



**BLUE STAR
FAMILIES**



Blue Star Families' Chapters:

A Social Impact Model

March 2020

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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. These Chapters were purposefully built with a specific and measurable social impact goal: **improve military families’ sense of belonging to their local communities**. Our suite of available programs is designed to build stronger families and stronger communities. Furthermore, each Chapter is equipped with a geographic cross-section of local Military Family Lifestyle Survey data to help tailor program implementation to the needs of their local communities.

Our Chapters use a data-informed, long-term framework to improve military family belonging:

Welcome: Develop and maintain sustainable Chapters by growing membership and delivering Blue Star Families’ core programs for military families

Engage: Improve member engagement and lead local civil-military integration

Belong: Improve sense of belonging to the local community, and drive cultural and systemic changes in the community

As part of our commitment to ensuring evidence-based programming, Blue Star Families is evaluating the effectiveness of the Chapter model in San Diego and the New York Tri-State region as part of the Connected Communities Impact Study (CCIS). CCIS is funded by the Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation and is conducted in partnership with the Sorenson Impact Center. Results will be released in early 2021.

¹ Drummet, A. R., Coleman, M., & Cable, S. (2003). Military families under stress: Implications for family life education. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 52(3), 279-287. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00279>

² Malone, G. P., Pillow, D. R., & Osman, A. (2012). The General Belongingness Scale (GBS): Assessing achieved belongingness. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(3), 311-316. <https://doi-org.sandiego.idm.oclc/10.1016/j.paid.2011.10.027>

³ Stone, D. M., Holland, K. M., Bartholow, B., Crosby, A. E., Davis, S., & Wilkins, N. (2017). Preventing Suicide: A Technical Package of Policies, Programs, and Practices. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁴ Blue Star Families. (2017). 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MFLS-ComprehensiveReport17-FINAL.pdf>

Context

The Modern Military

The families of our All-Volunteer Force are making unprecedented sacrifices to serve our nation. America's military was designed for the post-World War II universe, one that witnessed a military composed of young, conscripted, single men in barracks, alongside older, nuclear families living next to each other on massive military installations. These were tightly knit geographies that offered amenities familiar to many suburban towns. With formalized volunteer roles for military spouses – explicitly determined by the rank of the spouse's service member – the military provided a solid infrastructure of community for the families ordered to live there temporarily.

Three-quarters of a century into the post-War era – and nearly fifty years since President Nixon ended the draft – military life retains some strong echoes from that earlier era. Young troops often still live in barracks. But even with these and other legacies from an earlier time, military families of this century are experiencing extreme dislocation. For two decades, the Pentagon has sought to privatize military housing, simultaneously pushing these quarters off installation. As more and more troops marry at younger ages – in contrast to the national trends toward delaying marriage and having children – many young military spouses find themselves living miles from their partners' place of work.⁵ Frequent moves, often every two to three years, disrupt military families' lives.⁶ Spouses struggle to find work that pays the bills, not to mention opportunities that lead to meaningful careers. Children must repeatedly forge new relationships with friends, mentors, and teachers during their most formative juvenile and adolescent years.

About Blue Star Families

Fortunately, advocates are increasingly identifying these trends and offering solutions that can build community for the 21st-century military. In 2009, a group of military spouses came together to found Blue Star Families. This organization is committed to strengthening military families by connecting them with



⁵ University of Massachusetts Amherst. (2014, December 1). Why do military service members marry so much younger than average Americans. ScienceDaily. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/12/141201191305.htm

⁶ Burke, J., & Miller, A. R. (2018). The effects of job relocation on spousal careers: Evidence from military change of station moves. *Economic Inquiry*, 56(2), 1261–1277. <https://doi-org.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/10.1111/ecin.12529>

their neighbors — individuals and organizations — to create vibrant communities of mutual support. We believe our nation is stronger when we take care of one another: civilians, service members, veterans, and their family members.

Blue Star Families began with its groundbreaking annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS). In the decade since, the aMFLS has raised the nation's awareness of the unique challenges of military family life. Blue Star Families has used the output of this survey to better understand the many challenges military families face and design solutions to effectively address them. With the help of neighbors across the country, we are assisting military families with overcoming the isolation and alienation of frequent moves, deployments, and reduced support from the government. Our innovative programs are solving specific challenges for military families, including fighting economic insecurity with resources that foster spouse career development, creating family strength with rich family programming, and providing critical peer support for caregivers, whose numbers are only growing.⁷

With more than 150,000 members in our global network, Blue Star Families reaches more than 1.5 million military family members every year. Through our research and program partnerships, we strive to ensure that wherever American military families go, they can always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive — in every community across the nation and around the world.

About the Annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS)

Blue Star Families' aMFLS provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by military families. Since its inception in 2009, the survey has provided 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 represents an opportunity to increase dialogue between the military community and the broader American society, minimizing the civilian-military divide, and supporting the health and sustainability of the All-Volunteer Force.

