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2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Finding 3

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Maintaining connection and access to self-care are critical needs to support families of deployed or activated service members.

Deployments and activations are common for military families, but the COVID-19 global pandemic added a new layer of complexity to this familiar military family experience. More than half (55%) of National Guard family respondents and a quarter of active-duty (24%) and Reserve (27%) family respondents reported a deployment or activation from March through October 2020. Of those families who experienced a deployment or activation, more than half of active-duty (66%), National Guard (52%), and Reserve family (55%) respondents reported unexpected extensions due to COVID-19 or were required to spend extra time away from family due to quarantine restrictions. The importance of supporting military families experiencing deployment has been well-documented over the years (Conforte, et al, 2017); however, to date, there has been little published regarding what specific, practical, day-to-day needs are for military families during a deployment, aside from inter-family communication and access to mental health resources (Clark, O’Neal, Conley, & Mancini, 2018). Even less has been published regarding whether or not military family members on the homefront know how to access resources to meet the daily needs they identify.

CRITICAL NEEDS AND UNMET NEEDS ACROSS ALL MILITARY-CONNECTED FAMILIES

Active-duty spouse respondents who experienced a deployment since March 2020 reported **significantly higher levels of stress** than those who did not.

Among military-connected family respondents who experienced deployment or activation from March to October 2020, or anticipated an upcoming deployment within nine months, communication (with the deployed service member and with the unit) and self-care were

the most important needs reported by all respondent groups: active-duty members and their spouses, National Guard family respondents, and Reserve family respondents.

What would help support your family through a current or upcoming deployment or activation?

“To be honest, just an **open communication from the unit to the deployed spouse**. Time to check in and say hi will mean more than anything. The entire year my husband was deployed last (went from 6 months to a year) **not one person contacted me for anything.**” — Air Force Spouse

TOP 5 NEEDS DURING DEPLOYMENT OR ACTIVATION

Active-duty, National Guard, and Reserve Family Respondents Who Recently Experienced or Anticipated an Upcoming Deployment or Activation

	Active-duty Spouse Respondents	Active-duty Service Member Respondents	National Guard Family Respondents	Reserve Family Respondents
Ability to communicate with spouse	79%	83%	79%	84%
Emergency contact information for the unit/command	72%	68%	58%	67%
Access to medical care	71%	74%	50%	55%
Opportunity to exercise	57%	67%	54%	47%
Access to mental health	46%	58%	39%	34%

Although each of the service branches has created deployment readiness programs^{3,4,5,6} to support families during deployment and activation of service members, active-duty spouse respondents still reported they do not know how to access some of these services or information that may be especially critical during deployment. Despite “emergency contact information for the unit/command” that is often included in pre-deployment and activation briefings, this was an unmet need for many active-duty spouse respondents. Seventy-two percent of active-duty spouse respondents who have experienced a deployment since March 2020, or will in the near future, indicated this information was or would be a need during their deployment; however, 38% of those respondents were unaware of how to access it. While more than a third (37%) of active-duty spouse respondents indicated their service member’s unit or command “communicates well,” this number drops to 33% who agreed the command “communicates well during deployment.”

Other needs were less commonly reported, but harder for families to find. Only 18% of active-duty spouse respondents with a current or upcoming deployment reported needing caregiver respite or support, but 74% of those respondents did not know where to find such resources. In line with previous research,⁷ 46% of active-duty spouse respondents with recently deployed or deploying service members reported “access to mental health care” as a critical need. Of these, 40% were currently receiving care, 16% did not know how to access it, and 35% reported they do not receive care but would like to. Bureaucratic and logistical barriers to receiving mental health care are well-documented⁸ and align with our research: for example, “difficulty scheduling an appointment” (45%) and “finding child care” (40%) were top reasons for not receiving care among active-duty spouse respondents who desired it. Other unmet needs center on self-care and engagement opportunities for family members, such as social activities that include child care, support for children’s activities, and special needs family members.

