

Blue Star Families Connected Communities: THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BELONGING



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 that can have negative effects on their overall well-being. Having a sense of belonging is strongly associated with mental health benefits, including lower levels of depression, and is a strong protective factor against suicidal ideation. 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, it became clear that a purposeful model was required to fundamentally improve military families’ well-being at the local level.

Solution

In 2018, Blue Star Families launched pilot chapters in San Diego and New York to transition from volunteer-led chapters to a funded, staff-led chapter model to address this lack of connection. These chapters were purposefully built to improve military families’ sense of belonging to their local communities, using a three-phase approach:

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 military families’ sense of belonging to the local community, and drive cultural and systemic changes in community

From August 2018 to February 2020, Blue Star Families delivered 319 chapter events to military families in New York and San Diego, including military spouse career support and caregiver respite programs, as well as military family days at museums, theaters, and parks. Each program was an opportunity for military families to connect to their own family members, other military families, and their civilian communities. Over 20,000 adults and nearly 5,000 children attended these events. The Connected Communities Impact Study (CCIS) explores, over a three-year period, the efficacy of this chapter model to address belonging and other outcomes for military families.

Key Takeaways

1. Blue Star Families programming is directly related to elements of improved social capital quantity and quality, which in turn are significantly associated with belonging.
2. Increased attendance at Blue Star Families events is 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.



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



Implications and Recommendations

Belonging is complex and requires far more than event attendance to achieve. Blue Star Families' Connected Communities provide building blocks intended to 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. This research underscores the importance of funding and delivering a comprehensive chapter model which includes additional elements to facilitate belonging.

Recommendations include:

1. Increasing 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.
2. Increasing emphasis on newcomer welcoming events designed to quickly identify arriving military families and integrate them into the Blue Star Families community.
3. Increasing the number of civilian program participants.
4. Creating and providing training for chapter directors and key volunteers to understand how to manage different personality types at an event and promote inclusive programming design.
5. Offering a variety of activity types and sizes designed to appeal to both extraverted and introverted program participants.
6. Continuing to monitor and evaluate to identify possible differential effects for racially diverse groups.
7. Increasing understanding of caregiver participants' programmatic needs and wants.

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,² which in turn leads to better mental health outcomes.^{3,4} 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.). 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.

Research Conducted

The Blue Star Families Connected Communities Impact Study (CCIS) was conducted in New York and San Diego communities over a three-year period as an evaluation of the efficacy of the Blue Star Families chapter model pilot program at addressing belonging and other outcomes for military families. The impact of the chapter model was assessed through a series of five surveys designed to measure participants' sense of belonging in their communities; mental health; employment; and the quantity and quality of their social connections within their communities. During the study, funded by the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Blue Star Families surveyed 4,292 military-connected individuals in New York and San Diego.



About 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.

About Sorenson Impact Center

The Sorenson Impact Center is an applied academic organization focused on solving social problems through the use of data, evidence, and innovation. Housed at the University of Utah's David Eccles School of Business, the Center works with public, nonprofit, and private sector stakeholders across the nation and internationally to develop and implement outcomes-driven solutions.

For more information, contact survey@bluestarfam.org

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- 2 Anderson, A. A., & Milligan, S. (2006). Social Capital and Community Building. In K. Fulbright-Anderson & P. Auspos (Eds.), *Community Change: Theories, Practice, and Evidence* (pp. 21-60). The Aspen Institute.
- 3 Sarason, B. R., Sarason, I. G., & Gurung, R. A. R. (1997). Close personal relationships and health outcomes: A key to the role of social support. In S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships: Theory, research and interventions* (p. 547-573). John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- 4 Wang, M., Nyutu, P. N., Tran, K. K., & Spears, A. (2015). Finding resilience: The mediation effect of sense of community on the psychological well-being of military spouses. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 37(2), 164-174. <https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.37.2.07054x614489204m>