The aMFLS has become widely regarded as the gold standard among military family surveys. Results have informed issues as wide-ranging as childcare and spouse employment legislation, improvements to military family readiness through community engagement, defense personnel reform, and social media policies. The aMFLS' focus on military and veteran family issues allows us to track and identify trends over time and across the continuum of service. Many of the overall challenges veterans face, after all, are rooted in issues that carry over from their time on active duty. To commemorate the tenth anniversary of the aMFLS,

⁷ Ramchand, R., Tanielian, T., Fisher, M., Vaughan, C., Trail, T., Batka, C., Voorhies, P., Robbins, M., & Ghosh-Dastidar, B. (2014). Military caregivers: Who are they? And who is supporting them? RAND Corporation. doi:10.7249/rb9764

Blue Star Families' Applied Research Team prepared an impact summary, which provides a top-level trend analysis intended to facilitate a broad understanding of the military and veteran family experience over the past decade.⁸ By widening our aperture across ten years of data, we were able to better identify trends associated with generational expectations, such as an increased desire and need for two incomes, and provide national and community leaders actionable solutions to effectively support the diverse families they serve.⁹

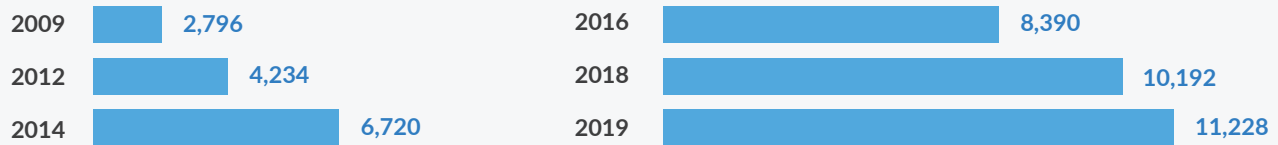
Survey respondents represent a cross-section of active-duty service members, veterans, and their immediate family members from all branches of service, ranks, components, and regions—both within the United States and on overseas military installations. While the sample provides critical perspectives from military and veteran families, it differs from both the active-duty and veteran populations in important ways. The majority of respondents were active-duty military spouses, and there was a greater percentage of married, older, and senior ranking respondents in this sample than in the active-duty population as a whole. Female service members and veterans were also over-represented.

Key Trend Identified	Actionable Solutions Selected Examples	Resulting Impact Selected Examples
The impact of military service on families is an increasingly important factor when making the decision about whether or not to continue service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Presidential Study Directive-9 ★ Bipartisan Policy Center Task Force on Personnel Reform ★ Revisions to Navy Family Framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Personnel reforms underway to increase service member and family agency in career decisions ★ Key military and civilian leaders regularly speak to the need to “retain the family”
Civilians' collective ability to understand military and veteran families is the foundation for sustainable military and veteran policy and program development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ White Oak Summits established to convene & mobilize key actors from public, private, and nonprofit sectors ★ Joining Forces Initiative launched ★ Community Blueprint program launched to encourage local community integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Advanced civil-military discourse nationally and had a tangible impact on civilian understanding and appreciation ★ Perceived civilian understanding and appreciation of military service and sacrifice has steadily increased since 2009
Generationally-driven changes to family dynamics underscore the immediate need to address chronic military spouse unemployment and underemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Hiring Our Heroes expanded to include military spouses ★ Military Spouse Employment Act ★ Executive order enhancing non-competitive appointments of military spouses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Increased national dialogue regarding chronic military spouse unemployment ★ Hiring 100,000 military spouses campaign ★ Congress passes professional licensure reimbursement provision for military spouses following PCS move

⁸ Blue Star Families (2018). Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Summary of Trends & Resulting Impact. TrendSummary_2009-2018-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf (bluestarfam.org)

⁹ From 2009 - 2018 the aMFLS utilized a convenience sample, not a longitudinal panel of repeat survey-respondents.

Progressive response rate reflects increasing buy-in among military families who know BSF has a proven track record of elevating the voices of those who serve



Challenges

Belonging and Isolation; the MilSpouse Recession

A growing consensus is emerging that Americans are facing an “epidemic of loneliness.”¹⁰ This problem is exacerbated for military families, who move every two to three years on average, and rarely have time to develop long-lasting ties to either their civilian or military communities.¹¹ When conceptually discussing a sense of belonging to a community, however, one common yet often incorrect refrain heard from civilians is that “the military community is tightly knit, and military families take care of one another.”

While this is certainly true for some families, our research has demonstrated that this is not the case for many, and especially military spouses.¹² In 2019, 43% of military family respondents did not feel a sense of belonging to their military community, and 40% felt the same with regard to their civilian community.¹³ Perhaps more telling, military spouse respondents’ sense of belonging to their military community decreased the longer they lived at a location, while it increased with regard to their civilian community.¹⁴ This aligns with research conducted over a decade ago, which found that military families were relying more on local communities for support.¹⁵

Military families and sense of belonging to community

2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey

- ★ 48% don’t feel they belong to civilian community
- ★ 43% don’t feel they belong to military community
- ★ Military spouse respondents were significantly less connected to and had a significantly lower sense of belonging within their civilian and military communities than any other respondent group, even after controlling for age, gender, and stress levels
- ★ Isolation from family and friends has been a top five stressor among military spouse respondents since 2014
- ★ In 2018, 39% of military spouse respondents said that this was a top stressor for them

¹⁰ Staff, T. W. (2019, January 6). An epidemic of loneliness. The Week. <https://theweek.com/articles/815518/epidemic-loneliness>

