

Blue Star Families'
Connected Communities:

THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BELONGING



ABOUT

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

Currently-serving military families move frequently, often far from family and friends, and live a lifestyle very different from their civilian neighbors. Correspondingly, Blue Star Families' annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey consistently reports that isolation from family and friends is a top stressor for active-duty families, and more than a third have no friends in the local civilian community with whom they can talk. To address this concern, Blue Star Families launched the Connected Communities Pilot with support from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation. This three-year project created a community-based programming model to test whether increasing the number and variety of community connections a military family has in the community in which they live improves their well-being. New York, NY and San Diego, CA were the locations for this innovative community model.

BLUE STAR FAMILIES

The families of our all-volunteer military make unprecedented sacrifices these days to serve our country. Blue Star Families was founded by military spouses in 2009 to empower these families to thrive as they serve. We are committed to strengthening military families by connecting them with their neighbors — individuals and organizations — to create vibrant communities of mutual support. We believe we are all stronger when we take care of one another.

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A vertical image on the left side of the page showing the Statue of Liberty and the American flag. The Statue of Liberty is green and stands on a stone pedestal. The American flag is red, white, and blue, waving in the wind. The background is a clear blue sky.

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Thank you for creating and delivering an innovative solution that addresses the root causes of many military life challenges.

Funding for the Connected Communities Impact Study (CCIS) is provided through the generosity of the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation. With this pivotal support, Blue Star Families has been able to develop, scale, and evaluate solutions for some of the most pressing challenges that military families face today. ***Thank you for helping us evaluate and refine our programming in order to best serve military families.***

Our community-based programming also would not have been possible without national and on-the-ground partnerships in New York and San Diego. Partners have supported the delivery of spouse employment, family, and caregiver programming, as well as our research efforts, to deliver a continuum of need-based services for military families. ***Thank you for your belief in the importance of this work, even before we had the data to prove it works!***



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CRAIG NEWMARK NEW YORK TRI-STATE CHAPTER:

CCIS Outreach Partners

106th Rescue Wing (Long Island)	LI Family Readiness Support
411th Family Readiness Support Assistant	Naval Operational Support Center
642 Support Battalion (ASB), NYARNG	NYC Veteran Alliance
Bard College	SAGE Vets
Bracewell	Theater Development Fund
Bronx Veterans Council	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs-Bronx Vet Center
Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce	U.S. Department of Veteran Services
Camp Smith — Family Assistance Center Specialist	U.S. Family Health Plan
Elizabeth Dole Foundation	Vet2Vet
Family Readiness NYC Region	Veterans Advisory Council
Fort Hamilton Family Readiness Support	Vibrant Mental Health
Fort Hamilton Spouses Foundation	

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George Link, Jr. Foundation	— US Family Health Plan
Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund	The Stirratt Fund
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SAN DIEGO CHAPTER:

CCIS Outreach Partners

American Red Cross	Oceanside Chamber of Commerce
Armed Services YMCA	San Diego Chamber of Commerce
Courage to Call	San Diego Military Family Collaborative
DeLuz Family Housing	Support the Enlisted Project
Families Overcoming Under Stress	United Services Organizations
Military Spouse Association of Camp Pendleton	Vets Community Connections
Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society — San Diego Office	Zero8Hundred

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Leonardo DRS	



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Military families move frequently — every two to three years, on average.¹ Moving often lands these families far from friends and extended family, leaving them isolated from support networks and with a lack of “belonging” to their community.

Having a sense of belonging is strongly associated with mental health benefits, including lower levels of depression,² and is a strong protective factor against suicidal ideation.³ Therefore, when the 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey found that about half of military families did not feel a sense of belonging to their local civilian community,⁴ it became clear that a purposeful model was required to fundamentally improve military families’ well-being at the local level.

To address this challenge, in 2018, Blue Star Families began transitioning from volunteer-led chapters to a funded, staff-led chapter model, launching pilot chapters in New York and San Diego. These chapters were purposefully built with a specific and measurable social impact goal: improve military families’ sense of belonging to their local communities. The Connected Communities Impact Study (CCIS) explores, over a three-year period, the efficacy of the chapter model to address belonging and other outcomes for military families.

Our New York and San Diego chapters use a three-phase approach to improve military family belonging as part of the CCIS:

1. **Welcome:** Develop and maintain sustainable chapters by growing membership and delivering Blue Star Families’ core programs for military families
2. **Engage:** Improve member engagement and lead local civil-military integration
3. **Belong:** Improve sense of belonging to the local community, and drive cultural and systemic changes in community

TAKEAWAYS:

1. Blue Star Families programming is directly related to elements of improved social capital quantity and quality, which in turn is significantly associated with belonging.
2. Increased attendance at Blue Star Families events is directly and indirectly linked to positive mental health outcomes, which also bolster belonging.
3. External factors, such as employment satisfaction, length of time in community, and personality traits, must be considered and accounted for in chapter programming.
4. Employment satisfaction is more important than employment status in terms of achieving desired mental health and belonging outcomes

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Blue Star Families Chapters: A COMMUNITY-BASED CONNECTEDNESS MODEL

Blue Star Families chapters began as a way for military families, who move more frequently than civilians and often live far from families and friends, to quickly connect to a support network within their new community.⁵ The chapter system was envisioned as a nationwide network that would become a familiar and predictable resource to support what is otherwise an often unstable and unpredictable military life.

Prior to 2018, Blue Star Families' chapters were led by volunteer chapter directors, the majority of whom were spouses of active-duty service members. While this model successfully engaged excellent volunteers, the transient nature of military life made their departure inevitable, and this undermined the stability and predictability of the chapter itself. Furthermore, the extent to which the model was working to improve military family well-being was unclear. To address this challenge, in 2018, Blue Star Families began transitioning to a funded chapter model, launching pilot programs in San Diego and New York.

