as a top improvement; thirty-two percent of service member respondents identified obtaining timely appointments as their top solution to improving their satisfaction with care, and 27% of veteran and service member respondents indicated making appointments more available would make seeking mental health care more comfortable. Military spouse (32%), veteran (25%), and veteran spouse (37%) respondents identified having alternative care options (i.e., chiropractic care, acupuncture, etc.) fully covered

in their health care benefits as a top improvement. Limited alternative care options are currently only covered for service members at designated military hospitals and clinics. Improvements to health care were particularly important to military family respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Roughly a third (32%) of military family respondents who identified as LGBT indicated that improving health care (i.e., services covered such as fertility/family planning services, transgender-specific care, and mental health resources) was the most important change that would improve support for LGBT families.

"Tricare coverage is minimal at best for families and service members. Vital problems that could be life-threatening take months for treatment, and even when treatment is given, it's inadequate. Providers treat symptoms over causes, rush through appointments, over stack appointments, and service members don't feel free to have frank conversations with providers - likely because of the rank they wear. Military medicine is failing our military and their families."

- ARMY SERVICE MEMBER

The National Council on Disability has found exceptional family members (EFM) and their familie also face barriers in a variety of domains including health care. In particular, obtaining and maintaining disability-related services requires relentless hard work, which can be time-consuming and overwhelming.<sup>20</sup> EFM and their families are required to enroll into the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), a program meant to provide a comprehensive and coordinated approach for community support, housing, medical, educational, and personnel services to families with special needs.<sup>21</sup> However, EFMP- enrolled military family respondents with a child with special needs reporte being significantly less likely than their peers to indicate Tricare provided appropriate medical suppo for their family. These families were also significantly less likely to be satisfied with the support their fami received from the DoD/military.

received from the DoD/military.
The DoD and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
have a number of opportunities to improve the mental
health care services and health care experiences
of service members, veterans, and their families as

#### TOP WAYS TO IMPROVE HEALTH CARE

	SERVICE MEMBERS	VE
1.	Obtaining appointments when needed	F
2.	Full coverage of alternative care for dependents	Obtaining whe
3.	Continuity	of care

	outlined in this finding. Additional opportunities lie in
es	better integrating health services across installations
	or enhancing communications between health care
7	systems to allow health care records and treatment
	plans to transfer easily between duty stations and/or
	providers. The DoD can also standardize the EFMP
ed	experience across installations and across military
	branches as recommended by the Government
	Accountability Office (GAO). <sup>22</sup> This includes
	developing clear EFMP policies across branches and
	installations, clear performance measures to assess
	the quality of EFMP services, and the coordination
	of assignments and treatment plans. Any plans for
ed	improving EFMP programs should include regular
	communication with affected EFMP families.
ort	
ly	
nily	<i>"I get little-to-no notification or assistance"</i>

- ARMY SPOUSE

TERANS	MILITARY & VETERAN SPOUSES		
Full coverage of alternative care for dependents			
appointments n needed	Continuity of care		
	Obtaining appointments when needed		

Finding 6 Respondents value the unique experiences intrinsic to the military lifestyle and feel it is important to engage in their local communities.

Military service is more than just a career for many military families-it is considered a lifestyle choice. Although there are challenges and hardships associated with military life, many military families continue to serve in the military due to many of the tangible and intangible benefits it provides. Specifically, many military family respondents value the positive aspects that the military lifestyle offers. The opportunities to travel, benefits, and the supportive military community were identified as the top three positive aspects of military life among qualitative responses. Service members who transition to civilian life also share in the positive perception about their time in service. In this year's survey, 96% of veteran respondents reported feeling pride from their accomplishments during service, and 95% reported their service had a positive effect on their life.



Military and veteran families are also highly Research has found that there are benefits to being civically engaged. While broader research on the civically engaged. Adults who volunteer are found U.S. population has found a general decline in to experience health benefits including longevity, civic engagement and community participation,<sup>23</sup> mobility, and mental health.<sup>24</sup> For those seeking military and veteran family respondents reported employment, those who volunteer have a 27% higher feeling a responsibility to participate. The following likelihood of finding a job after being out of work were considered imiportant responsibilities among than non-volunteers.<sup>25</sup> Travel has been found to respondents: working with neighbors to fix problems have several benefits for families including improving or to improve conditions in their communities (96%) communication within relationships, reducing the and voting in elections (97%). Volunteerism among possibility of divorce, strengthening family bonds, military families was also high; among the 71% and increasing a sense of well-being in adults and of military and veteran family respondents who children.<sup>26</sup> Most importantly, however, the ability to volunteered in the past 12 months, 17% volunteered have a positive outlook on life has been associated on military installations and 83% volunteered in their with higher levels of resilience, which allows for civilian communities. military families to be protected against challenges they may encounter due to the lifestyle.<sup>27</sup>

#### MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILY RESPONDENTS ARE HIGHLY CIVICALLY ENGAGED

97%

Believe voting in elections is an important responsibility

96% Feel working with neighbors

an important responsibility

to improve their communities is

71%

Volunteered in the past 12 months

83% volunteered in their civilian communities

## Community Connectedness & Belonging

#### **FINDING 1**

A majority of respondents report they feel connected to institutions and networks within their communities, yet many do not feel they belong in them. Military spouse respondents are the least connected and have the lowest sense of belonging.

#### **FINDING 2**

Loss of connection to the military community and loss of a sense of purpose are the top transition challenges experienced by veteran family respondents.

#### **FINDING 3**

Military and veteran families have high levels of protective factors that enhance their ability to be resilient. Military families, however, have significantly higher levels of these protective factors than veteran families.

#### **FINDING 4**

Caregiver respondents seek improvements to support resources, such as access to health care and mental health care services.

#### **FINDING 5**

Military spouse respondents with a mental health diagnosis feel less of a sense of belonging in their civilian and military communities than those without a diagnosis.

#### **FINDING 6**

Schools are a critical junction for military families to connect. Respondents who rate school support for military life as "excellent" indicate higher levels of community connectedness.



feel they don't belong in local civilian community

#### MILITARY SPOUSES LEAST CONNECTED **OUT OF ALL GROUPS**

*Spouses* feel significantly less connected to and had a lower sense of belonging within both communities

#### SCHOOLS FACILITATE COMMUNITY **CONNECTEDNESS**

Military families who rate civilian school support for military life as *"excellent"* report significantly higher levels of community connectedness

#### **TOP CAREGIVER IMPROVEMENTS TO** SUPPORT RESOURCES

#### MILITARY SPOUSE CAREGIVER

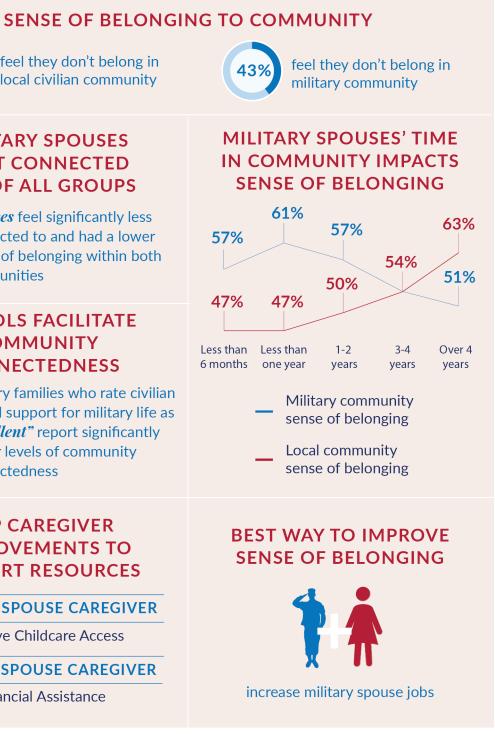
Improve Childcare Access

**VETERAN SPOUSE CAREGIVER** 

**Financial Assistance** 

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- community health and well-being are in place for military families
- 2. Corporate leaders/foundations can engage community organizations
- 3. Local and state governments can minimize military family barriers that arise out of their unique lifestyle



1. Department of Defense and communities can jointly ensure building blocks of

in opportunity areas (e.g., caregiver support and military spouse employment)

A majority of respondents report they feel connected to institutions and networks within their communities, yet many do not feel they belong in them. Military spouse respondents are the least connected and have the lowest sense of belonging.