¹¹ Burke & Miller, 2018

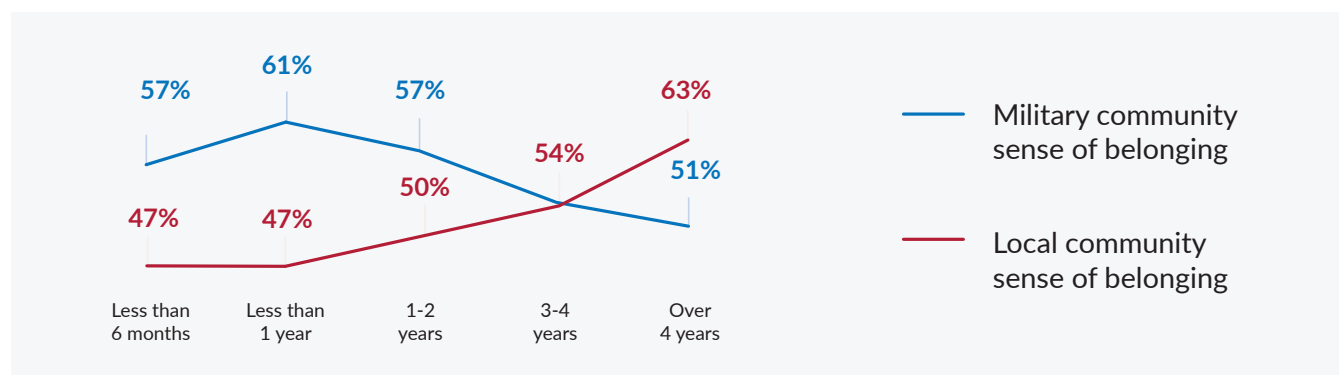
¹² Blue Star Families (2019). 2019 Military Family Lifestyle Comprehensive Report. <https://bluestarfam.org/survey>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Hoshmand, L.T. and Hoshmand, A.L. (2007). Support for military families and communities. Journal of Community Psychology. 35(2) 171-180. 10.1002/jcop.20142

Military spouse respondent sense of belonging and length of time in communities



This phenomenon resonates with military families — the relationships you build within your military community, while deep, informed, and incredibly supportive, can also be fleeting. Military-connected neighbors move away. Colleagues transition into new roles or out of service altogether. The civilians in your life, however, remain fairly stable. Civilian teachers and coaches learn more about your children and learn how to support them over the years. Civilian employers, colleagues, and neighbors rarely move, and these informal relationships are able to develop organically over time. Our findings, then, underscore the importance of intentionally engaging our civilian counterparts and developing a strong community of civilian Blue Star Neighbors who actively seek to understand military life and local military community members. (Note: We expand upon this concept in a later section.)

What is a “sense of belonging,” and why is it so important? “Belonging” is more than the number and strengths of connections one has to people and resources in a community. It connotes a subjective sense of membership, influence, shared emotional connections, integration, and the fulfillment of needs within a community.¹⁶ Researchers have recognized the importance of belonging for strong mental health for decades. In 1951, the philosopher Émile Durkheim proclaimed that belongingness deprivation can lead to severe depression, a claim which has since been scientifically validated, even after controlling for other factors such as stress, spousal support, and social support.^{17,18,19} Sense of belonging is an important factor in alleviating tangential issues such as mental distress and the ability to cope with military-life stress.^{20,21}

“Having a strong social support network is the second most predictive factor (after a strong marriage) when it comes to positive coping and adjustment during a deployment [...]. It increased likelihood of adjustment by 24%.”

(Orthner & Rose, 2006 cited in Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009, pg. 218)

¹⁶ McMillan & Chavis, 1986, as cited in Carpiano, R.M., Hystad, P.W., 2011. “Sense of community belonging” in health surveys: What social capital is it measuring? *Health & Place* 17 (2011) 606–617. doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2010.12.018

¹⁷ Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012

¹⁸ Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012

¹⁹ Choenarom, Williams, & Hagerty, 2005, as cited in Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012

²⁰ Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012

²¹ Orthner & Rose, 2006, as cited in Huebner, A. J., Mancini, J. A., Bowen, G. L., & Orthner, D. K. (2009). Shadowed by war: Building community capacity to support military families. *Family Relations*, 58(2), 216–228. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/61349452?accountid=13158>



For these reasons, achieving a sense of belonging within a community is a desired outcome for military families, and military families who have the luxury of remaining in a particular location for more than a couple of years often achieve it.^{22,23} The majority of military families in our aMFLS have lived in their current location for less than two years, and most military families will relocate every two to three years. This frequent need to relocate may prevent these families from remaining in a community long enough to develop, cultivate, and sustain the deeply-rooted relationships they need to ever feel they truly “belong.”

Military Spouse Unemployment and Underemployment

Military spouses have been suffering a ten-year recession, with their unemployment rate hovering around 24%, while civilian peers experience record lows in unemployment at just 3.6%.

Our research shows that young people are significantly more likely than their predecessors to believe that two incomes are vital to their families’ well-being, regardless of rank — 70% of respondents under the age of 37 said this was the case.²⁴ With the rise of remote work and portable careers, there is no reason our military families should be left standing on the financial sidelines. Without real change, our nation risks a crisis in recruiting — and especially retaining — active-duty service members.

However, this trend has tangible financial impacts that extend far beyond the family unit. In 2016, Blue Star Families partnered with the Sorenson Impact Center to explore the downstream economic impact of chronic military spouse employment instability. The Social Cost Analysis of the Unemployment and Underemployment of Military Spouses found that military spouse unemployment costs our nation between \$710 million and \$1.07 billion every year due to paid out unemployment and lost wages.²⁵

With military spouse unemployment at crisis levels, military spouse underemployment has also not received the attention it deserves, given the devastating effects it can have on a family’s financial situation and a military spouse’s sense of self. According to the 2019 aMFLS, when employed military spouse respondents were asked if they were currently experiencing a range of factors that can be defined as “underemployed,” a staggering 77% reported at least one incidence of underemployment.²⁶

²² Blue Star Families (2017). 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Comprehensive Report. <https://bluestarfam.org/survey>