Although more research was needed to understand which elements of programming could have the greatest impact on belonging, Blue Star Families knew program design should aim to mitigate the impacts of fundamental military life challenges consistently identified in the Blue Star Families annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS). These chronic issues include the lack of a strong local support network and understanding across the civil-military divide; chronic military spouse unemployment and underemployment; and the downstream mental health effects that can emerge over time as a consequence of these and other challenges, particularly among military spouses.

These issues were consistently also connected to “belonging” in open-ended responses in other research projects, a desired outcome which has well-documented benefits. This research is explored in-depth in the next section.



Blue Star Families' funded chapters were therefore purposefully built as a connectedness model with a specific and measurable social impact goal: **improve military families' sense of belonging to their local communities by connecting them to others in their community.** Chapter activities would provide a venue for military and civilian families to come together where they could organically develop authentic networks of mutual support. Blue Star Families theorized that increased program participation should result in larger and stronger social support networks, improved employment outcomes, and improved mental health outcomes. All of these improvements, alongside national and community-based efforts to improve understanding of military life among local civilians, should also result in military families in Blue Star Families' chapter locations having an improved sense of belonging to their local communities in the long-term.



WHY BELONGING?

The Importance of Authentic Human Connection to Support Mental Health

The mental health benefits of belonging are well-documented. As one 2020 report found, “A respondent’s sense of community belonging is linked to their general health status, and particularly strongly linked to their self-perceived mental health.”⁶ Forming and maintaining social relationships has been linked to human motivation and well-being.⁷ Having a sense of belonging is associated with a stronger connection to one’s community, a sense of control over one’s own life (stronger internal locus of control), and a stronger sense of self-worth.⁸ In fact, “even a minimal sense of belonging affects important aspects of self.”⁹ This explains why having a sense of belonging is therefore associated with positive mental health outcomes,¹⁰ including lower levels of depression¹¹ and negative affect, and greater positive affect.¹² More importantly, connections to other people and a sense of belonging are also strong protective factors against suicidal ideation.¹³ Active-duty military spouses who have a larger social network develop a stronger sense of belonging in their communities, which is in turn associated with improved psychological well-being.^{14,15}

Previous Blue Star Families research assessing belonging in military and veteran families echoes civilian literature. The 2018 and 2019 MFLS and the 2020 Resilience Under Stress Study (RUSS) all indicate a relationship between a sense of belonging and various protective factors that support resilience and mental health in military families, and findings suggest that the need to bolster belonging is greatest among military spouses.

Active-duty spouse respondents to the 2018 MFLS had the lowest sense of belonging¹⁶ and those who reported one or more mental health diagnoses felt significantly less belonging than those who reported no mental health diagnosis.¹⁷ The 2019 MFLS extended this research and found associations between levels of social isolation, community characteristics, and belonging. Social isolation decreased for active-duty family respondents as belonging increased, and both active-duty and veteran family respondents reported an increased sense of belonging if they perceived that civilians in their local communities had a greater “military family lifestyle competence.”¹⁸ Further, the 2020 RUSS, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that belonging helped mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Active-duty family respondents who had a greater sense of belonging to their local community reported less intense “COVID-19 impacts on their family, their mental health, their children’s mental health, and their happiness.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, despite the clear benefits of belonging, in the 2019 MFLS, 40% of active-duty family respondents did not feel that sense of belonging to their civilian communities.



BELONG

Improve sense of belonging to local community by driving cultural and systemic changes in community

IMPROVE:



SENSE OF BELONGING

ENGAGE

Improve member engagement and lead local civil-military integration

IMPROVE:



MENTAL HEALTH

WELCOME

Develop and maintain sustainable chapters by growing membership and delivering Blue Star Families' core programs for military families

INCREASE:



QUALITY OF SOCIAL CAPITAL



QUANTITY OF SOCIAL CAPITAL



PERCEIVED LOCAL SUPPORT

BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION:

Welcome, Engage, Belong

Blue Star Families' chapters began with a simple premise: The role of a formal organization is to facilitate the informal support networks we all need to thrive.^{20, 21} Military families who move frequently and often live far from extended family support networks benefit from shortening the time it takes to develop this support network. The first two phases of chapter development — “Welcome” and “Engage” — emphasize activities designed to quickly increase the quantity and quality of local social capital, increase awareness of resources, and set the conditions for positive mental health outcomes. They encourage local chapter directors to focus their efforts on capacity-building and leading local civil-military integration by delivering Blue Star Families' branded programming and offering a wide variety of volunteer and family activities. This provides ample opportunities to meet others in the community and strengthen social support systems for currently-serving and veteran families. To recognize benefits recognized in phase three, “Belong,” well-established chapters seek to drive cultural and systemic changes in the community by increasing military family lifestyle cultural competence among the local civilian population and through substantive policy changes.

The original Blue Star Families chapter model also included an emphasis on direct job placement at the local level. However, this component was not preserved as part of the pilot program in New York due to lack of funding and therefore is not assessed herein.

The CCIS explores the relationship between increased participation in Blue Star Families activities and outcomes such as increased quality and quantity of social networks, perceived availability of material resources, positive mental health outcomes, and perception of belonging. The study also seeks to better understand the relationships between these outcomes and other variables, such as employment satisfaction, personality characteristics, length of time in community, etc.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The CCIS was conducted from August 2018 to February 2020 and comprised five separate survey fieldings. Chapter activities conducted during that time frame included, but were not limited to, coffee talks, spouse networking lunches, Yellow Ribbon events, and back-to-school events. When referencing this data, please consider that the sample does not represent the military and/or veteran population as a whole, and these findings therefore are not generalizable to the entire military or veteran population.

