



# Chicagoland & Illinois Needs Assessment Phase II: Focus Groups

## About

This report is part of a broader needs assessment to understand the experiences and resource needs for currently-serving military families in Chicagoland and the broader Illinois region. Results from this report will be used to inform survey instrument design for the next phase of the study. Blue Star Families is grateful for the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, which funded this study.

## Blue Star Families

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

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## Introduction

Illinois is among the top 15 states in terms of the number of active-duty, reserve, and civilian employees, and with over half a million Veterans, it is among the states with the largest populations of Veterans in the country (“Military Active-Duty Personnel, Civilians by State,” 2017; Veterans Affairs, 2019). Despite this concentration of military-connected families, little is known about the lives, experiences, and outcomes of Illinois-based service members, Veterans, and their families. Given the intricate challenges that military families face in terms of community integration and achieving a satisfactory quality of life (Burrell et al., 2003; Knobloch et al., 2019), research on the nature of this population and potential challenges faced by it is critical.



In 2020, Blue Star Families initiated a comprehensive research project to identify and examine studies conducted on military-affiliated families in Illinois. As a broader overlay for this analysis, we determined that the existing research on military families in Illinois was very limited, specifically in terms of data on active-duty, National Guard, reserve, and racial/ethnic minority members/families. The limited existing research we found indicated that Illinois military families, those in Chicagoland in particular, had outsized challenges related to civilian employment, housing and food insecurity, and issues related to family functioning/cohesion and child performance in K-12 (Kintzle et al., 2016; Miller and Sorenson, 2017; Sullivan, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2018; WalletHub, 2019). To help bolster and provide additional context for this existing body of research, as well as directions for further investigation in this space, we conducted focus groups with Illinois military-affiliated families to explore these dynamics.

## **Findings and Implications**

In line with findings from the initial exploratory analysis, focus group participants identified COVID-19's disruptive impacts, mental health and health care access challenges, and complexities associated with employment as key issues, regardless of location.

### **COVID-19 Compounded Existing Challenges**

When participants were asked to briefly summarize their experiences during COVID-19, they used words like "chaotic," "uncertain," "isolating," "hard," and "unstable." In employing these terms, participants across the three distinctive Illinois geographies emphasized a collective experience that was frenzied and complex to navigate. These complexities were described as exacerbating existing challenges. As one Chicagoland Army Reserves spouse explained:

"For us, there was a lot of stress, because we knew that my husband was deploying. Also, because of the sheer fact we're on Active-Duty Operational Support (ADOS) orders, we've gotten several ADOS orders back-to-back, so we're never actually sure like okay, or the ADOS orders actually done? Are we moving back to our house, or are we staying here for a while? How do we work that with the school schedule? How do we work that with COVID? Am I doing things by myself, is he going to be here? So there were a number of uncertainties for us that COVID just complicated."

Like civilians, facilitating K-12 education remote learning was among the largest disruptions and areas of complexity stemming from COVID-19. Illinois respondents to Blue Star Families' 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey reported higher levels of remote learning than the full sample, suggesting this disruption was more widespread in the state. Multiple participants described frustrations in balancing their professional and/or domestic duties with new duties related to preparing their children for online classes.



One participant, a Veteran and spouse of a Veteran residing near Scott Air Force Base in southern Illinois, described this experience:

“My first grader... [had class] every half an hour... they had to log in and log out and I had to be there for that. I couldn't do that and work full time. It was impossible, so we pulled her out completely and she's homeschooled.”

Another participant, a spouse of a Veteran in central Illinois, added the following:

“I think the biggest thing was the struggle... when you've got these small kids at home and you're doing the remote learning. I have a friend who has seven kids and I seriously don't know how she hasn't committed herself yet to doing remote learning with kindergarten all the way through freshman year in high school. I just think that it's knowing your resources and just having a good relationship with your husband and just trying to get through it.”

### The “Bright Sides” of COVID-19

Several participants described the emergence of certain interpersonal and domestic benefits and strengths during the pandemic, representing “bright sides.” One participant, an active-duty military spouse in southern Illinois, said:

“I had my kid home all the time, and I enjoyed that, but I get to do other things now like actually exercise and stuff like that.”

Relatedly, another participant, a National Guard spouse residing in central Illinois, stressed how the pandemic brought her and her family increased belonging with the military – thanks to increased availability of virtual events in an otherwise dispersed community:

“I would say, before the pandemic, I feel like I did not have as good of a relationship with the military community. Just being a National Guard family and not being super close to a base or anything like that, I feel like you kind of miss out on some of the natural camaraderie... But one I think really great thing that came out of the pandemic was Blue Star Families and the USO and all of these great organizations having so many online events... whereas we used to do things you know with National Guard youth programs and stuff, we'd have to drive an hour to go do them ... but now it was all accessible online.”