²³ Blue Star Families (2018). 2018 Military Family Lifestyle Comprehensive Report. <https://bluestarfam.org/survey>

²⁴ Blue Star Families, 2018

²⁵ Blue Star Families, Sorenson Impact Center & The University of Utah (2016, April 5). Social cost analysis of the unemployment and underemployment of military spouses. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Social-Cost-Analysis-of-the-Unemployment-and-Underemployment-of-Military-Spouses_Final_4-5-1.pdf

²⁶ Blue Star Families, 2019

Underemployment factors assessed included receiving pay that was lower than their education level (42% indicated this was the case), receiving pay that was lower than their work experience (42%), being overqualified for their current position (40%), receiving pay lower than a previous position (31%), and working fewer hours than they wanted (25%). When asked to describe the impact of underemployment, 2018 aMFLS military spouse respondents indicated the primary impacts were financial or related to their self-esteem.²⁷

Importantly, these open-ended responses provided insight into the fact that the financial impact of underemployment is much greater than the commonly cited lost lifetime earnings due to the inability to advance within a particular career field or company.²⁸

Respondents also explained the currently unquantified financial effects of not achieving seniority in an organization, such as additional childcare costs incurred due to having less desirable work shifts, or having to take Leave Without Pay for pre-deployment and post-deployment family time when they have not been at an organization long enough to accrue paid time off.²⁹ Consistently encountering issues like this would take a mental toll on most people. Encountering them while your spouse is experiencing consistent career advancement can take an additional toll on individuals, families, and marriages.

“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 backwards 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.” — Air Force Spouse

When viewed through the dual lens of national spending and national security, it’s imperative that we actively engage all sectors of the workforce to eliminate this financial burden and provide opportunities to military spouses. Only then can all military families continue to serve.

²⁷ Blue Star Families, 2018

²⁸ Unpublished qualitative data, Blue Star Families, 2018

²⁹ Unpublished qualitative data, Blue Star Families, 2018

Blue Star Families’ Response

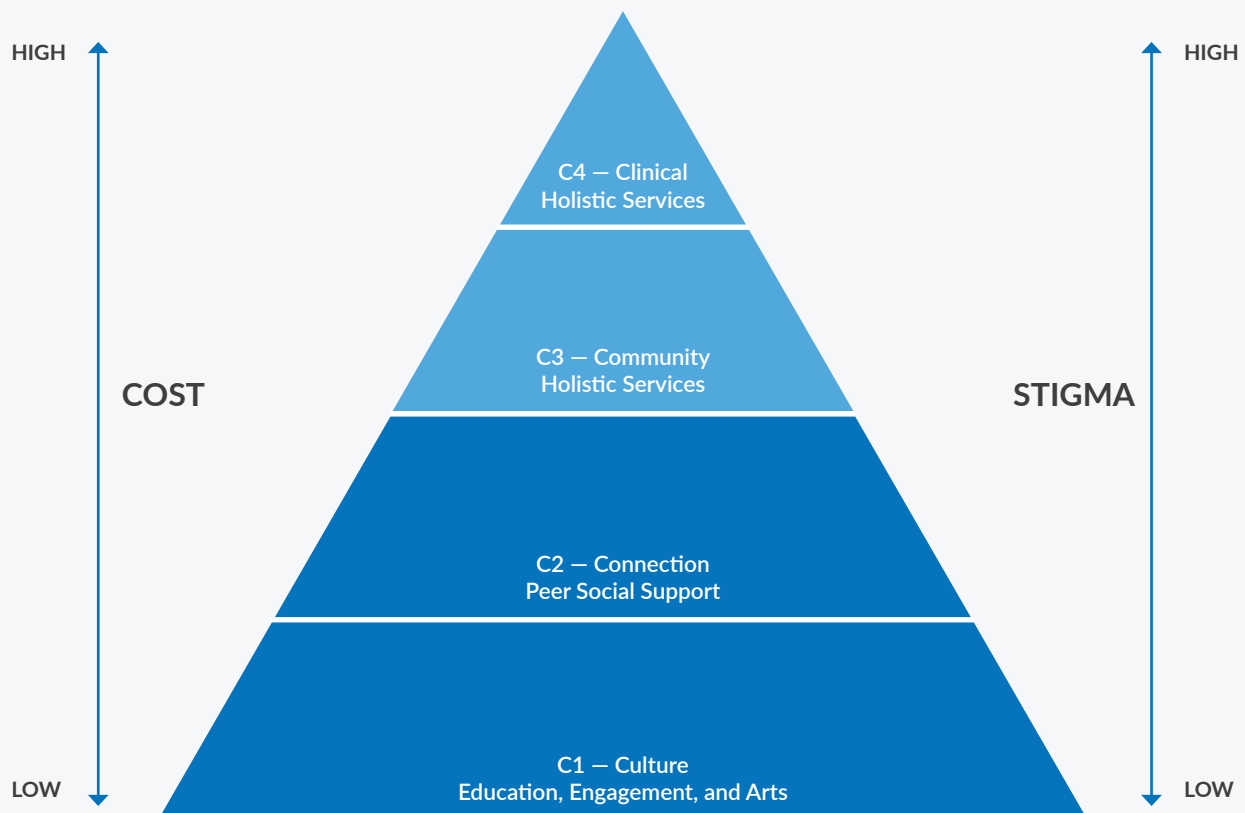
Blue Star Families’ Approach

Blue Star Chapters uniquely focus as much on civilian community members as they do on military families. This approach strengthens both military families, by reducing the impact of being far from family support systems, and local communities, by increasing overall community cohesion. Our comprehensive programming portfolio directly facilitates military cultural competence, civil-military relationship building, informal support network development, military family cohesion, military family financial stability, and sense of belonging.