The majority of respondents in this sample are located in San Diego (68%), are spouses of currently-serving military personnel (62%), are female (83%), are white, non-Hispanic (61%), and half (50%) have a bachelor's degree or higher. Additionally, over half are affiliated with the sea services (Navy-39% and Marine Corps-29%), and 60% are in families whose service member has served over 10 years in the military. Respondents are nearly evenly split between those living in civilian housing (51%) or military housing (49%).

By the Numbers

Activities conducted from August 2018 through February 2020

- **20,000+** adult event attendees
- **4,800+** children event attendees
- **223** events in San Diego
- **96** events in New York

Definitions: Respondent Groups

Currently-Serving Family

Active-duty or National Guard service members and their spouses

Veteran Family

Veterans (no longer serving) and their spouses



Blue Star Families' Connected Communities Provide the **BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BELONGING**

Building social capital is key to supporting military families with relocations and assimilation into their new community,^{22,23} and is a critical first step toward belonging. CCIS surveys assessed the relationship between participation in Blue Star Families activities in the previous three months²⁴ and social capital (quantity and quality), participants' access to material resources, self-reported mental health indicators,

and overall sense of belonging. Several indicators were assessed within outcomes; while significant associations were found with some indicators after accounting for key demographic and control variables derived from literature, others were not and present opportunities for continued research to determine how best to maximize all outcomes across the board.



Outcomes Assessed In CONNECTED COMMUNITIES IMPACT STUDY

Primary independent variable: Number of Blue Star Families activities attended in previous three months



Direct association, statistically-significant²⁵



Statistically significant association with covariates that aligns with the literature²⁶

DESIRED OUTCOMES



Greater
**SENSE OF
BELONGING**²⁷



Belonging

The perceived availability of people one can do things with
For those living in community 4+ years



Better
**MENTAL
HEALTH**



Lower levels of depression

Self-report measure for assessing major or other depressive disorders



Greater
**SOCIAL CAPITAL
QUALITY**



People met and kept in contact with

Total number of people met at a Blue Star Families event with whom respondent maintained contact



Appraisal Support

More people to talk to about one's problems



Greater
**SOCIAL CAPITAL
QUANTITY**



High Contact Roles

Number of social roles in which the respondent has regular contact (i.e. at least once every two weeks) with at least one person



People in social network

Total number of people with whom the respondent has regular contact (at least once every two weeks)



Embedded Networks

The number of different network domains in which a person is active. (Domains: friends, church/temple, school, work, neighbors, volunteering, groups)



Greater
**AVAILABILITY OF
TANGIBLE AID**



Tangible support

The perceived availability of material aid

BUILDING CONNECTIONS AND LONG-TERM, MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

A sense of belonging takes time to develop and one of the initial key steps to building belonging is engaging individuals with others in their community to help them build their social network.²⁸ To that end, Blue Star Families programming helped participants increase their social capital quantity and quality.

Blue Star Families programming is intended to welcome and convene participants from a variety of social roles and experiences within the community in hopes that participants can meet and engage with a variety of people and thereby increase their personal network and opportunities for support. This study found a significant relationship between increased attendance at Blue Star Families events and (1) making more contacts at the events and (2) having a greater number of high contact roles.²⁹

“

As a military family [Blue Star Families'] programs make our family feel more connected and cared about. My kids feel like they have friends even when we move because they meet people at these events. I can't imagine how hard it would be for my kids to move repeatedly and not have programs like these.”

— Military spouse



“

Military families in this community are looking for opportunities to make connections and have a sense of belonging. The activities, volunteer opportunities, events, informational sessions, and career support programs demonstrate that military families are not invisible or forgotten.”

— Military spouse

As designed, Blue Star Families activities are an effective way for attendees to meet people and develop long-term relationships, which in turn bolsters belonging. At least half of currently serving family (50%) and the majority of veteran family (68%) respondents who attended at least one Blue Star Families event reported they had met and kept in contact with at least one person from the event(s). Respondents who had lived in the community longer, and were employed, had an increased association to high contact roles than those who had not lived in the community as long or were unemployed and seeking work.

Literature suggests that these individual outcomes (increasing high contact roles and creating long-term relationships) should be directly or indirectly associated with better mental health outcomes.³⁰ This association is echoed in CCIS findings; there is a significant relationship between having positive affectivity and having a greater sense of belonging. Higher positive affectivity was also significantly associated with higher contact roles and having more people in their social network. Positive affectivity was also significantly associated with lower depression, more people in one's social network, a greater number of embedded networks, at least one person they could discuss their problems with (“appraisal”), access to material resources, and belonging.



“

To feel the support of a community when we are miles away from home and peers is so beneficial to the mental health aspect for not only myself but our kids as well.”

— Military spouse

“

Being a spouse in the military it gets extremely lonely when you PCS and don't have your 'tribe' yet. This gives you a push to go to events to meet people while your spouse is gone and those people can become your tribe!"

— Military spouse

Among currently-serving spouses who had participated in at least one event in the previous three months, there was a significant, positive correlation between the number of people whom they had met at a Blue Star Families event and kept in contact with and their sense of belonging.