Military family respondents report they are relatively connected to both their civilian and military communities—with a significantly greater connection to their military community than to their civilian community. However, military families often face integration challenges in developing a sense of belonging within their community. Although a sense of connectedness and sense of belonging are sometimes referenced interchangeably, they are distinctly different. Community connectedness is objective, and it measures the number and strength of connections within a community,<sup>1</sup> whereas belonging is "experienced as a feeling of being accepted, included, respected in, and contributing to a setting, or anticipating the likelihood of developing this feeling."<sup>2</sup> Recent studies indicate the U.S. population is lonelier than ever and losing its sense of community,<sup>3,4</sup> yet literature on the sense of belonging has found that "belonging" is a basic human need and fundamental to our sense of happiness and well-being.<sup>5</sup>

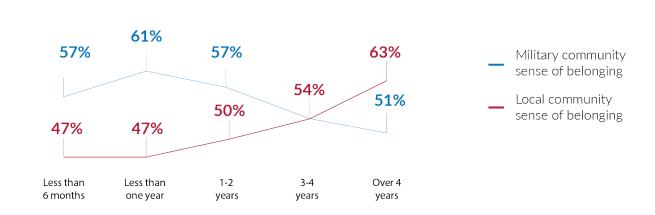
Forty-eight percent of military family respondents indicated they did not feel a sense of belonging within their local civilian community. Slightly fewer (43%) military family respondents felt the same within their military community. Out of all survey respondents, military spouse respondents were significantly less connected to and had a significantly lower sense of belonging within their civilian and

military communities—even after controlling for age, gender, and stress levels. When exploring whether the length of time in one's community had an effect, military spouse respondents felt a greater sense of belonging to their civilian community the longer they resided there; however, the inverse was true with regard to their military community. Military spouse respondents residing at their current location for more than two years were significantly less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their military community than those who lived there for less than two years.

Military spouse respondents had a significantly lower sense of connectedness and sense of belonging to both their civilian and military communities than other respondent groupsregardless of age, gender, or stress levels.

Research suggests that "being connected but not The overwhelming majority of military spouse belonging is only problematic when one's sense respondents are actively trying to engage in their of identity is invalidated,"<sup>6</sup> which occurs when an communities, despite their lack of belonging or individual does not fill an externally valued social sense of value. Seventy percent of military spouse role.<sup>7, 8</sup> While most service member respondents respondents volunteer in their civilian and military believed they are valued members of their civilian communities; seventy-five percent want to contribute (60%) and military (69%) communities, fewer financially and are working or trying to find work; military spouse respondents felt the same in either and 22% have voluntarily or involuntarily withdrawn of these communities (50% civilian and 52% from the labor force and are instead focused on military). Collectively, these findings have serious trying to provide stability for their family. There is an implications, especially for military spouses. Holding opportunity for all stakeholders to do a better job a valued social role and sense of belonging to one's of recognizing military spouses as valued members community is critical for individual well-being,<sup>9, 10,</sup> and increasing their sense of belonging within their <sup>11, 12, 13</sup> and this year's survey findings align with respective communities. that assertion—especially as it relates to a military spouse's ability to find employment. Although "The military community is unlike a sense of belonging is derived from more than any other. When we're separated from employment status, both military spouse (25%) family, our military family really steps and service member (21%) respondents identified up to the plate and provides support increasing the availability of jobs for military spouses and a sense of belonging." as the top recommendation for improving their sense of belonging to their civilian community. - ARMY SPOUSE

#### MILITARY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING & LENGTH OF TIME IN COMMUNITIES

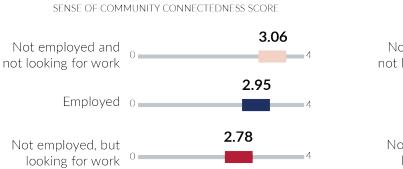


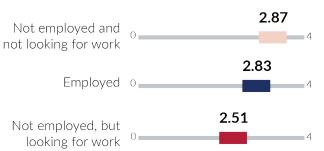
Finding 2 Loss of connection to the military community and loss of a sense of purpose are the top transition challenges experienced by veteran family respondents.

Service members and their families encounter a range of transition challenges during the reintegration to civilian life. In this year's survey, loss of connection to the military community (45%) was the key transition challenge for both veteran and veteran spouse respondents. The military environment is often perceived as a "family," providing support, valued friendships and bonds, structure, and security.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, separation from the military can be experienced as a separation from these "family" connections. The difficulties associated with these changes are exacerbated when veterans and their families feel they do not "fit in" with civilian society or that civilians do not understand or value them.<sup>15</sup> Of veteran family respondents, 82% felt that the general public does not understand the challenges military families face when transitioning out of the military, and 60% felt that the general public does not understand that veterans bring value to their communities.

Although veteran family respondents had significantly higher mean scores for connectedness and belonging to their local communities than military family respondents, these levels of connectedness and belonging varied by age at separation, time resided in current community, and transition experiences. As age at separation increased, so did veteran family respondents' sense of connectedness and sense of belonging to their local communities. Similarly, feelings of belonging and connection increased as time in the community increased. Negative transition experiences were generally associated with decreased feelings of connectedness and belonging for veteran family respondents. Though the average time since separation was nearly 10 years for veteran family respondents, early transition experiences, particularly employment, may impact their community connections and sense of belonging. For veteran respondents, the

#### VETERAN SPOUSE RESPONDENTS' MEAN CONNECTEDNESS AND BELONGING SCORES VARY BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS AT TRANSITION





SENSE OF BELONGING SCORE

#### "... I always had support from my military friends and family no matter where I moved to. That is by far the thing I miss [about] being in the military."

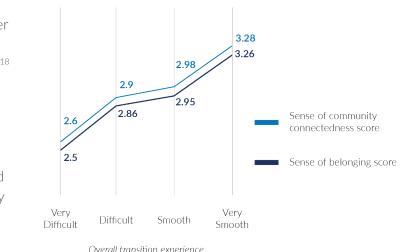
more time to find employment after transitioning, network for transitioning service members as their top the lower the feelings of connectedness to their transition improvement solution, and veteran spouse local community. For veteran spouse respondents, respondents identified including spouses in transition programming as their top improvement solution. mean connectedness and belonging scores were significantly higher for those who were employed Employers, government and nonprofit agencies can full- or part-time than those who were not employed help build strong support networks for transitioning service members and veterans, and provide broader but were looking for work at the time of transition. Veteran spouse respondents who were not employed transition outreach so transitioning spouses are aware and not looking for work at the time of transition of the resources afforded to them. Additionally, local communities, veteran service organizations, and/or reported the highest levels of connection and belonging to their current local community. the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) could work together to create programming to educate civilian and During transition, loss of purpose is closely tied veteran families, encourage connection, and welcome to loss of connection.<sup>16</sup> In this year's survey, loss veteran families.

of a sense of purpose/camaraderie (39%) was the next top transition challenge for veteran family respondents after loss of connection to the military community. Almost half (47%) of veteran respondents reported they did not have a sense of purpose when they left the military. Veterans who report a loss of purpose or meaning miss shared goals, bonds, and contributing to a communal effort.<sup>17</sup> Finding employment and/or education after transitioning out of the military can aid in finding purpose and also foster connection and belonging.<sup>18</sup> In their qualitative responses, veteran respondents who pursued higher education after separating reported their education provided them with direction and purpose.