Another participant, an active-duty military spouse residing in the Chicagoland area, echoed this sentiment, explaining:

“I do a lot of USO events... when they were in-person, I was working and I wouldn’t have time so, to be honest, I really didn’t even know much about the military community ... because of COVID and everything’s virtual, it was much easier to actually participate, so I’ve really enjoyed that part, and I’ve met a lot of great people through that.”

Participants like this active-duty military spouse residing in Chicagoland expressed other bright sides to the pandemic, which came in the face of broader struggles:

“I mean, I did lose my job and I guess there were, you know, there were negative parts of that, but I guess I just try to look at the bigger picture of that, so like, ‘Well, yes, I did not make money for a few months [but] I got to spend more time with family, which is just more important to me than the money aspect I guess... [and] having my husband home for a year, rather than him being gone would be a better option.’”

Participants also recognized their resilience during the pandemic, attributing it to their experiences of being a military family. As one participant, a spouse of a Veteran residing in central Illinois, noted:

“I think it just goes back to resiliency; I mean, us as [spouses], we’re so used to packing up, moving, and just adapting and, you know, dealing with changes and starting all over and different things like that. I think we were a little bit more prepared, and I think that we also have a little bit better understanding of what was going on globally.”

### **Health and Mental Health Care**

Participants consistently described broad issues related to their family’s ability to access health care services. Many of these issues were described as long-running, but also as being worsened by the pandemic and wider structural issues specific to military policy and their communities. An active-duty military spouse in southern Illinois explained:

“For us, it’s been really frustrating, like we’re sick, but it’s not COVID, [so] it’s nearly impossible to see a doctor in person or for just preventative care. Just not seeing people in person, unless it’s like you’re dying. So, in some instances, it is more convenient to just talk to my doctor on the phone and get a prescription or whatever, but in other instances, it’s kind of frustrating.”

Most participants further highlighted difficulties managing mental health either for themselves or one of their family members. One participant, an active-duty military spouse residing in Chicagoland, provided additional context, highlighting the added difficulties many military families face living far from family:

“You almost become like a single parent trying to figure out with multiple kids like, ‘What do I do?’ You know and keeping your sanity with that I think can be difficult, if you have multiple kids and then you’re at home all day with them. If they’re under, you know, school age and you... have no family near you, it just becomes really isolating, and I think during the pandemic, that kind of makes it much, much worse.”

For some families, these dynamics are further complicated by the inability to maintain continuity of mental health care across state lines due to moves and licensing restrictions. One participant, an active-duty military spouse in southern Illinois, discussed an issue her daughter had with getting mental health treatment:

“We had a death in the family and [my daughter] couldn’t do a teleconference with her [therapist] while we were in Georgia, even though we live in Illinois and she sees us in-person in Illinois and teleconferences with us in Illinois normally... but not here at this time when we were in Georgia, when she really could have used counseling.

[...]

[In order to obtain care for my daughter], I have to pick her up from daycare, interrupt her day and try to work around the meal time and nap time and drive the 45 minutes, do a two- or four-hour appointment and in 45 minutes back, so for me that’s an entire workday... my child needed a lot of specialized services, like a lot of people do. St Louis is right there, but right there isn’t close enough for the working mom.”

## Employment Challenges

While most participants did not describe dramatic impacts to their employment, household finances, or their ability to obtain a job (if they were unemployed and wished to get one), several described issues related to employment “fit” in terms of what local employers were expecting in professional competencies and skill sets. One participant, a Veteran and spouse of a Veteran residing in southern Illinois, explained:

“The base is home to Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), Air Mobility Command (AMC), so, I mean, Boeing is here. The big [companies], the big ones are here and [are] always hiring... [but] they’re looking for people who have security clearances. They’re looking for people who know about avionics... there’s a huge disconnect between the skill set that a military spouse will have and what is being offered, and there’s no [mid-level]. It’s either you can be a barista or you can be a defense contractor. There’s nothing in between.”

Participants also described issues related to professional licensure. One participant, an active-duty military spouse residing in Chicagoland, illustrated this concern:

“Having a license, working in one place, and then moving to another... I think that uncertainty is kind of difficult to figure out, like, ‘Okay, well, maybe if I move to Texas and I’m not able to work as a licensed therapist, then I need to figure something else out, and then, what do I do? Do I just take a pay cut? Do I just not work?’”

Similarly, another participant, an active-duty military spouse residing in southern Illinois, described her difficulty navigating the licensure process:

“I had a job when I came here, and I had to get my license transferred over, and there was the red tape for the Illinois side. It was very difficult because it required a certain card that only the state of Illinois had available, and they wouldn’t respond to my request for them to mail me one. I had to figure out a workaround on my own, so that was very challenging. And I never want to go through [the] Illinois licensure process again, so since you often come back to Illinois at some time in [your] military career, if we choose to stay active duty, I will pay out-of-pocket and maintain my Illinois licensure so that I don’t have to reapply for it in the future.”