Although participation in Blue Star Families activities provides these building blocks toward belonging in the short term, event attendance alone is not associated with increased belonging for all populations. A significant relationship exists between attending more events in the previous three months and higher levels of belonging, but only for those who have lived in the area for four or more years.³¹ This is consistent with previous research; as discussed in the 2017 and 2018 MFLS, belonging to the local civilian community takes time to develop, increasing over time.^{32, 33}



BOLSTERING BELONGING:

Understanding the Complex Nature of Belonging for Military Families

Belonging, by its nature, is complex and requires far more than event attendance to achieve. Blue Star Families' Connected Communities are intended to help catalyze a series of reinforcing behaviors and norms within a community, which in the long term should lead to more welcoming, cohesive communities where military families can feel they truly belong. In order to guide program implementation in the long term it is essential to understand how non-programmatic factors influence the outcomes the chapters hope to achieve. By understanding the importance of employment satisfaction, length of time in community, and personality characteristics, chapters can explore ways to bolster factors that support belonging and mitigate factors that undermine it.



I relocated to the United States to be with my husband who's currently deployed and I had no idea of what people are out there doing to help military spouse like myself. I have a bachelors degree from Italy and I've been having a lot of trouble with finding a job since I moved to the United States which kind of stressed me out until I heard of Blue Star Families this year and through that I've learned a lot and connected with a lot of people which is helping me build myself and makes me feel at ease."

— Military spouse

EMPLOYMENT:

It's About More Than a Reliable Paycheck

The detrimental relationship between unemployment and poor mental health is well-established in the literature;^{34,35,36} however, unemployment in and of itself does not fully explain an individual's mental health outcomes. A person's sense of control over their own employment situation also affects mental well-being.³⁷ For example, voluntarily leaving employment for educational pursuits or pregnancy are associated with increased mental well-being.³⁸ The 2019 MFLS found a similar distinction between military spouse respondents who were unemployed and seeking work compared to those who were unemployed and not seeking employment: those who were unemployed and seeking employment reported decreased mental well-being compared to those who were unemployed and not seeking work.³⁹

In contrast, CCIS finds no relationship between levels of depression and employment status. Instead, this study finds that having a satisfactory employment situation is more important than simply having a job and is significantly associated with all desired outcomes, including having lower levels of depression and higher levels of belonging.

Relationships Between Employment & Desired Outcomes

EMPLOYMENT STATUS



SENSE OF BELONGING

- ☆ **No**, a sense of belonging is not associated with employment status



MENTAL HEALTH

- ☆ **No**, mental health is not associated with employment status



SOCIAL CAPITAL QUALITY AVAILABILITY OF SOMEONE TO TALK TO ABOUT ONE'S PROBLEMS

- ★ **Yes**, greater availability of people to talk to about one's problems is associated with people who are:
- Unemployed and not seeking work
 - Employed part-time
- ★ **Yes**, lesser availability of people to talk to about one's problems is associated with people who are:
- Unemployed and seeking work



QUANTITY OF SOCIAL CAPITAL HIGH CONTACT ROLES

- ★ **Yes**, greater quantities of high contact roles are associated with people who are:
- Employed full-time/part-time
 - Employed seeking more hours
- ★ **Yes**, lesser quantities of high contact roles are associated with people who are:
- Unemployed and seeking work



AVAILABILITY OF TANGIBLE AID

- ☆ **No**, availability of tangible aid is not associated with employment status
- ★ **Yes**, lesser availability of tangible aid is associated with people who are:
- Employed full-time

EMPLOYMENT SATISFACTION



SENSE OF BELONGING

- ★ **Yes**, a greater sense of belonging is associated with people who have:
- Greater satisfaction
- ★ **Yes**, lesser sense of belonging is associated with people who have:
- Lesser satisfaction



MENTAL HEALTH

- ★ **Yes**, lower levels of depression is associated with people who have:
- Greater satisfaction
- ★ **Yes**, higher levels of depression is associated with people who have:
- Lesser satisfaction



SOCIAL CAPITAL QUALITY AVAILABILITY OF SOMEONE TO TALK TO ABOUT ONE'S PROBLEMS

- ★ **Yes**, greater availability of people to talk to about one's problems is associated with people who have:
- Greater satisfaction
- ★ **Yes**, lesser availability of people to talk to about one's problems is associated with people who have:
- Lesser satisfaction



QUANTITY OF SOCIAL CAPITAL HIGH CONTACT ROLES

- ★ **Yes**, greater quantities of high contact roles are associated with people who have:
- Greater satisfaction
- ★ **Yes**, lesser quantities of high contact roles are associated with people who have:
- Lesser satisfaction



AVAILABILITY OF TANGIBLE AID

- ★ **Yes**, greater availability of tangible aid is associated with people who have:
- Greater satisfaction
- ★ **Yes**, lesser availability of tangible aid is associated with people who have:
- Lesser satisfaction