Based on this year's findings, focusing resource and outreach efforts on younger veteran families, newly transitioned families, and those families struggling to find employment may be the most impactful. Veteran respondents identified a strong support

#### - NAVY VETERAN

#### **VETERAN FAMILY RESPONDENTS'** TRANSITION EXPERIENCES ASSOCIATED WITH MEAN CONNECTEDNESS AND **BELONGING SCORES**



33

Finding 3 Military and veteran families have high levels of protective factors that enhance their ability to be resilient. Military families, however, have significantly higher levels of these protective factors than veteran families.

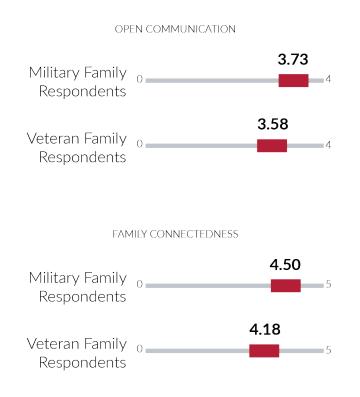
Military family resilience is when service members, veterans, and their families have the skills and resources they need to withstand, recover, and grow from stressors, including those compounded by military and veteran life.<sup>19, 20</sup> To better understand military and veteran family resilience, four of seven family-level factors from the Individual, Family, and Community Resilience Profile (IFCR) were modified and measured for the purposes of this survey. The four factors were open communication, familiy connectedness, internal family support, and meaning making of adversity. In line with previous research,<sup>22</sup> military family respondents indicated high levels of open communication (average 3.73 out of 4), family connectedness (average 4.50 out of 5), and internal family support (average 3.59 out of 4). Yet, when compared to veteran family respondents, military family respondents scored significantly higher on every factor.

Developing protective factors to enhance resilience is multi-faceted, and many military family respondents recognize the role military service has played in helping them develop these skills—despite the challenges they may face. For example, in this year's survey, military family respondents identified personal growth as a positive aspect of military service in their open-ended responses, and they cited witnessing their child's personal growth as a positive result of the service member's deployment. Respondents also identified the perspective and healthy communication patterns military service forced their family to develop, and shared that multiple moves and living far away from extended family and friends helped them "learn to rely on their core family [...] creating great bonds between children and parents."

At the same time, many military and veteran family respondents are unsure whether their family is strong enough to make it through the challenges they face and succeed. While military and veteran family respondents indicated high levels on the three protective factors, they scored the lowest when it came to making meaning of adversity (average 3.38 out of 4 and 3.31 out of 4 respectively). In the words of an Air Force spouse, "[w]e are certainly resilient, but how far can families bend before they break?" This finding is particularly alarming because research shows that meaning making is the "lynch-pin in a family's resilience response."<sup>23</sup>

There is an immediate need to bolster military families' ability to make meaning of military-induced adversity and foster more effective responses to stress. Families can intentionally frame difficult situations in a positive light and seek ways to grow as a family through their experience. Community

#### HIGHER LEVELS OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS REPORTED BY MILITARY FAMILY RESPONDENTS THAN VETERAN FAMILY RESPONDENTS

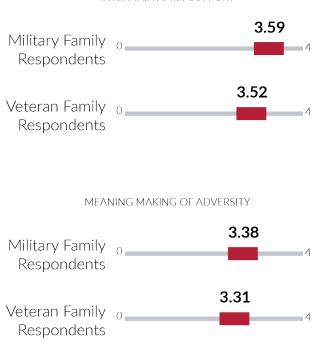


"Each of us [has] become stronger, more independent and resilient. It can be hard, but it's an honor."

- ARMY SPOUSE

members can validate the sacrifices military families make by taking the time to understand them, and

- by demonstrating empathy and gratitude. Most importantly, however, military and national leadership must simultaneously provide military families with an honest and cohesive narrative when they require sacrifices. Additionally, they must respect the family's
- d time together when such sacrifice is unnecessary. This is the foundation for a family's ability to make meaning of adversity, which in turn helps develop more resilient military and veteran families in the future.



INTERNAL FAMILY SUPPORT

## Finding 4 Caregiver respondents seek improvements to support resources, particularly access to health care and mental health care services.

There are roughly 5.5 million unpaid military or veteran caregivers in the United States who provide assistance to others with daily living and/ or medical tasks.<sup>24</sup> While providing unpaid care is often regarded as a great responsibility, and one that caregivers are extremely proud of doing,<sup>25</sup> post-9/11 military and veteran caregivers are also more likely to fare worse in health outcomes as a result of not being connected to a support network.<sup>26</sup> In this year's survey, 34% of military and veteran spouse respondents identified themselves as caregivers of which 35% were caring for someone with an emotional or mental health issue, and 12% were caring for a minor child with special needs.

Many caregivers may turn to federal, state, and local agencies for support regarding benefits and turn to the nonprofit community for social

support. Yet, fewer than one-third of caregiver respondents felt the support services provided by the nonprofit community were adequate to support caregivers, highlighting an important area for additional nonprofit engagement. When asked what would most improve the overall support of caregivers, military spouse caregiver respondents identified improving access to childcare as their top improvement; seventy-eight percent of military spouse caregivers indicated needing some form of childcare compared with 72% of their non-caregiver peers. Both military and veteran spouse caregivers identified access to health care and mental health services, and help with finding financial assistance resources as two of the top three recommendations. Veteran spouse caregiver respondents also identified improving programming and access to VA services to round out their top three recommendations.

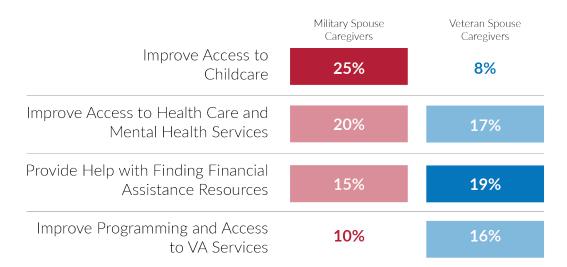
Research suggests that, although external support and resources (such as childcare, financial assistance, and VA resources) are important, individual coping mechanisms are the most effective protective factor caregivers have to mediate stress.<sup>27, 28</sup> In this year's survey, military spouse caregiver respondents (with children living at home) who provide care for a service member or veteran with a long-term disability or emotional/mental health needs indicated they have fewer protective factors than their noncaregiving peers. These military spouse caregiver respondents reported significantly lower levels of open communication, meaning making of adversity, family connectedness, and internal family support all of which enhance family resilience-than noncaregiving military spouse respondents. By contrast veteran spouse caregiver respondents fitting this description reported higher levels of all protective factors than their military spouse caregiver peers.

As military-connected caregivers' circumstances pose unique challenges,<sup>29, 30</sup> research questions regarding the impact of these intra-family caregiving dynamics on family resilience and children living at home continue to evolve. <sup>31, 32, 33</sup> These findings suggest that focusing on military and veteran caregivers and their families as distinct populations with similar but different needs provides a general framework for planning future research and programming endeavors. The government, local organizations, and philanthropies also have an opportunity to collaborate and explore ways to improve support resources for military and veteran caregiver spouses, such as those identified within this finding.

"There needs to be attention brought out about what happens to spouses and children from the Veteran's PTSD issues."