Effective...and efficient

Blue Star Families values its donors’ scarce resources; we have a responsibility to steward these contributions as effectively and efficiently as possible.

For this reason, we base our work on the best-in-class model developed by BG (Ret.) Loree Sutton, currently the Director of the NYC Department of Veterans’ Services.



Blue Star Chapters bring this proven social impact model to the local level by:

Listening: We derive a geographic cross-section from our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey and execute localized member research to capture military and veteran families' stories and experiences in the area.

Sharing: We share this regional data with local/regional civilian and military leaders to improve the community's collective capacity to support their military-connected community members.

Partnering: We partner with existing civilian and military organizations and leaders to encourage mutually supportive, well-informed, collaborative networks to maximize outcomes for all community members.

Acting: We deliver targeted, data-backed programming and inform evidence-based policies at the local level.

The dedicated staff in Blue Star Chapter locations help initiate a reinforcing social impact process within communities by sharing information with local stakeholders, partnering with them to effectively address military and veteran family concerns, and acting to implement evidence-based programming and policies.

This social impact process is rooted in interdisciplinary research and theory. It draws on literature and practitioner reports from disciplines as wide-ranging as community resilience/disaster preparedness, public health, public administration, social work, psychology, military organizational research, organizational change, and economics. Within this framework, military cultural competence (gained through sharing information and increasing civilian-military engagement) initiates a reinforcing process within the community in which formal Blue Star Families programming leads to stronger informal support systems for all community members.

This underlying process can be applied at the macro level by simply raising awareness of military life issues within the community. However, it is strongest when paired with targeted programming that addresses a "root cause" issue, such as military spouse employment or sense of belonging to one's community. If increased military cultural competence generates a ripple effect within a community, then targeted Blue Star Families programming in a Chapter location amplifies the ripple.



Examples of Blue Star Families Solutions:

Challenge	Solution	Description
Military families lack a sense of belonging	Blue Star Families Programs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Blue Star Museums ★ Blue Star Parks ★ Blue Star Books ★ Reading programs for military children ★ Military spouse career resources ★ Hiking and outdoor recreation caregiver support ★ Military spouse walking groups ★ Civilian engagement activities 	Blue Star Families launches programs that give military families the opportunity to facilitate in-person relationships and strengthen their capacity to be resilient when faced with a military life stressor.
High unemployment and underemployment amongst military spouses	Blue Star Careers/Spouseforce	Blue Star Families has partnered with employers, policymakers, and resource providers on utilizing our comprehensive data to address root causes and spark systematic improvements that diversify career opportunities for military spouses.

During the summer of 2019 alone, we hosted over 650 events, with more than 47,000 attendees nationwide. Each event was an opportunity to facilitate in-person relationships, demonstrate appreciation for military families, use data to inform better understanding, and/or strengthen a military family's capacity to be resilient when faced with a military life stressor.

Blue Star Families Programs

Blue Star Museums: Participating museums across the country offer free family admission for active-duty military families from Armed Forces Day through Labor Day (mid-May through September). Since 2009, military family members have made more than 8 million visits to a Blue Star Museum, at no cost. This program is a collaboration among the National Endowment for the Arts, the Department of Defense, Blue Star Families, and thousands of museums across the country.

Blue Star Parks: This program focuses on increasing access to outdoor activities that bring families together — such as kayaking, hiking, and stargazing in the green spaces and outdoor areas that make a community unique. More than 300,000 military family members visited national parks for free during the first year of this effort (2017), thanks to our partnership with the National Park Trust, Department of the Interior, and the National Park Service. When surveyed, 88% of program participants stated the program made them more likely to visit another national, state, or local park in the future; 88% felt the program

provided their family with an outlet from the stresses of the military lifestyle; and 82% stated the program made them feel more connected to their family and community.

Blue Star Books: Since 2009, the Blue Star Books program, with the help of partners like Disney, has given hundreds of thousands of books away to more than 560,000 military kids across the world.

Blue Star Caregivers: Military caregivers unite to share resources and enjoy wellness activities such as cooking classes, morale events, and career-building opportunities.

Book Clubs: Our START (Serving, Thriving, and Reading Together) Book Clubs offer civilian and military families opportunities to come together over a shared meal and love of reading.