Implications

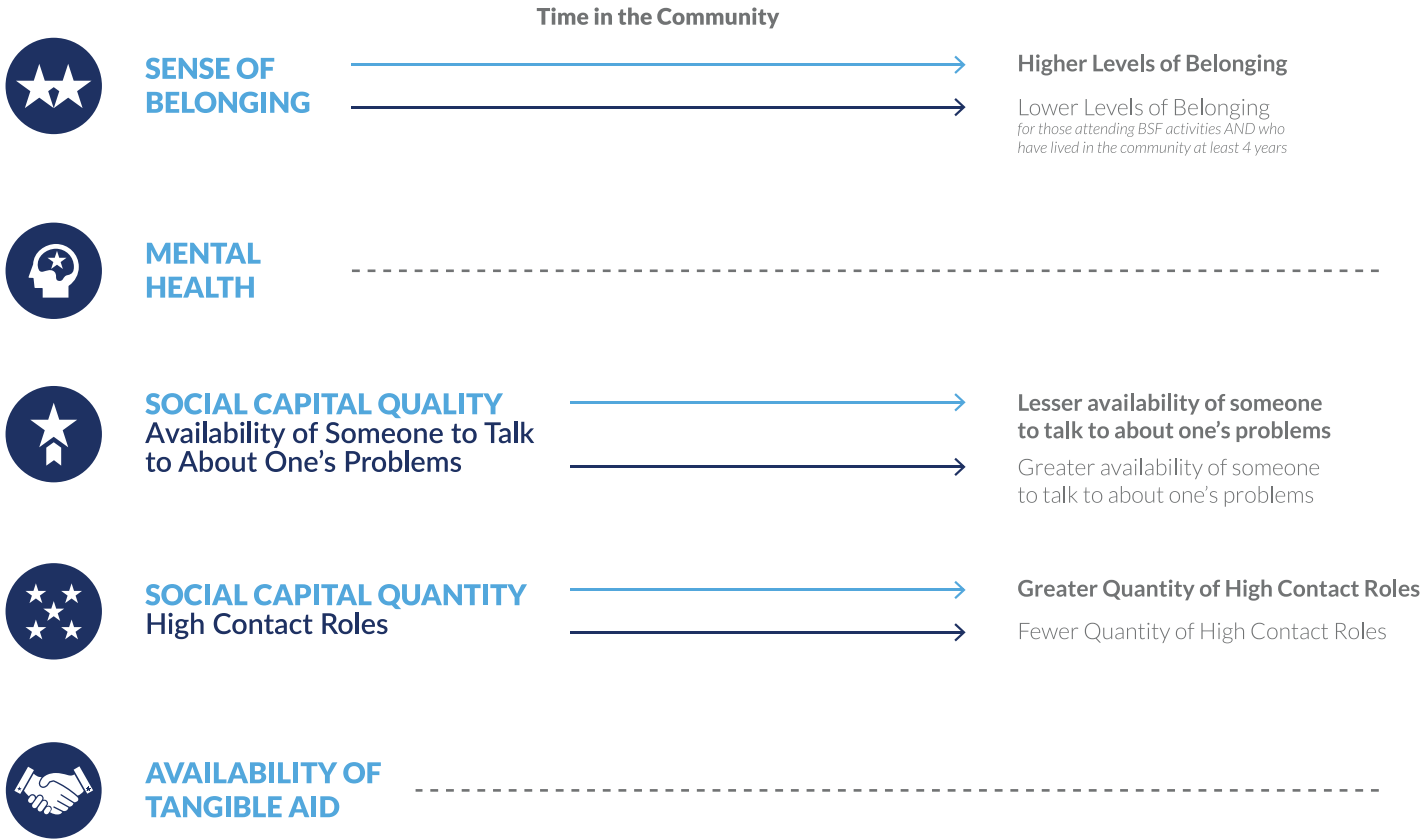
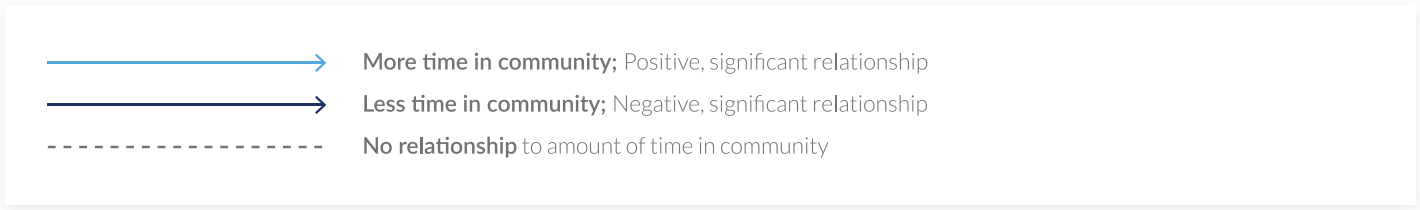
This finding has important implications for how policymakers and military spouse employment advocates measure “success” when it comes to addressing chronic employment concerns. Policy efforts to date have focused primarily on lowering the military spouse unemployment rate.

While this should remain an important benchmark, CCIS findings suggest that in order to support desired mental health outcomes, the nationwide conversation needs to evolve beyond job placement and recognize the importance of spouses finding a satisfying employment situation.

GREATER TIME IN COMMUNITY BOLSTERS BELONGING, But is Not Universally Positive

Previous research finds that belonging to the local civilian community takes time to develop, increasing over time.^{40,41} CCIS finds that this relationship is far more complex than a simple calculation of the length of time spent in a community. While living in the community for at least four years is associated with greater belonging, it is only

significant for those also attending Blue Star Families activities. Furthermore, the analysis uncovered at least one negative impact associated with increased time living in a location: greater time in community is associated with significantly fewer people the respondent felt able to talk to about one’s problems.



Implications

The phenomenon that greater time in community is associated with significantly fewer people the respondent felt able to talk to about one’s problems provides an interesting opportunity for additional research and has important programmatic and policy implications. For example, it is possible this phenomenon is due to the departure of other military families in one’s local network,