- VETERAN ARMY SPOUSE

#### CAREGIVER RESPONDENTS IDENTIFY TOP IMPROVEMENTS TO SUPPORT CAREGIVERS



#### LEVELS OF FAMILY RESILIENCE AMONG CAREGIVER RESPONDENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN AND CARING FOR SERVICE MEMBERS/VETERANS WITH A LONG-TERM DISABILITY OR EMOTIONAL/ MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

OPEN COMMUNICATION

	0	PEN COMMUNICATION	
	Military Spouse Non-Caregiver Respondents	0	<b>3.74</b>
	Veteran Spouse Caregiver Respondents	0	<b>3.57</b>
<i>Ι</i> ,	Military Spouse Caregiver Respondents	0	<b>3.50</b>
t,		INTERNAL FAMILY SUP	PORT
	Military Spouse Non-Caregiver Respondents	0	<b>3.61</b>
	Veteran Spouse Caregiver Respondents	0	<b>3.53</b>
Ig	Military Spouse Caregiver Respondents	0	<b>3.39</b>
5	FA	MILY CONNECTEDNESS	5
	Military Spouse Non-Caregiver Respondents	0	<b>4.55</b>
	Votoran Englisa		4.27



#### MEANING MAKING OF ADVERSITY



**Finding 5** Military spouse respondents with a mental health diagnosis feel less of a sense of belonging in their civilian and military communities than those without a diagnosis.

Research has found that greater social support provides military spouses with a greater sense of community, which leads to improved psychological well-being.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, a lower sense of belonging to a community has been linked with both depression <sup>35</sup> and suicide.<sup>36, 37</sup> In this year's survey, military spouse respondents (23%) reported higher rates of depression diagnoses compared to the national average of 17%,<sup>38</sup> 4% had seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, and 9% had seriously considered committing suicide at any time during military service. Furthermore, this year's survey results found that there was a statistically significant difference between those military spouse respondents who reported one or more mental health diagnoses compared to those who reported no diagnoses and their sense of

A statistically significant difference was observed in sense of belonging to military and civilian communities, with military spouse respondents who indicated one or more mental health diagnoses reporting lower levels of belonging to both communities, as compared to those who reported no diagnoses. belonging to their military and civilian communities, with those respondents with mental health diagnoses reporting lower levels of belonging to both communities. Military spouses may feel a reduced sense of belonging to their military and civilian communities because they are frequently more isolated, lack the same sense of military community their active duty spouse encompasses as a member of the military, and/or are too transient due to the military lifestyle to integrate into their civilian community.

As service member and veteran mental health and suicide continue to gain attention and support, more can be done to increase mental health and suicide prevention awareness among military and veteran spouse populations. Just as it is important to be aware of the impact military service has on service members' and veterans' physical and mental health, it is equally important to be aware of the mental health challenges faced by the entire family. Similar to the reasons service members choose not to seek mental health treatment, availability, access, and stigma are also common barriers for military spouses.<sup>39</sup> The mental health of military family members is a critical component of mission-readiness, requiring additional support and early intervention. The Department of Defense (DoD) and the VA could examine their existing suicide awareness, public outreach, research, and prevention program efforts for service members and veterans, and identify ways to expand it to include military spouses and veteran spouses.

"I feel as though everyone wants to understand military service member suicide but no one cares about spouses back home while their husband is deployed or the impact deployments have on children. No one researches mental health of families, only the service member." **ARMY SPOUSE** 

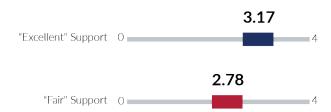
Finding 6 Schools are a critical junction for military families to connect. Respondents who rate civilian school support for military life as "excellent" indicate significantly higher levels of community connectedness.

Service member (34%) and military spouse (42%) respondents' concerns regarding their dependent children's education remains a top five issue of concern for the second consecutive year, and it appears to have increased compared to last year's survey results. Many military families nationwide have voiced concern about school options available in their community,<sup>40, 41, 42</sup> while others have opted to remain in a location ("geo-bach") rather than travel with their service member to a new duty assignment in order to keep their child in his or her current school. Twenty-nine percent of military family respondents have geo-bached, and of those, "children's school" was the third most commonly-cited reason (28%). Although private school is considered an alternative to public school enrollment, this survey has seen a decline in reported private school enrollment among military family respondents and an uptick in military family respondents who elect to homeschool their children. In this year's survey, 12% of military family respondents' children were homeschooled, which is four times the national rate.<sup>43, 44</sup> Homeschooling can be a solution for families who cannot afford private tuition and also have concerns about the quality or environment of public schools near the installation to which their service member has been assigned.

Of the 54% of military children who are schoolaged,<sup>45</sup> the vast majority (84%) currently attend a public school.<sup>46</sup> For these military families, the school's ability to support military life events, such as frequent moves and deployments, can be especially important. Among military family respondents enrolled in local (non-DoDEA) public or private schools, 17% indicated their school's support for military life events was "excellent" compared to 20% who rated it as "fair." However, when civilian schools excel at providing support for military children, their impact extends far beyond the classroom. Those military family respondents who rated their non-DoDEA school's support for military life as "excellent" were significantly more connected to their civilian communities than those who indicated their school did a "fair" job of doing so.

#### MILITARY FAMILY RESPONDENTS WHO RATED SCHOOL'S SUPPORT FOR MILITARY LIFE AS "EXCELLENT" WERE SIGNIFICANTLY MORE CONNECTED TO THEIR CIVILIAN COMMUNITIES

SENSE OF COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS SCORE



## *"Educators are not equipped to deal with the new kid, child of deployed service member, or military life struggles of the child."*

Civilian schools are a critical junction for military Officer (10%), and providing free resources to families to connect to their local civilian communities, empower military families to fill educational gaps but school variation from state to state and when necessary (15%). from district to district can make it difficult for The DoD and philanthropic organizations have families to prepare themselves and their children an opportunity to work with state and national for what to expect upon arrival. When asked certification authorities to integrate training about what their top recommendation would be for military students into training curricula and licensing improving military child education, military family examinations for teachers nationwide. Additionally, respondents supported recommendations that schools that receive federal Impact Aid funds have would help standardize their experience and an opportunity to be provided sustainment training increase understanding of military life. Identified by the local DoD Military School Liaison Officer improvements included helping educators and or his/her appointee. This required training for administrators understand how to support their administrators and educators could include proactive children (33%), strengthening compliance with and strategies to work with parents and children who use of existing resources such as the Interstate may be navigating high-stress military life issues and Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military help distinguish issues unique to active duty, National Children (23%) and the Military School Liaison Guard, and Reserve component families.

#### TOP IMPROVEMENTS TO MILITARY CHILD EDUCATION

33%	Increase education and training for teachers and school professionals
23%	Increase compliance to the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children
15%	Provide free access to online educational programming

#### - ARMY SPOUSE

- Training should include information specific to military life experiences, such as deployment and frequent moves.
- Military child education could benefit from an increased focus on transition issues including enrollment, placement, attendance, eligibility, and graduation.
- Educational gaps continue to exist from state to state even with the Common Core Curriculum; online educational programming could help supplement military child education.

# Military Service in Society

#### **FINDING 1**

Housing allowance impacts military families' well-being, regardless of whether they choose to live on- or off-installation. Better housing options or increased Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) was selected as the top choice of military family respondents to improve their quality of life.

#### **FINDING 2**

As a top strategy to decrease the civilian-military divide, military and veteran family respondents seek honest messaging from the Department of Defense on the difficulties and sacrifices faced by the entire family.

#### **FINDING 3**

Improvements to quality of life and to benefits are top ways the Department of Defense can attract more eligible recruits for military service.

#### **FINDING 4**

Respondents who were less likely to recommend military service to their daughters are concerned about gender-based issues.

#### **FINDING 5**

Female service member respondents are more likely to join for education benefits than retirement benefits, indicating they may not see military service as a viable long-term career.

#### **FINDING 6**

The majority of veteran respondents were not prepared for their transition and indicated their expectations did not match their experiences.