## **Additional Issues**

Aside from key themes already discussed, participants also reflected on the current housing market and perceptions of their local civilian communities.

### **Housing Market**

Americans nationwide are navigating a challenging housing market in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and focus group respondents speculated on how this might affect military families with permanent change of station (PCS) moves in summer 2021. As one active-duty military spouse participant residing in southern Illinois explained:

“There is a very, very, very small rental market; I mean, it’s pretty much nonexistent. Your only choice is to buy. [But] houses right now are going anywhere from- I mean two on my street within hours, hours they sold for, I think one of them went 20 over listing and the other one was, I want to say 35 or 40 over listing, [so] yeah... I see the complete unfairness for a military family that’s moving from a different location coming here. [...] BAH is not [...] going to cover the mortgage when they’re paying that mortgage.”

## Perceptions of Community

Echoing Blue Star Families' previous research regarding the civil-military divide in local communities, some participants view their local communities as welcoming and defying their own preconceived expectations. Meanwhile, others do not believe their civilian neighbors truly understand challenges unique to military life, especially deployment. As one active-duty military spouse residing in southern Illinois explained:

"Well, I lived in Chicago for a while, and I never wanted to come back to Illinois, but [southern Illinois] is not Chicago- they're totally different, and you know just when you hear 'hey you're moving to southern Illinois,' that does not sound like some place that you know, you want to jump on that bandwagon just by that, so it's, I mean, the people are very friendly here, very welcoming. You know, it's just been pleasant. [...] We've lived in Texas also, and people weren't nearly as welcoming and as pleasant. And more people would be apt to go to Texas over southern Illinois, so [I] was just very pleasantly surprised to be here and be welcomed."

On the other hand, another participant, a National Guard spouse residing in central Illinois, said:

"I don't feel like- in my own community — I don't know a lot of people that are in similar situations to mine and people don't really understand. They know what it's like to have your husband leave — you know people complain about oh my husband's out of town for work — but they don't really fully understand what that's like until you have a deployment, and you know your husband's in another country where [he] could be killed, and you know it's just different- and I [...] wouldn't focus on that, but yeah, it's just I don't feel like [it's] the same thing. Not living on a base — you know, people just don't get it."

## Conclusion

Focus groups conducted with military family members in Illinois illustrate that COVID-19 had an outsized impact on multiple dimensions of these families' lives, including a general sense of stability, children's education, health care access, mental health, military community connectivity, and employment. In regards to concerns on health care access that were raised by participants, efforts need to be made to expand access to care and also generate clarity on how to access local services. Because the increased volume of telehealth is likely to continue post-pandemic, it is equally important that policymakers work to remove barriers to access, including those related to interstate transitions.

To address issues related to employment, it is recommended that effort be put into developing and advertising opportunities for employment—those that correspond more tightly to the existing skill sets and interests of military families. Programming and policy should also seek to build upon existing identified strengths. This analysis suggests that online military family programming may help military families feel more connected and engaged, making it an ideal opportunity to generate greater resilience among this population.

## Methodology

In May 2021, Blue Star Families' researchers conducted three separate focus groups with Illinois military families. The first focus group included military families in the metropolitan Chicago area, one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States. The second focus group included military families in central Illinois. The third and final focus group included military families in southern Illinois. Additionally, we conducted one semi-structured interview with a Blue Star Families staff member who was currently residing in southern Illinois. Focus group participants were recruited from Blue Star Families' membership pool via email and online monthly newsletter communications. Interested participants were asked to fill out an online form, which included demographic information and their availability. Research analysts then selected participants based on their geographic location, military affiliation, and availability. Participants were selected based on completion of the consent form and a brief questionnaire, which captured additional contextual information to formulate the most appropriate focus groups.

All focus group participants identified as female and white, and they were between the ages of 25 and 55. Table 1 provides additional details on respondents. Focus group facilitators used a semi-structured focus group guide with each focus group. The questions focused on understanding specific experiences and challenges that participants may have faced in the realms of a military career, civilian employment, health and well-being, community engagement and resource access, and K-12 schooling for their children, using the context of COVID-19 as a general overlay. A copy of the focus group interview question guide is provided in Appendix 1. Participants received a \$50 gift card incentive. Each focus group was recorded using Zoom's integrated recording function, then transcribed using built-in Zoom functionality and manually cleaned by a Blue Star Families team member. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