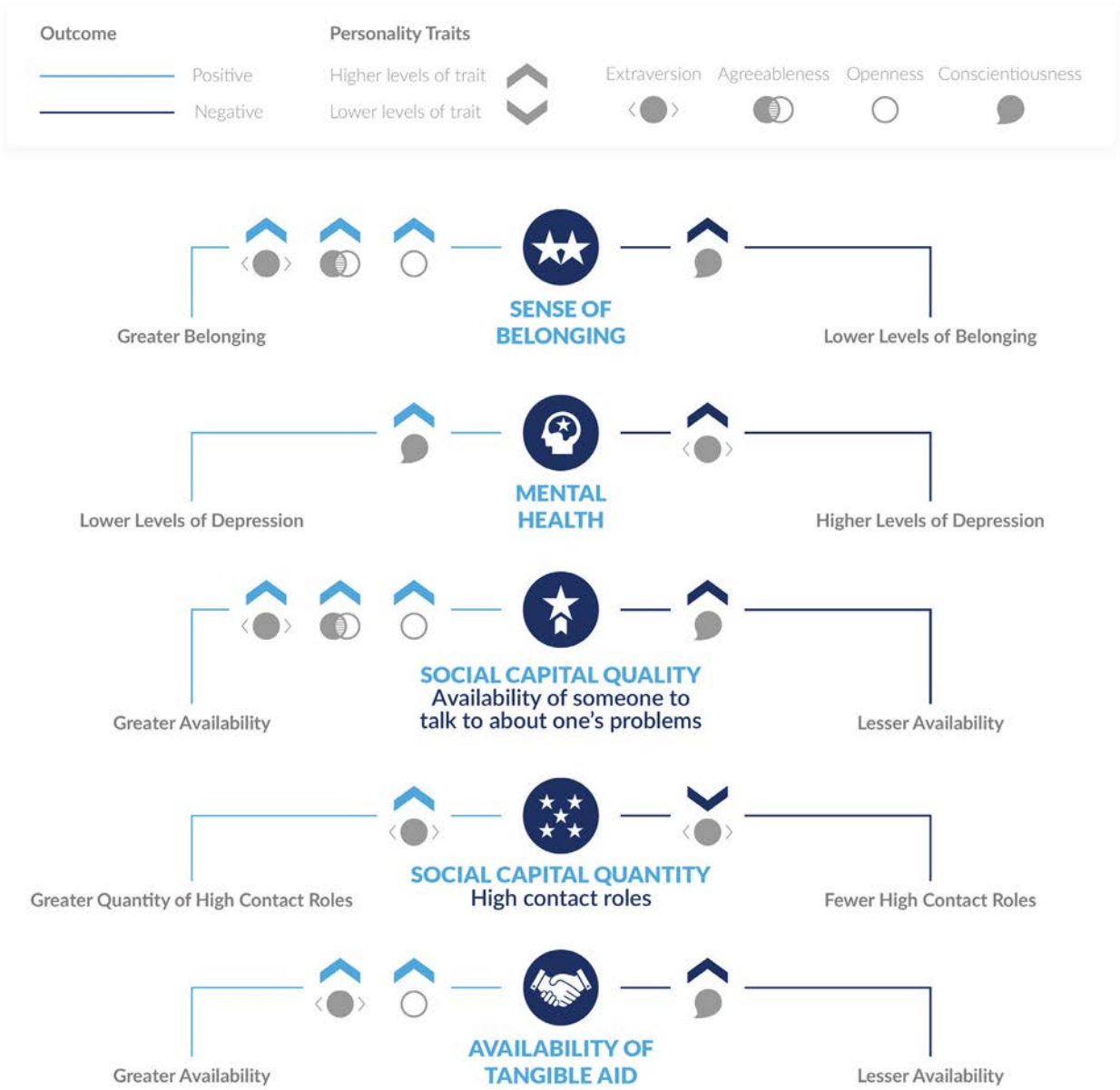
and suggests that frequent moves impact not only the relocating family, but also the friends they leave behind at the losing installation. In short, while longer time in a location may mean you know more people, and may start to feel a greater sense of belonging to the broader community, current PCS policies potentially undermine the quality of military families’ social support networks.

PERSONALITY TRAITS INFLUENCE DESIRED OUTCOMES

Research has found extraversion is associated with stronger associations between belongingness and well-being.⁴² Similarly, CCIS finds a strong relationship between high levels of extraversion with nearly every key positive outcome. Openness and agreeableness were also associated with positive outcomes. High levels of conscientiousness,

however, degrade key desired outcomes such as the perceived availability of someone to talk to about one’s problems and tangible aid, and lower levels of belonging. Personality traits were not significantly associated with depression levels.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERSONALITY TRAITS & OUTCOMES



Implications

Respondents reporting higher levels of extraversion also report significantly greater desired outcomes (with the exception of mental health), although it is likely that these individuals would be more inclined to attend the programmatic events than their introverted counterparts.

While the large majority (66%) of currently-serving families in both New York and in San Diego rated as higher than average on extraversion, the remaining one-third could likely benefit from smaller, more intimate gatherings as opposed to larger events.

Recommendations for Program Design and IMPLEMENTATION

While event participation is an important element of Blue Star Families' Connected Communities, this research underscores the importance of funding and delivering a comprehensive chapter model which includes additional elements to facilitate belonging.

The CCIS findings suggest that program participants would benefit from the following:

1. **Increased emphasis on setting the conditions for military spouses who desire employment to find meaningful and satisfying employment, not simply "a job," in all chapter locations.** Respondents who were dissatisfied with their current employment situation fared significantly worse than their satisfied peers on all key desired outcomes. This effort should be directed at both those seeking employment as well as employers.
2. **Increased emphasis on newcomer welcoming events designed to quickly identify arriving military families and integrate them into the Blue Star Families community.** There is a continued need to shorten the length of time it takes for military families to develop a support network and sense of belonging to their community.
3. **Increased number of civilian program participants.** There is evidence that military families' support network is undermined when their military friends relocate. Civilians, who move less frequently, can remain a stable support network for military families throughout their time at a duty station.
4. **Training for chapter directors and key volunteers to understand how to manage different personality types at an event and promote inclusive programming design.** This effort should focus on accommodating the needs and wants of highly conscientious and introverted participants, in particular.
5. **A variety of activity types and sizes, designed to appeal to both extraverted and introverted program participants.** This effort should be paired with program evaluation to assess which types of activities benefit each group.
6. **Continued monitoring and evaluation to identify possible differential effects for racially diverse groups.** This study was unable to assess differential effects by race due to low response rates among non-white racial groups and high multicollinearity within the sample.