#### **CIVIL-MILITARY DIVIDE**

18%

feel the general public understands their sacrifices

19%

feel the general public is aware of challenges military service places on families

### WILLINGNESS TO RECOMMEND SERVICE (ALL RESPONDENTS)





### **BEST WAYS DOD CAN IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE**

Better housing options/increase BAH

Adequate manning levels and reduce OPTEMPO

More military career control

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- and communities
- 3. Comprehensively assess and standardize requirements impacting military families' quality of life

#### TOP WAY TO **IMPROVE CIVILIANS'** UNDERSTANDING OF SERVICE

Honest messaging about family realities & sacrifices

#### **IMPROVE CULTURAL NORMS**

- 1. End sexual assault & harassment
- to daughters 2. Eradicate sexism in military culture
  - 3. Better work-life balance

#### **CHILDCARE** CHALLENGES FOR **FEMALE VETERANS**

female veterans *top stressor* during service is 5X male veteran rate

1. Tailor recruitment messaging specifically for females and modern military families 2. Help Americans understand centrality of military families to national security

"For families, it matters to know that housing is well taken care of (well maintained, no black mold, etc.). Those privatized housing companies take all the BAH but do not update/ maintain housing ..." COAST GUARD SPOUSE

## Finding 1

Housing allowance impacts military families' well-being, regardless of whether they choose to live on- or offinstallation. Better housing options or increased Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) was selected as the top choice of military family respondents to improve their quality of life.

Quality, affordable housing options are directly linked to positive health and economic outcomes underscoring the importance of prioritizing them for the military.<sup>1</sup> Yet, reports of contaminated water and lead poisoning on military bases surfaced this year, and Congressionally-mandated Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) reductions will continue to reduce total housing allowances to 95% of local area rates by 2019.<sup>2</sup> Military family respondents in this year's survey identified better housing options or increased BAH as a top way their family's quality of life could improve.

Cuts to housing allowance affect military families who choose to reside off-installation, but can also affect families who reside on-installation. Housing allowance impacts base housing sustainment funding, which ensures the Department of Defense (DoD) continues to provide military families the quality housing its policies require. Of the 66% of military family respondents who utilized on-installation housing during their military service, one-third (33%) indicated they were dissatisfied with their on-installation housing experience. In qualitative responses, military family respondents expressed frustration with privatized housing management and aging properties, and environmental health hazards such as contaminated water, lead poisoning, and mold infestations. For military family respondents who live off-installation, inadequate BAH rates as compared to local area rent and housing shortages were cited as limiting factors for finding quality, affordable housing in desirable communities. For the vast majority of these respondents, BAH did not cover total monthly housing costs, including utilities, leaving only 15% of off-installation housing fully covered. Military family respondents identified the cost of housing as their top financial obstacle following military spouse un/ underemployment.

The DoD's policy is written to ensure that military families have access to quality, affordable housing, which reflects current community living standards.<sup>3</sup> Delaying maintenance and sustainment of other improvements can further compromise the conditions of military housing options and the overall quality of life and readiness of those currently serving. The DoD and policymakers can take seriously the experiences and concerns of service members and their families as a factor in the decision making process when looking at the impact the Congressionally-mandated BAH reduction has on those residing on- and off-installation. Finding 2 As a top strategy to decrease the civilian-military divide, military and veteran family respondents seek honest messaging from the Department of Defense on the difficulties and sacrifices faced by the entire family.

Currently, less than 1% of the American public has served on active duty at any given time since 9/11, resulting in a decreased understanding between the military and the broader U.S. society (otherwise known as the "civilian-military divide"). This widening divide is especially prominent among America's youth as many lack basic knowledge about military service, and what they think they know is often wrong.<sup>4</sup> While 41% of military and veteran family respondents in this year's survey agreed the general public truly appreciates the sacrifices made by service members and their families, only 18% felt the general public truly understands this sacrifice. Additionally, only 19% felt the general public is aware of the significant challenges military service places on families. This lack of knowledge and understanding about the military may be further compounded by the decreasing personal relationships young adults have with someone who has served. Today, only 15% of young adults in America have a direct connection to a service member or veteran in their family, a stark decline from 1995 when 40% were connected.<sup>5, 6</sup>

Earlier this year, the DoD began a program called "This is Your Military" to combat the increasing civilian-military divide. The program has released a series of campaigns aimed at increasing public understanding of who is serving in the military today and correcting common misconceptions the public may have.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, military and veteran family respondents qualitatively identified the best ways the DoD could increase the public's understanding of military service and military family challenges, which included educating the public directly through the DoD-generated advertisements and public interviews, and building partnerships with the media to produce compelling documentaries, movies, and television shows as a tactic to reduce media bias.

The top strategy identified by respondents was for the DoD to incorporate more honest messaging about the realities, difficulties, and sacrifices of contemporary military life. Specifically, respondents sought increased messaging that military sacrifice is borne by all members of the family, not just the service member. Respondents also indicated by increasing honest messaging, the general public may be better educated to advocate on behalf of service members, veterans, and their families to policymakers. Opportunities for the DoD to develop local community partnerships focused on educational outreach and build joint engagement partnerships were also identified as top strategies to increase the general public's understanding of military service.

These findings suggest service members, veterans, and their families seek an authentic representation of their military experiences. Military and veteran families are more than just war heroes or victims; they are good neighbors, families, and friends actively engaged in making their military and civilian communities great places to live. Not only does authentic and honest messaging help build a stronger understanding of the military experience among the general public, but it also might have recruitment and retention implications for those who enter the military based on DoD messaging. Civilian workforce research has found employers who are able to match the expectations of joining

#### TOP STRATEGIES TO INCREASE CIVILIAN UNDERSTANDING OF MILITARY SERVICE

Honest Messaging from the Department of Defense

"Honest public releases of what we do, vice recruiting commercials... Also they should know that their military family members are riding obsolete aircrafts that don't have the maintenance funds or parts to stay safe and operational. Might help the civilian sector hold our political leadership accountable." Educational Media and Marketing Campaigns

"Allow more documentaries to be produced about military lives. There are very few documentaries and articles that thoroughly explain or describe the hardships the families endure."

- NAVY SERVICE MEMBER

a company with the reality of the work experience reap better recruitment, engagement, employee advocacy, and retention outcomes. Their employees are more likely to recommend their employer as a place to work, post or share praise about their employer online, and put more effort into their job than is required.<sup>8</sup> The DoD and command leadership have an opportunity to enhance the way the military is publicly represented and promote a command culture that matches that representation.

- ARMY SPOUSE

Educational Community Outreach

"More civilian DoD relationships for military members and transitioning veterans ... The divide is a major issue, but it is also our responsibility as veterans to share our stories and connect with our civilian communities."

> - MARINE CORPS VETERAN

## Finding 3 Improvements to quality of life and to benefits are top ways the Department of Defense can attract more eligible recruits for military service.

For the first time since 2005, the U.S. Army was the only service branch to miss its recruiting goal by 6,500 soldiers.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. military recruits approximately 180,000 men and women into its active duty forces each year.<sup>10</sup> These recruits vary between 17 to 39 years old depending on the service branch's cut-off age and waivers.<sup>11</sup> Policymakers recently acknowledged recruitment challenges citing, "With the difficult recruiting and retention environment driven by a lessened overall propensity to serve, reduced pool of qualified candidates and a robust economy, the competition for recruits will be difficult and you will all be

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competing for the same pool."<sup>12</sup> The private sector currently outpaces the military in adjusting their work culture to better attract and recruit new talent with many offering more flexible careers, better working hours, improved benefits, and tailored workplace policies that appeal to the millennial and centennial generations.