**Table 1. Focus Group Participant Traits**

	Chicagoland, Illinois	Central Illinois	Southern Illinois	Total
<b>Total Number of Participants</b>	2	3	3	
<b>Age Range</b>				
25-35	2	1	1	
36-45	0	1	2	
46-55	0	1	0	
56-65	0	0	0	
65+	0	0	0	
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	2	3	3	
Male	0	0	0	
<b>Military Affiliation</b>				
Service Member	0	0	0	
Spouse	2	3	3	
<b>Military Branch Affiliation</b>				
Army	2	1	0	
Air Force	0	0	3	
Navy	0	0	0	
National Guard	0	2	0	

### Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, we only conducted three focus groups – one in each of the three primary regions in Illinois. Also, the number of participants, overall and in each focus group, was fairly limited. Thus, it is not possible to draw broad assessments related to this study’s emergent themes. Lastly, all participants were white and women. Therefore, the findings may not reflect the experiences and sentiments of non-white individuals, and men and people with other gender identities who are affiliated with the military. Further research is needed to characterize the themes discussed here across a broader array and racial, ethnic, and gender categories.

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# Appendix 1:

## Blue Star Families Chicagoland & Illinois Focus Group Script and Questions

[Thank you all for joining our Blue Star Families focus group today. My name is X, and I'm going to be the facilitator today. I'm an Applied Research Analyst with Blue Star Families, and I'm from X [...include other details like relevant professional/military background and affiliations here].

As a reminder, your participation here is optional and everything you share here will be held confidential (and we ask that you all keep the discussions from this group private). Please note that I am going to be audio-recording our discussions just so I don't have to take written notes.

As part of our Chicagoland / Illinois Needs Assessment, our goal with these focus groups is to better understand the experiences of Chicagoland / Illinois families who are affiliated with the military. We are especially interested in hearing more about your experiences in your [NAME OF REGION] communities, what resources are or are not available to you in these communities, and your experiences in relation to COVID-19. The information we gather will be extremely valuable in us having a better grasp of some of the unique perspectives of military families and in us learning how to better develop and implement programs in your communities to support them. We honor your experiences and are grateful for your participation.

This focus group will take about one hour to complete. We would like to thank you for your time and participation by giving you a gift card. You will receive the gift card code about one week after this focus group.

As we go through the questions, please let me know if anything is unclear. If you get disconnected or are having trouble with your feed, please let me know by contacting me at [contact info]. I'll put it in the chat box.

Just to start off, let's please go around and just do some brief introductions. Things like your name, where you're originally from, your military affiliation, and where you currently live.

1. In just a few words, please describe what the last year has been like for you since COVID-19 began?  
We'll go around.
2. Now, let's talk a little bit more about specific impacts that COVID-19 may have had on you and your family. We'll do each one-by-one. Please tell me about anything...

- a) Probe: As far as your military career (PCSing, etc.)
  - b) Probe: As far as your physical health (e.g., have you or anyone in your family gotten COVID-19, etc.)
  - c) Probe: As far as your mental health
  - d) Probe: As far as schooling for your child
  - e) Probe: As far as your civilian employment
  - f) Probe: As far as your finances
3. Let's switch gears a bit now. Generally speaking, how would you compare your experience as a MilFam in Chicago / downstate Illinois / mid-state Illinois versus being a MilFam in other cities / places?
- a) Probe: What things make the experience better?
  - b) Probe: What things make the experience worse?
4. How would you describe your experiences with the military community [HOW YOU DEFINE] in Chicagoland / mid-state Illinois / downstate Illinois?
- a) Probe: Is it accessible? Inviting?
  - b) Probe: Do you interact with them? How so?
5. In general, what are your experiences like with non-military members of your local community?
- a) Probe: Do you have relationships with them?
  - b) Probe: Do you and your family feel welcome?
6. Do you feel a sense of belonging to your local community?
- a) Probe: [DON'T] feel they belong] What would help you feel a greater sense of belonging?
  - b) Probe: [DO feel they belong] What attributes of your community or the people there are helping you feel that sense of belonging?
  - c) Probe: Compared to other places you've lived, do you feel a greater or lesser sense of belonging?



7. Thank you. We're just about halfway done now. How would you generally describe the quality of employment options available here to MilFams like yours, as far as wages, opportunity for growth, etc.?
8. How would you generally describe the housing options available here to MilFams like yours?
  - a) Probe: Are there many options to pick from?
  - b) Probe: Are homes/rent affordable?
  - c) Probe: Are the housing options of good quality?
  - d) Probe: Are they in the neighborhoods and/or school district you prefer?
8. How would you generally describe the quality of K-12 school options available here to military families like yours?
9. Please describe any kind of activities, services, or resources you and/or your family would like to have that you have difficulty accessing in your area.
10. If you had/have the option, would you ideally stay in your area for the foreseeable future? Why or why not?
11. That was my last question. Is there anything else you think we should know about you or other military families in your area?