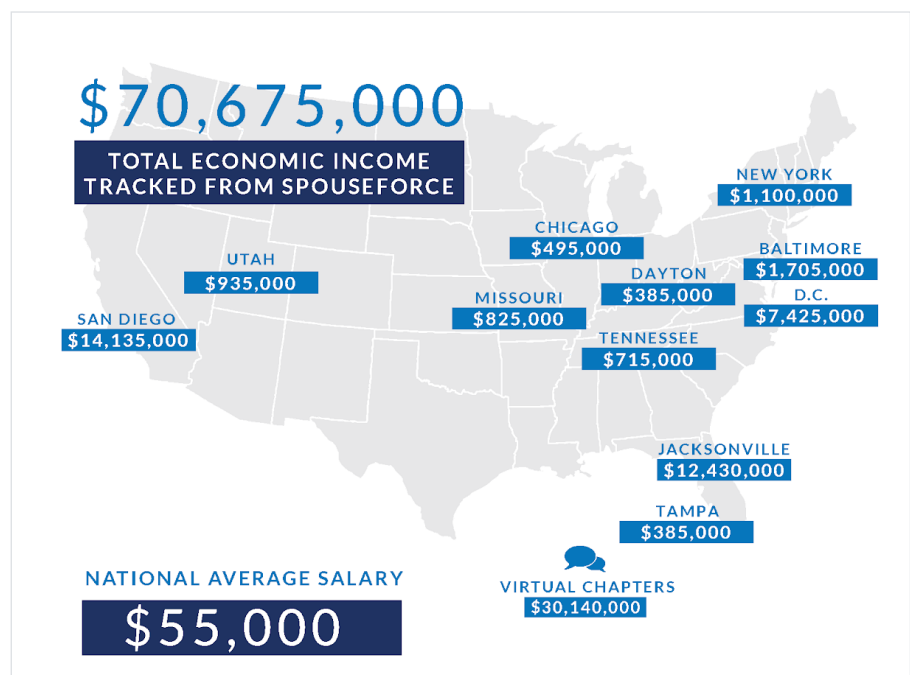
Blue Star Careers/Spouseforce

Based on Blue Star Families' more nuanced understanding of the military spouse employment space, we launched a military spouse career program, Spouseforce, in 2017 to alleviate unemployment (by linking spouses to viable career options)

and underemployment (by emphasizing portable, high-paying careers). Since late 2017, Spouseforce has connected military spouses to work, driving more than \$70 million in income to military families.

With an average annual salary of over \$55,000, many successful Spouseforce participants more than double their family's income, as the median service member salary is \$47,000 per year. Our ongoing research

and data highlights the education, talent, and experience of the military spouse in the local community. It quantifies the value they bring to an organization and reinforces their participation in the workforce.



The Next Evolution: Blue Star Chapters

Blue Star Chapters launched in 2019, with support from CSX Corporation, Boeing, Schultz Family Foundation, Craig Newmark, and Wounded Warrior Project. Chapters represent the next phase in the social impact of Blue Star Families' work. By employing full-time personnel in an initial nine regions across the nation (Baltimore, Chicagoland, Jacksonville, Missouri, Nashville, New York Tri-State area, Salt Lake City, San Diego, and Washington, D.C.), Blue Star Families is now embedding sustainable, regularized, and localized versions of our national community and Careers programs within communities.

Fully-funded Chapters also include local member research and a geographic cross-section of the aMFLS. This research sets the conditions for governmental, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporate, and cultural leaders to "plug in" with more precision to where impact is most sorely required. In line with our research into our members' needs and wants, we help military families successfully develop a sense of belonging in their local community by focusing as much on civilians as we do on military families. By including all community members, we hope to bolster social support networks, increase military family lifestyle competence, and increase overall military family resilience.

Our programming does not reinforce unnecessary civilian-military divisions, but instead builds bridges and finds areas of common ground for both civilians and military families in local communities. Our comprehensive, community-based approach has never been attempted at this scale, but researchers

Examples of Blue Star Families Community Impact(s)

Blue Star Neighbor	A local employer attends a BSF presentation at the local Chamber of Commerce and learns about how to read a military spouse resume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjusts hiring and interviewing procedures to better utilize this untapped labor source • Hires a military spouse (!) • New employee provides insight and lessons learned from previous jobs
Military Family #1	A military family moves to the area; the spouse and service member join a START Book Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military family meets civilians with shared interests • Weekly meetings allow friendships to develop • New friendships lead to deeper engagement in unrelated groups throughout the community
Military Family #2	A military family caring for a child with special needs moves to a new community and attends a Caregivers Empowering Caregivers event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meets others who can provide peer-to-peer support and insight into local resources and services • Family is able to more easily navigate complicated bureaucracies

have been calling for this type of collaborative programming for years.³⁰ The theoretical blueprint suggests that our model will maximize community economic impact, strengthen overall community cohesion, and increase military family resilience.³¹

Building a Strong Foundation: Welcome, Engage, Belong

Blue Star Chapters began with a simple premise: the role of a formal organization is to facilitate the informal support networks we all need to thrive.^{32,33} 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 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. This outcome-driven model provides a long-term roadmap to achieve substantive community-level change.

Focus on Outcomes



³⁰ Bowen, G. L., Orthner, D., Martin, J., & Mancini, J. A., 2001

³¹ Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009

³² Bowen, G. L., Martin, J. A., Mancini, J. A., & Nelson, J. P. (2000). Community capacity: Antecedents and consequences. *Journal of Community Practice*, 8(2), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1300/J125v08n02_01

³³ Farrell, A. F., Bowen, G. L., & Swick, D. C. (2014). Network supports and resiliency among U.S. military spouses with children with special health care needs. *Family Relations*, 63(1), 55-70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12045>

Impact

Benefits to Military Families

- ★ Blue Star Families' proven and popular morale and support programming, tailored for modern military families, creates not merely one-off opportunities, but a unique ecosystem of support based on each community's comprehensive needs.
- ★ Fully funded Chapter communities bring Blue Star Families' nationally-funded programs to military families. These fun, attractive, and data-driven programs focus on activities that build resilience, to include: military children reading programs, military spouse career resources, family museum and local cultural tours, hiking and outdoor recreation, wounded warrior caregiver peer support, military spouse walking groups, civilian-military engagement activities, and more. Nearly all activities bring together military, veteran, and civilian communities.
- ★ Connections to local neighbors. By inviting members of the local community who wish to support veteran and military families, Blue Star Families fosters the friendships and relationships that truly make a place feel like "home."
- ★ Leadership, volunteer experience, and opportunities to give back. As a grassroots organization, Blue Star Families provides career opportunities, leadership opportunities, and volunteer opportunities to the community.
- ★ Investments support outreach, infrastructure, and evaluation in each location to ensure social impact.