In qualitative portions of the survey, military family respondents identified several strategies the DoD can take to attract more eligible recruits for military service. In line with the quality of life adjustments similarly being addressed in the private sector, improvements to the quality of military life was the top response, including increasing stability, offering more support for family members, and allowing more control over the service member's career and duty locations. Improvements to benefits was also a top suggestion, including better housing, increasing military pay, ending threats to cut benefits, and offering student loan forgiveness. While the majority of all service member and veteran respondents (57%) reported a desire to serve as their top reason for joining the military, the majority of those who were millennial respondents (58%) in this year's survey prioritized educational benefits as their primary reason for joining.

It's not surprising that military family respondents recommend quality of life improvements as the top way to recruit more eligible service members given 69% of military family respondents indicated the current operational tempo exerts an unacceptable "Uprooting and separating families or forcing them to make those choices is why many choose not to stay, and why many choose not to join at all. This is an antiquated way of thinking ... New generations are not as willing to subject themselves or their families to constantly being moved."

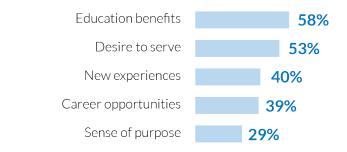
level of stress for a healthy work-life balance, and 51% cited "time away from home" as their top issue of concern (an increase from 47% in last year's survey). Military family respondents identified top changes that would most improve their family's quality of life, which included; offer better housing/ increase BAH, maintain adequate manning levels/ reduce high operational tempo, allow more control over service member's career, and increase stability (e.g., move less and deploy less). These findings indicate the quality of life issues military families are facing today not only affect the current All-Volunteer Force, but can also have an effect on the legacy recruits of tomorrow.

Of the less than 1% of the U.S. population that make up the active duty military, a disproportionate number comes from military families.<sup>13</sup> Existing research has found that parental intentions to recommend military service and child intentions to enlist in the military are directly associated.<sup>14</sup> Of those military family respondents who were least likely to recommend military service to their own child, reasons related to greater stability, more control over active duty career, and reduction of operational tempo were identified as some of the top ways the DoD could most improve their quality of life. The DoD and command leadership have an opportunity to enhance the quality of life experienced by military families wherever current missions make this feasible and ultimately enhance the attractiveness of military service for future recruits.

#### - NAVY SERVICE MEMBER

#### TOP 5 REASONS FOR JOINING MILITARY SERVICE

Active Duty and Veteran Respondents, 37 and younger



#### TOP 5 CHANGES TO IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR MILITARY FAMILY RESPONDENTS

18%	Offer better housing and/or increase BAH
18%	Maintain adequate manning levels/reduce high OPTEMPO
12%	Allow more control over active duty career
10%	Move less
10%	Deploy less

## Finding 4 Respondents who were less likely to recommend military service to their daughters are concerned about gender-based issues.

Approximately 17% of today's total force is comprised of women,<sup>15</sup> and this number is expected to grow with pressure by lawmakers on the U.S. military service branches to increase their focus on women when conducting recruitment and retention efforts.<sup>16</sup> However, in this year's survey, while 51% of military and veteran family respondents were likely to recommend service to their sons, only 39% indicated the same for their daughters. Qualitative responses identified gender-based issues as the top changes that needed to happen in order for respondents to recommend service to their daughters. These included ending sexual assault, harassment, and sexism in military culture, and improving the quality of life and work-life balance. Military sexual trauma (MST) refers to sexual assault or harassment that occurs in the military and has serious implications for the victim's mental and physical health, relationships, and concentration.<sup>17</sup> One in four veteran women report experiencing MST.18

"As a female veteran myself and having seen and heard what I have, I would highly recommend they choose a different path."

- AIR FORCE VETERAN AND SPOUSE

"Sexual assault is a real problem that needs to be eradicated before I ever tell my daughter she should serve in the military."

- AIR FORCE SERVICE MEMBER

These findings suggest there is a critical need to reassure parents that their daughters will be safe from sexual misconduct and sexism, and supported while on active duty before they're willing to recommend military service. There is also an opportunity for DoD and command leadership to encourage the use of Bystander Intervention Training to continue to enforce a zero-tolerance policy for sexual assault, harassment, and sexism in the workplace, and to promote a healthier worklife balance. Public education messaging about the steps the military is taking to address gender-based issues may also help parents become more open to recommending military service to their daughters.

*"Balancing motherhood and military service"* is one of the most difficult challenges that I think exists in the Service."

- ARMY SERVICE MEMBER

## Finding 5

While all service member respondents indicated a desire to serve their country as a top reason for joining the military, it's important to note female an male service members may view and experience military service differently, starting with when they enter the service. In this year's survey, 60% of fema service member respondents prioritized educationa benefits as their primary reason for joining the military (compared to 47% of male respondents). Women in the U.S. tend to take out larger student loans than men and have less disposable income with which to repay their loans after graduation.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, female service member respondents may find military education benefits even more attractiv

However, female service members may decide earli on that they do not see military service as a viable long-term career. Only a third of female service member respondents selected retirement benefits as their primary reason for joining, compared to 439 of male respondents. There was also a significant difference in the age of separation for male and female veteran respondents, with female veterans reporting they separated at a younger average age

#### TOP ISSUES OF CONCERN BY SERVICE MEMBER GENDER

	FEMALE SERVICE MEMBER
1.	Time away from family <b>(58%)</b>
2.	Military family quality of life (42%)
3.	Dependent children's education (37%)
4.	Impact of deployment on children (36%)
5.	OPTEMPO/deployments/training time (27%)

\*There were no differences to the top issues by gender for Veteran respondents

## Female service member respondents are more likely to join for education benefits than retirement benefits, indicating they may not see military service as a viable long-term career.

	(32 years) than their male counterparts (37 years). Female service members can find it increasingly
d	difficult to balance motherhood and advance
	their careers, <sup>20</sup> especially as they struggle with
	the military's work culture. <sup>21</sup> In this year's survey,
ale	female service member respondents identified
al	military families' quality of life as their second
	top issue of concern, an issue not ranked within
	male service members' top five. Although female
	and male service member respondents agreed on
	maintaining adequate manning levels/reducing high
	operational tempo and allowing more control over
У	a service member's career as their top two areas of
e.	improvements to their quality of life, female service
	members indicated increased access to affordable
ier	childcare that works with their schedule as their third
	improvement. This was at almost three times the rate
	of their male counterparts (13% vs. 5%). Additionally,
%	childcare challenges experienced by female service
70	member respondents were found when veteran
	respondents were asked about their biggest stressors
	during their time in the military. Female veteran
	respondents cited a lack of childcare at five times the
	male veteran rate.

	MALE SERVICE MEMBER
	Time away from family <b>(46%)</b>
	Military pay and benefits (41%)
	Impact of deployment on children (34%)
	Military spouse employment (33%)
%)	Dependent children's education (31%)

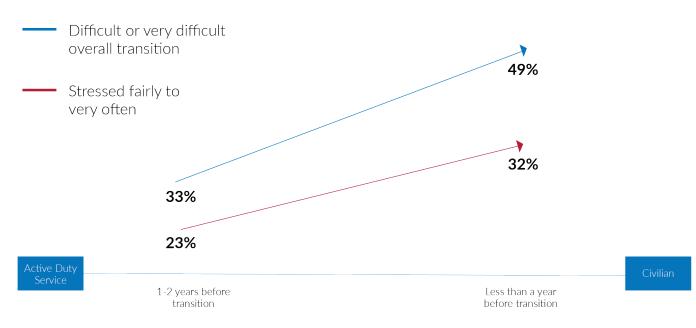
## Finding 6 The majority of veteran respondents were not prepared for their transition and indicated their expectations did not match their experiences.