Existing and ongoing Blue Star Families research also suggests the following practices would further bolster belonging:

1. Increased emphasis on promoting military family lifestyle cultural competence throughout the entire community
2. Increased local military spouse employment opportunities
3. Increased programming and outreach to military families and service members without children





METHODOLOGY

DESIGN

The Connected Community Impact Study (CCIS) was designed as an evaluation of the three-year Connected Communities Pilot Program launched in San Diego, CA and New York, NY. The study was designed to improve outcomes for military families by increasing the number and variety of community connections in the community in which they live. The evaluation plan was intended to measure the social integration of military families, especially spouses. Specifically, the evaluation plan was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do respondents who attend more Connected Communities activities have a greater quantity of social connections than those who attend fewer?
2. Do respondents who attend more Connected Communities activities have a greater quality of social connections than those who attend fewer?
3. Is the number of people a respondent met and kept in touch with at a Connected Communities event associated with an increased sense of belonging for military spouses?
4. Do respondents who meet and keep in contact with others at Connected Communities events have better mental health outcomes than those who do not maintain these connections?

STRENGTH OF FINDINGS

These findings are not generalizable to the entire military-connected community, however, they are consistent with prior research showing that increasing access to larger social networks increases social capital,⁴³ which in turn leads to better mental health outcomes.^{44,45} Direct associations were determined based on regression analysis using multiple theoretically-grounded control variables and all were significant at the .05 level or below. These outcomes were in turn directly associated with positive affectivity, which is in turn associated with additional positive outcomes (e.g. lower levels of depression, more people to talk to, etc.); these are termed “indirect associations” or referred to as “statistically-significant association with covariates” in tables. Although not directly linked to the number of activities attended in the previous three months, all discussed indirect associations are grounded in literature, lending additional strength to the understanding that Blue Star Families Connected Communities provide the building blocks for belonging.

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

Data was collected via the Connected Communities Instrument Component (CCIC). The CCIC is a self-report survey that was jointly developed by Blue Star Families, the Sorenson Impact Center (SIC), and the National Center for Veterans Studies (NCVS), specifically for the purpose of collecting data for CCIS. In addition to demographic questions, standardized, scientifically validated scales were incorporated into the instrument.⁴⁶ These scales were chosen for their degree of relevance to the quantity and quality of social connections.

The survey was administered quarterly by Sorenson Impact Center (SIC) over the pilot period of CCIS using the Qualtrics survey system. A cross-sectional data collection was chosen over a longitudinal collection due to the transient nature of the population and subsequent high attrition rates. Changes to the survey instrument were made periodically including: 1) Survey run #2 skip logic was added to clarify existing questions, and validation for appropriate input type was added; and 2) Survey run #3 added a caregiver identifier, questions on events attended, and a 100-mile radius validation question, and added MFLS belonging questions.

Recruitment and outreach were designed to solicit survey responses from event participants as well as members of the military-connected community within a 100-mile radius of San Diego and New York. Outreach included social media advertising, emails to Blue Star Families members in both San Diego and New York, and outreach to existing Blue Star Families partners in the New York and San Diego areas as well as paid digital ads. Outreach was targeted to obtain a military-connected sample that was representative of each of the communities including the military branch, currently serving status, and veteran respondents. As an incentive, participants could opt into a raffle for a \$100 gift card. A total of 4,292 respondents started the survey. After filtering for respondents who were not eligible (outside of New York or San Diego area or no military affiliation) and those who did not complete the survey, a total of 2,519 respondent surveys collected from the five survey runs were used in data analysis.



DATA ANALYSIS

Outcomes were analyzed by Sorenson Impact Center using multiple linear regression, Poisson regression, or negative binomial regression (dependent on the distribution of the independent variable and best model fit), and correlation analysis. Outcomes/dependent variables, independent variables, and control variables were identified and tested among specified groups for regression analyses for research questions 1, 2, and 4. Pearson's correlation was used for research question 3. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were also used, as needed, to assess response rates, demographics, and general prevalence of certain characteristics within the sample.