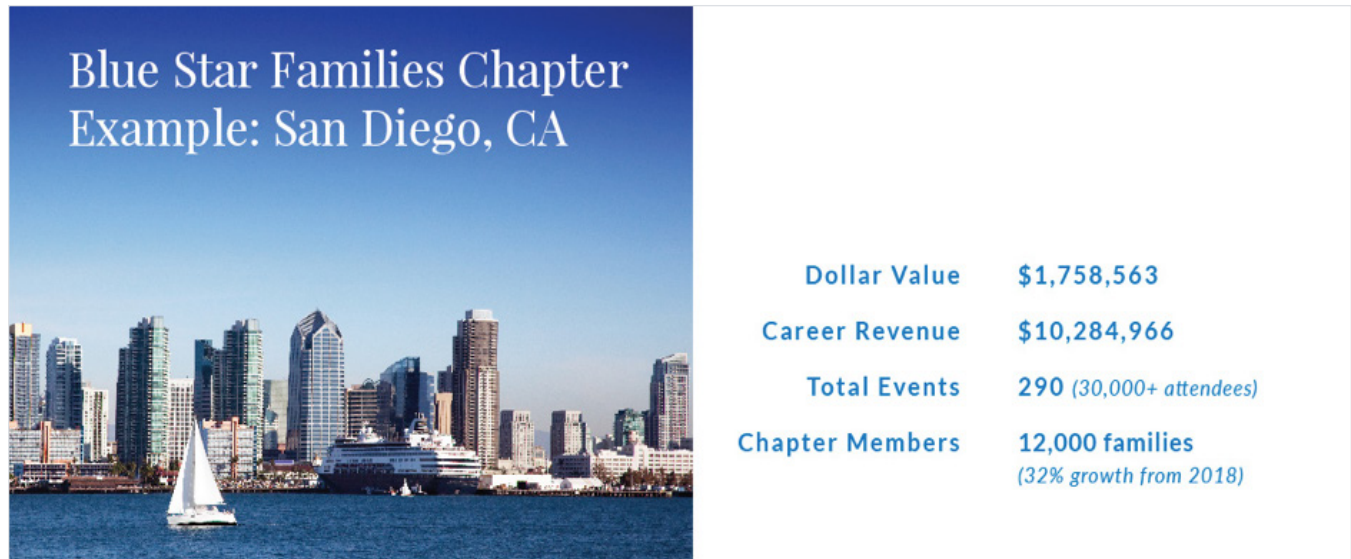
"[the] primary function of formal networks should be to support informal networks, because it is these informal group associations that are the most accessible to individuals and families and those who they most often rely upon on a daily basis."

(Bowen et. al., 2000, cited in Huebner et. al., April 2009)

Benefits to the Community

- ★ Through programs and the economic activity generated from increased military spouse employment, Blue Star Families' sponsored Chapters can generate millions of dollars per year in each community – from San Diego to Jacksonville.
- ★ Blue Star Families will conduct a localized, deep-dive annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey to inform community leaders about the strengths and challenges of their community's military families.
- ★ Through our area advisory councils, Blue Star Families engages civic, business, government, and military leaders to create or enhance ties between these sectors in a community. When communities can better demonstrate support of their military populations, they improve their ability to retain military infrastructure and investment in their communities.

Case Study: Eye on San Diego



Since 2018, the San Diego Chapter, at a cost of only \$175,000 per year, has generated nearly \$12 million in economic impact for the community.

Benefits to the Armed Services

★ At a recent off-the-record event with senior military brass, a four-star officer said that his service wasn't struggling with recruiting, but it was struggling with re-enlisting talented young officers and non-commissioned officers. The reason: "their spouses won't let them stay in... they can't have a career with all the moves." In a nation dependent on a small fraction to defend the rest of us, different sectors can empower our warriors' families, while at the same time creating talent development pipelines for a previously untapped, highly mobile, and highly educated population.

★ Similarly, providing for the general well-being of military families back home dramatically reduces stress for the service member, especially given the ever-increasing connectivity available between families and troops, even in forward-deployed locations.

★ "I have people in seven different countries and three different continents right now," said Command Sergeant Major Lyle Whitted of the 101st Airborne (Air Assault) Division (at the launch of the Nashville Chapter in June 2019). "This is stuff you don't normally see on the news... Blue Star Families is critical, because if a soldier's mind is on the families back home, and isn't on the mission, then something bad can happen." Supporting military families is one concrete way that civilians can support America's national security on the home front.



Benefits to Civilian-Military Understanding

Civil-military cultural competence is the foundation for sustainable military and veteran family programming and policy. Blue Star Families recognizes that civilians' collective ability to understand military and veteran families is the foundation for sustainable military and veteran policy and program development.

Every critical military life issue is influenced by the extent to which those outside of the military comprehend the unique and diverse experiences of this lifestyle.

The civilian-military gap emerged with the advent of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970s, and efforts to close it have existed since that time.³⁴ Blue Star Families has been a consistent thought leader since 2009, collecting and quantifying military life issues, and translating that data into understanding and action. Signature national initiatives such as Mrs. Obama and Dr. Biden's Joining Forces Initiative and the bipartisan White Oak Retreat are direct results of this work. These have advanced civilian-military discourse nationally, provided a tangible impact on civilian understanding and appreciation, and catalyzed action across sectors ranging from business to national service to entertainment, all to address complex social issues such as veteran unemployment. Collectively, the initiatives demonstrate intentional efforts to bridge that "gap" can be successful.