Many veterans and their families encounter challenges as they transition out of active duty status—especially in securing employment, managing finances and health care, pursuing education, family reintegration, and navigating their new community.<sup>22</sup> In this year's survey, 47% of veteran family respondents reported their overall transition experience was "difficult" or "very difficult." Extant literature indicates that veterans may also experience

symptoms of grief and stress in response to the perceived "loss of the military self",<sup>23</sup> and additional research has found that transition difficulty and stress are predictive of mental and physical health problems.<sup>24</sup>

For the past three years of this survey, veteran respondents' difficult transition experiences have been associated with greater stress levels, greater

#### OVERALL TRANSITION DIFFICULTY AND FREQUENCY OF FEELING STRESSED INCREASES WITH LESS TIME PREPARING FOR TRANSITION



likelihood of depressive symptoms, and thoughts of suicide. Much of this may be due to inadequate transition preparation for service members and their families. Nearly 70% of veteran family respondents in this year's survey reported that they started preparing for transition less than a year before separating, yet 64% of veteran respondents reported that they "needed time to figure out what to do with their lives during their transition." Research has found that service members and their families have improved transition experiences and outcomes when they have more time to formulate their post-service plans.<sup>25</sup>

When asked what would most improve the transition experience, veteran respondents cited a strong support network for transitioning service members as the top strategy. Likewise, one of the top requested (37%) resources in searching for employment was "a network of those who successfully transitioned from the military into the civilian workplace." Although the majority (65%) of veteran respondents reported attending some form of transition programming (21% attended

"Managing expectations! Both my spouse and I felt like we could get out of the military and everyone would want to hire us at a salary and benefits package at or better than what we had in the military. That is simply not the case, and I think those expectations made it harder to mentally adjust to a civilian career."

Time Before Transition

Transition GPS), of those veteran respondents who attended, half (50%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the programming prepared them to successfully transition from active duty to civilian life.

These findings suggest service members, veterans, and their families are seeking the support of those who have previously experienced transition. By doing so, they may be able to gather more realistic information and gain earlier access to information, resulting in better preparation and managed expectations for a successful transition. This is particularly important for managing expectations around finding employment after transition as 67% of veteran respondents reported they did not have a job equal to their skills and gualifications in place when they left the military, and 28% reported that they did not have a permanent place to live when they separated. In last year's survey, over half (54%) of active duty families planning to exit from the military in the next two years had less than \$5,000 in savings or available in case of emergency. Overall, 52% of veteran respondents reported it took them longer than expected to find employment.

#### - NAVY VETERAN

## Implications & Recommendations

#### SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES UPHOLDS NATIONAL SECURITY AND COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Military families are assets to national defense and their local communities. They are central to the health and capability of the All-Volunteer Force and are good neighbors actively engaged in making their civilian communities great places to live. When service members and their families thrive, our country is stronger.

Military families are American families and, as such, they desire the same type of opportunities and support as their civilian counterparts. However, the unique demands of military service mean families must serve and sacrifice along with their service member, and this results in exceptional issues and challenges for the entire military family.

The responsibility for supporting military families is certainly a duty of the Department of Defense; however, a healthy nation shares in this responsibility. There are significant opportunities for expanding support from the private sector and on the local level.

#### BEST BETS FOR SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES

Our country can help support military families by learning more about the unique nature of military life and increasing civilian and military collaboration on a number of levels.

#### On the local level:

- Researchers who possess an opportunity to shape the narrative around military families can conduct additional research to emphasize the diverse experiences of service, and improve military and veteran family resilience
- Local and state governments can work to minimize barriers experienced by military families that arise out of their unique lifestyle (e.g., spouse employment, children's education)
- Corporate leaders and foundations can best support military families by engaging community organizations in opportunity areas identified in this report (e.g., caregiver support, mental health, employment, childcare)
- Community organizations and businesses can improve hiring practices for military spouses, veterans, and transitioning service members by updating employment resources to fit their diverse needs and by recognizing the value they bring to their military and civilian communities

#### On the national level:

- Military leaders can look to improve their recruitment strategies by tailoring messaging specifically for female recruits and modern military families
- Leaders from all sectors who possess an opportunity to shape the national narrative can represent the military lifestyle through honest messaging to remind Americans of the centrality of military families to national security and their communities

#### ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING MILITARY LIFE

#### Mental Health Services for Service Members & Veterans

- Increase available/accessible appointments
- Remove stigma/punishment for receiving care
- Employ more culturally competent and caring counselors

#### Support for LGBT Military Families

- Improve health care
- Increase support from senior leadership
- Make LGBT benefits equally available across installations

- Elected leaders can support initiatives and legislation that promote military family stability
- Policymakers can comprehensively assess and standardize requirements that impact military families (e.g., housing and EFMP) to improve their quality of life

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#### **Childcare for Military Families**

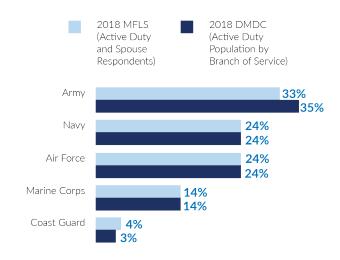
- Increase on-installation childcare availability
- Improve affordability
- Increase hourly/drop-in care options

#### Veteran Transition Experience

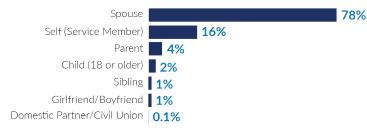
- Institute strong support networks for transitioning service members
- Improve employer education & hiring incentives
- Begin preparing for transition earlier

# Respondents

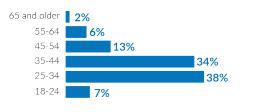
#### **BRANCH OF SERVICE**



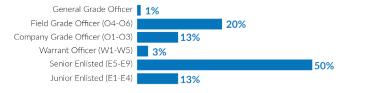
#### **PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP TO SERVICE**



#### AGE OF RESPONDENTS



#### SERVICE MEMBER'S RANK



The widespread distribution of the 2018 survey through Blue Star Families' networks and our partners in the military community has allowed the survey to remain the largest and most comprehensive survey of active duty, veterans, and their families since the survey's inception in 2009. This year's survey generated 10,192 individual responses, including 6,186 completed responses, yielding a 61% completion rate. The respondents represent a cross-section of active duty service members, veterans, and their immediate family members from all branches of service, ranks, components, and regions-both within the United States and on overseas military installations. While the high level of response helped to achieve a comprehensive sample, there were a greater number of older and more senior ranking respondents in the sample when compared with the active duty population as a whole. With regard to active duty respondents' branch of service, all services were represented at rates within a few percentage points of the active duty force according to the Defense Manpower Data Center (May 2018). Army respondents were sampled at 33%, as compared to 35% of the total active duty force, and the Coast Guard was sampled at 4%, as compared to 3% of the total active duty force.

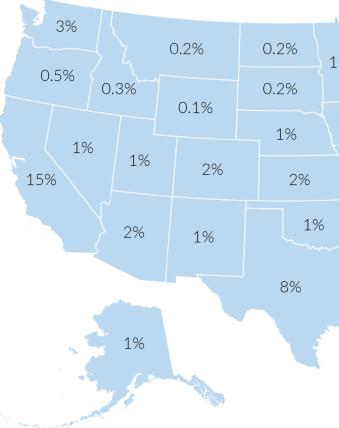
#### **DEMOGRAPHIC OF RESPONDENTS**

Survey respondents were asked to identify their primary relationship with the military based on the service members through whom they receive Department of Defense benefits, if applicable. The majority (85%) of respondents were family members, and 16% of the sample were either currently serving in the military or were veterans. The largest group of respondents was the spouses of active duty service members, representing 64% of total respondents.

Spouses of veterans represented 11%, veterans represented 9%, and active duty service members represented 6% of total respondents. Four percent of respondents were parents of a service member. 2% were adult children of service members, and 1% were siblings of service members.