LIMITATIONS

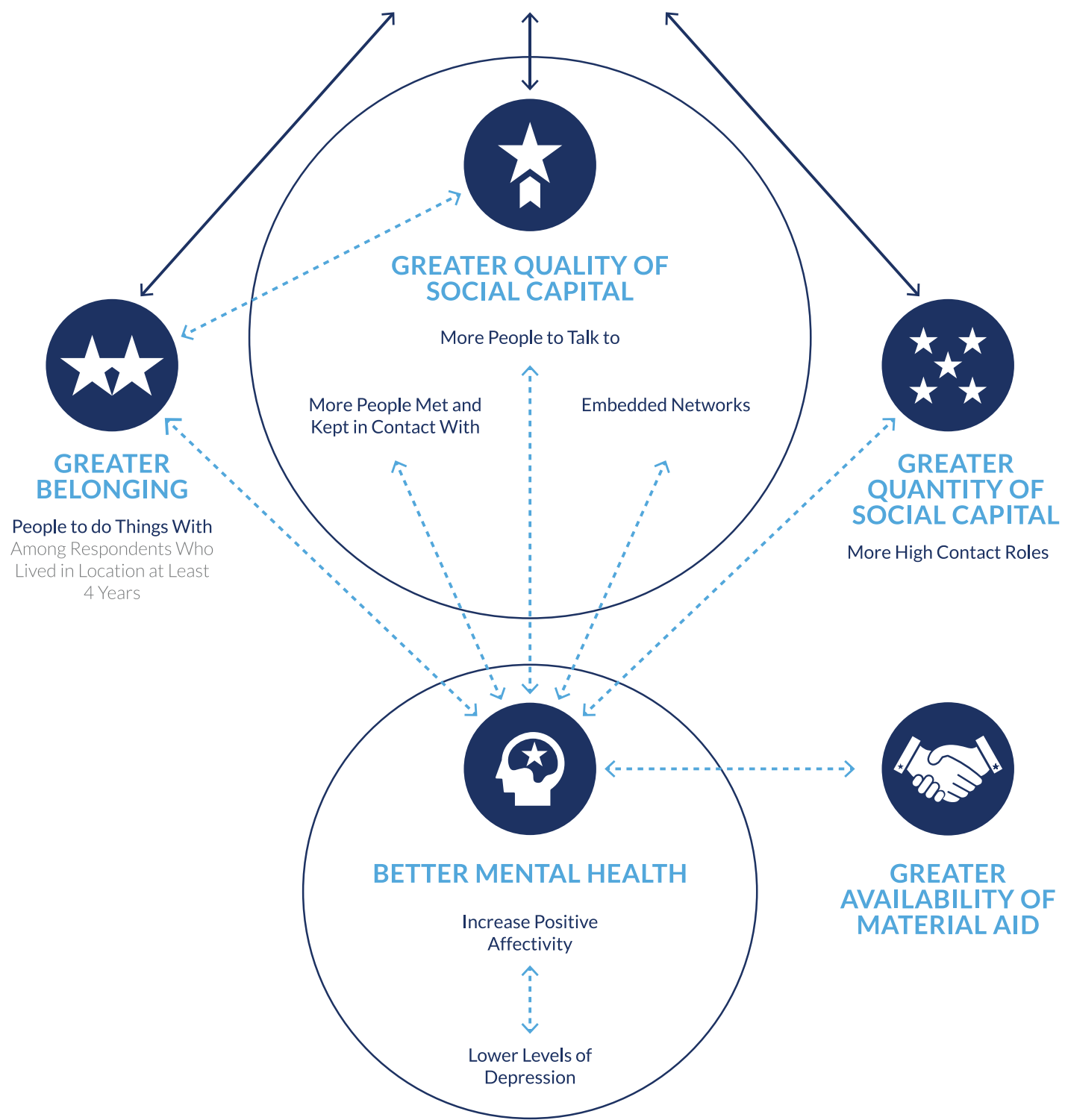
A limitation of this evaluation is the limited number of racial and ethnic minority respondents and respondents who had attended a Blue Star Families event in the previous three months. Overall, about 70% of respondents had not attended an event in either San Diego or New York in the previous three months. Future evaluations should consider ways to reach intended stakeholders. Additionally, questions were added to the survey instrument to integrate questions identified by the Blue Star Families research team as potential control variables (e.g. caregiver status) after fielding was underway.

Appendix 01: Chapter Events Aug 2018 – Feb 2020

BSF EVENTS	BFS CHAPTER	NUMBER OF EVENTS	NUMBER OF ADULTS IN ATTENDANCE	NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN ATTENDANCE
July 2018	San Diego, CA	13	1,357	51
	New York Tri-State	4	198	55
August 2018	San Diego, CA	21	3,087	1,169
	New York Tri-State	7	305	141
September 2018	San Diego, CA	20	1,302	224
	New York Tri-State	5	435	12
October 2018	San Diego, CA	19	1,294	288
	New York Tri-State	4	570	7
November 2018	San Diego, CA	37	1,006	152
	New York Tri-State	14	2,150	40
December 2018	San Diego, CA	13	789	870
	New York Tri-State	7	613	285
January 2019	San Diego, CA	10	426	1
	New York Tri-State	4	99	35
February 2019	San Diego, CA	12	277	2
	New York Tri-State	1	100	0
March 2019	San Diego, CA	17	1,014	45
	New York Tri-State	5	71	10
April 2019	San Diego, CA	18	1,009	185
	New York Tri-State	6	152	93
May 2019	San Diego, CA	5	635	0
	New York Tri-State	7	665	455
June 2019	San Diego, CA	2	45	0
	New York Tri-State	3	50	42
July 2019	San Diego, CA	1	10	10
	New York Tri-State	0	0	0
October 2019	San Diego, CA	4	30	37
	New York Tri-State	4	284	139
November 2019	San Diego, CA	9	794	52
	New York Tri-State	8	414	68
December 2019	San Diego, CA	0	0	0
	New York Tri-State	4	115	45
January 2020	San Diego, CA	8	470	150
	New York Tri-State	2	38	35
February 2020	San Diego, CA	14	202	45
	New York Tri-State	11	194	115
Total	San Diego, CA	223	13,747	3,281
	New York Tri-State	96	6,453	1,577

MORE BLUE STAR FAMILIES EVENTS ATTENDED

In Previous 3 Months



ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

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- 24 The original evaluation plan called for surveys to be run every three months, but that was not possible due to competing survey fieldings.
- 25 Direct associations were determined based on regression analysis using multiple theoretically-grounded control variables and all were significant at the .05 level or below.
- 26 Indirect associations (one degree) denote a direct association with a desired outcome, and then a direct association between that outcome and another desired outcome, all calculated using regression analysis. Although not directly linked to the number of activities attended in the previous three months, all discussed indirect associations are grounded in literature.

- 27 "Belonging" is measured slightly differently in other Blue Star Families research instruments. The short belonging scale often used in other Blue Star Families research products was introduced in the third survey fielding of CCIS and results did not differ significantly from the measure of belonging included in the original CCIS instrument. Therefore, the original measure was used for this analysis to maximize
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