ACTIVE-DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS' NEEDS DURING CURRENT OR UPCOMING DEPLOYMENT OR ACTIVATION

Needs During Deployment/Activation Ranked from highest to lowest reported critical deployment need	Critical Deployment Needs % of respondents who reported this need during deployment	Unmet Deployment Needs % of those who reported this need but do not know how to access it
Ability to communicate with spouse	79%	7%
Emergency contact information for the unit/command	72%	38%
Access to medical care	71%	7%
Opportunity to exercise	57%	24%
Access to mental health	46%	16%
Resources for child(ren)'s activities	44%	48%
Social/recreational activities that include child care options	38%	65%
Resources for social support	34%	50%
Communication from unit/command	33%	33%
Child care	32%	49%
Assistance with child(ren)'s education	29%	40%
Resources for sports/recreation	24%	49%
After-school care	24%	54%
Employment/job opportunities	22%	39%
Help with yard/house maintenance	21%	58%
Caregiver respite or support	18%	74%
Resources for my education	15%	53%
Financial support	14%	51%
Assistance with special needs child(ren)	14%	53%
Assistance with shopping (curbside pickup, someone to shop for me)	10%	35%
Resources for job preparedness	10%	59%
Food support	9%	49%
Transportation assistance	4%	64%

MOST (>50%) do not know how to access **SOME** (25%-50%) do not know how to access **FEW** (<25%) do not know how to access

The majority of respondents reporting the most common needs (communication, self-care, etc.) also reported they knew how to access resources to meet them; however, respondents with less common needs reported higher levels of uncertainty regarding how to access these resources or supports. These everyday needs – things like “social/recreational activities with child care” and “help with yard/house maintenance” – are necessary to help families on the homefront thrive, not just survive, while their service member is deployed. High levels of unmet need in these areas offer a helpful blueprint for supplemental nonprofit and community-based programs to provide meaningful support to military families during their service member’s deployment or activation.

IMPLICATIONS

Time away from family remains the top issue for National Guard and Reserve family respondents, and is second only to “military spouse employment” for active-duty family respondents. Deployments were the top stressor for National Guard family (45%) and Reserve family (43%) respondents, and one of the top for active-duty family respondents (38%). Further, about two out of every 10 active-duty (18%), National Guard (22%), and Reserve (17%) family respondents would choose to leave military service because of too many deployments/activations. It is important to note that while “time away from family” encompasses more than deployments – including long work hours, training or field problems, TDYs, unaccompanied tours, geo-batching (voluntarily living separately), and more – deployments are stressors unique to military life. Supporting families and easing some of the unmet needs could support retention and recruitment, as well as provide needed resources to keep families healthy and thriving.

LIMITATIONS

Although the sample includes respondents from all currently-serving military families, the subsamples of National Guard (n=106) and Reserve (n=61) family respondents who had experienced or anticipated deployment or activation were small. Also due to sample size constraints, we do not separate out National Guard or Reserve spouses as a separate subsample group for discussion as we sometimes do for active-duty spouse respondents.

COVID-19-related school and child care closures, as well as limitations to medical and wellness services that were commonly utilized by military families, may also have influenced spouses’ reported needs and wants during a current or upcoming deployment.

RECOMMENDATIONS



CONGRESS

- Commission a report regarding child care needs (including respite care) during deployment, and assess the extent to which these needs are being met. The assessment should include the availability of programs serving families who have special needs children, and the extent to which access to child care supports the mental health of the parental figure on the homefront and that of the deployed service member.



MILITARY

- Simplify communications to family members leading up to and during deployment to ensure they are digestible and user-friendly.
- Diversify the methods of communication that commands use when connecting with the families in their unit. Eighty-one percent of active-duty spouse respondents prefer receiving information via email, 45% prefer social media, and 41% prefer a phone call or text message.*
- Provide routine, inclusive, bi-directional communication (unit to family member and family member to unit) leading up to, during, and following a deployment. Examples include: routine check-ins, virtual office hours, virtual town halls, etc.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

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