The majority of respondents report their or their service member's current rank is, or was at the time of military separation, as follows: senior enlisted (E5-E9) at 50%, followed by field grade officer (O4-O6) at 20%, junior enlisted (E1-E4) at 13%, company grade officer (O1-O3) at 13%, and warrant officer (W1-W5) at 3%. General grade officer (O7-O10) comprised of one percent of respondents. 1% were unsure of their rank or their service member's rank. The single largest age group was aged 25-34 (38%), followed by those aged 35-44 (34%), 45-54 (13%), 18-24 (7%), 55-64 (6%), and 65 and older (2%).

#### **GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION OF RESPONDENTS** 3% 0.2% 0.2% 1% 0.5% 3% 1% 0.3% 0.2% ME: 0.3% 1% 0.1% 2% CT: 1% 0.4% 1% 1% 1% NH: 0.3% 1% 2% 0.1%11% 0.1% VT: 1% 2% 1% 15% 2% 2% MA: 1% 7% NJ: 1% 2% RI: 0.4% 1% 0.4% 2% 2% 1% DE: 0.3% 1% 3% 1% MD: 3% 1% D.C: 1% 8% 1% Outside the country: 4% 3%



Eighty-nine percent of respondents were female, 11% were male, and 0.2% identified as transgender/ gender nonconforming. When looking specifically at service member and veteran respondents, while

- males made up over half (55%) of this respondent group, an almost equal percentage of female respondents (44%) were also represented. One percent of service member and veteran respondents identified as transgender/gender nonconforming.
- Approximately 92% of respondents lived within the Continental U.S. (CONUS); 6% of respondents lived outside of the Continental U.S. (OCONUS), of which 4% lived outside the country. Within the U.S., the majority of respondents lived in: California (15%), Virginia (11%), Texas (8%), North Carolina (7%), and

Florida (6%).

#### TIME IN THE MILITARY

Among service member/veteran respondents, 59% had served on active duty in the past and 39% were on active duty at the time of the survey. Approximately 17% of service members were affiliated with the National Guard/Reserves currently or in the past (3%). Approximately 82% of family members indicated that their service member was currently on active duty, and 16% indicated that their service member had served on active duty in the past. The remaining were unsure of their service member's status (0.2%). The majority of veteran

#### TIME PERIOD OF SERVICE FOR VETERANS

 November 1941 or earlier
 0.1%

 World War II (Dec 1941-Dec 1946)
 0.4%

 January 1947-June 1950
 0.3%

 Korean War (July 1950-January 1955)
 1%

 February 1955-July 1964
 2%

 Vietnam Era (August 1964-April 1975)
 11%

 May 1975-July 1990
 29%

 August 1990-August 2001 (including Persian Gulf War)
 52%

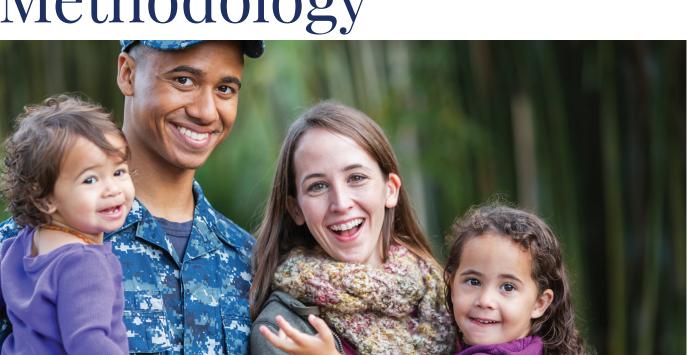
 September 2001 or later
 76%

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family respondents (76%) reported they/their veteran had served since September 2001 or later.

In summary, these demographics outline a diverse group of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, drawn together by their commitment to service and shared support for military and veteran-connected families. It is important to note, however, that the sampling protocol applied to the study is subject to the introduction of selection bias.

## Methodology



Conducted since 2009, this is the ninth iteration of the Blue Star Families' (BSF) annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey. The 2018 survey was designed by BSF in collaboration with Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and analyzed with extensive input from military family members and advocates, subject matter experts, and policymakers who work with military families. The survey was accessible online from April 23 to June 1, 2018.

BSF and IVMF worked together with other national military and veteran service organizations who distributed the survey to their own constituents and communities. Possible biases introduced through the utilization of a non-probability sampling method include over- or under-representation, particularly the case when looking at gender representation among service member and veteran respondents in this year's survey compared to the military population. Female service members make up 16% of active duty personnel <sup>1</sup> compared to the 47% of female service members represented in this survey. Similarly, nearly 10% of veterans are

- female <sup>2</sup> compared to the 43% of female veterans represented in this survey. Over- or underrepresentation means this sample cannot necessarily be considered a direct representation of the entire military and veteran family populations. The survey was conducted online with approval from the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was administered online using Qualtrics survey system (Qualtrics, Inc., Provo, UT), generating a selfselected, convenience sample.
- Recruitment and outreach were designed in a way that systematically solicited from sample subsets of
- the military family population. All survey participation was considered voluntary, and no identifying
   information was collected or linked to answers on the survey. Survey recruitment and outreach were
- the survey. Survey recruitment and outreach were broad and included:
  - building direct awareness of the initiative for military families via direct e-mail distribution from the BSF and IVMF mailing lists and social media dissemination (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blog posts, and partner websites),

- outreach from a myriad of diverse military family, military, and veteran service nonprofits, supportive service organizations, and professional organizations, and;
- an intentional explanation of the study's objective (provided to each possible participant whether they subsequently completed the survey or not) to minimize self-selection bias toward any single focal issue and, thus, mitigating the respondents' propensity to participate based upon any specific, issuebased self-interest (e.g., benefits, employment, wellness. etc.).

Of the 10,192 military family members who started the survey, 61% (6,186) completed the entire questionnaire. The number of respondents varied per question based on applicability to the respondent (for example, relationship to the service member, presence of children, employment status). Many sections of this survey were only available for completion by specific subgroups: military spouses, veteran spouses, veterans, or service member respondents. A survey branching technique was used whereby the answers to certain questions were a gateway to specific follow-on questions (detailed branching is available upon request). For example, sections related to the needs of military children were excluded from those without children. All responses allowed respondents to select "Prefer not to answer" on guestions with which they felt uncomfortable, and many questions allowed respondents to select all applicable responses. Therefore, as mentioned above, including missing data considerations, the actual number of respondents per question varied throughout the survey.

Any comparisons that are made between this year's data and previous years' data are intended only as comparisons of absolute percentages; although statistical significance was assessed this year among selected data and is indicated as such in

the report. Additionally, the wording across the years has been revised on various questions; as a result, trends across the years have not been universally assessed. The survey questions were a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions to allow for diverse responses from participants. With the exception of most mental health questions and select questions, "Does not apply" and "Prefer not to answer" responses were coded as missing. Multiple response sets were created for questions that allowed more than one response.

Standardized, scientifically-validated instruments were incorporated into the survey to enable future comparisons with other populations. Examples of standardized instruments include the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), the Brief Locus of Control Scale, Sense of Community Connectedness Scale, and four subscales from the Individual, Family, and Community Resilience Profile to measure factors of family resilience.

For this report, nine open-ended questions were chosen for qualitative analysis. These questions related to key focus areas of the survey (spouse employment, health care and wellness, children, civilian-military relations, community support, and transition). Two survey analysts on the team conducted the qualitative analysis of these questions to ensure consistency. The analysts utilized a content analysis methodology to identify key themes from the data. The content analysis included several rounds of data analysis: first, the data were reviewed for emergent themes; second, each response was categorized by relevant theme(s); third, a final tabulation of responses by theme was created. After each question was analyzed, quotes were identified to illustrate each theme for the purposes of this report. The survey team utilized these themes and quotes to complement and support the findings from quantitative items. Quotes are used throughout this report to bring further depth and understanding to the numbers behind this survey.

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