Civilian Understanding of the Military Influences

Military's ability to recruit and retain personnel

"Showing normal life, meeting soldiers, etc., will show people that the military allows you to serve with amazing people, learn leadership skills that will benefit you the rest of your life, and grow as a person in a way that few other professions allow." — 2018 Army service member

Civilian schools' ability to effectively support military students and families

"We live away from a base in a small town. Reintegration has been terrible for him because the school doesn't get it [...] they just don't understand our lifestyle as a Reserve family." — 2015 Reserve spouse

Civilian employers' understanding of military spouse and veteran employment needs

"[P]ublic understanding is truly important in hiring veterans [...] I think most large businesses get it and put forth a helping hand with employment, but I'm not so sure about the small businesses' understanding." — 2018 Air Force spouse

Civilian physical and mental health providers' knowledge of military life issues

"Civilian mental health counselors have little experience with military members" — 2016 Air Force spouse

Military families' sense of belonging in their local civilian community and veteran families' ability to transition into civilian life

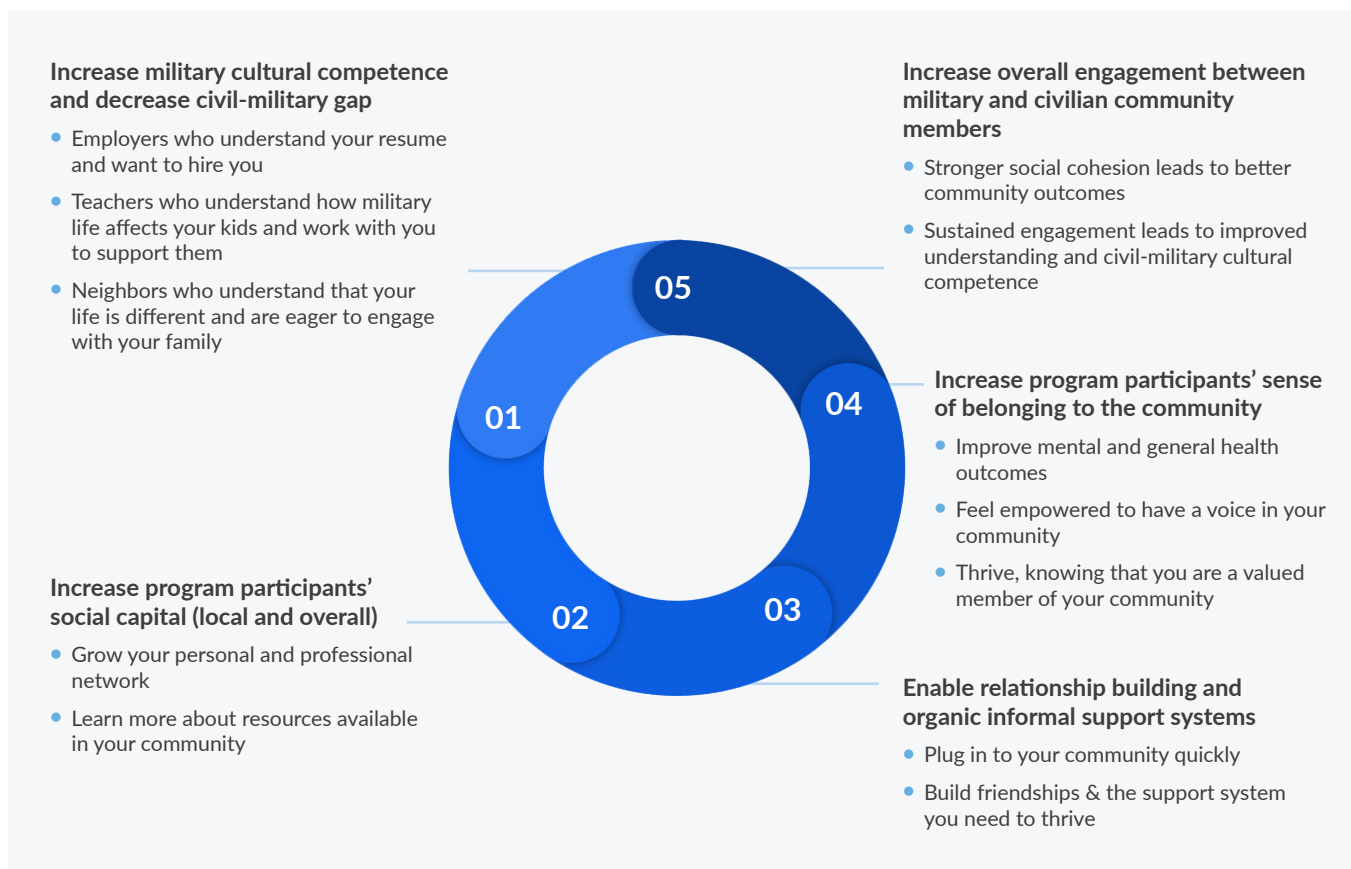
"Military families go through a lot and to have the community not be empathetic makes the situation worse." — 2018 Navy spouse

³⁴ Rostker, B. (2006). The evolution of the all-volunteer force. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9195.html

Conclusion

Blue Star Families' social impact Chapter model provides a unique, data-driven approach to military family programming at the local level. In striving for long-term, cultural change within a community, our Chapter model presents a sustainable and effective option for communities seeking to better support their local military families by meaningfully connecting them to their civilian neighbors.

Increasing Military Cultural Competence Improves Outcomes for Military Families



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