

## White Oak VIII PARTICIPANTS

American Armed Forces Mutual  
Aid Association  
American Red Cross  
Armed Services YMCA of the  
USA  
Army Emergency Relief  
Association of Defense  
Communities  
Blue Star Families  
Bob Woodruff Foundation  
Camp Corral  
Coast Guard Mutual Assistance  
Code of Support Foundation  
Combined Arms  
Comcast  
D'aniello Institute for  
Veterans and Military  
Families  
Elizabeth Dole Foundation  
Hiring Our Heroes  
Lockheed Martin  
MAZON: A Jewish Response to  
Hunger  
Military Child Education  
Coalition  
Military Family Advisory  
Network  
Military Officers Association of  
America  
National Military Family  
Association  
Navy-Marine Corps Relief  
Society  
Operation Homefront  
Our Military Kids  
Partners in PROMISE  
PsychArmor Institute  
RAND Epstein Family Veterans  
Policy Research Institute  
Robert R. McCormick  
Foundation  
Rosalynn Carter Institute for  
Caregivers  
Semper Fi & America's Fund  
Sesame Workshop  
The May & Stanley Smith  
Charitable Trust  
TriWest Military & Veteran  
Partnerships  
U.S. Department of Defense  
U.S. Department of Labor  
U.S. Department of Veterans  
Affairs  
UCLA National Center for Child  
Traumatic Stress  
USAA  
Veterans Experience Office  
Wounded Warrior Project

**Overview:** Comprised of major nonprofit military service organizations, related government offices, and other key philanthropic partners and contributors, members of the White Oak community specializing in issues related to military children's mental health and financial security gathered for the White Oak VIII Retreat. White Oak members are committed to creating positive solutions aimed at better serving the interests and needs of military members, transitioning veterans, their families and caregivers. The first retreat in almost four years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, White Oak VIII began with great enthusiasm as many attendees met in person for the first time. Collaborators brought forward vast knowledge and strong innovative thinking capacity to tackle critical issues confronting our military and veteran communities. This year's key issue areas were 1) military family mental health and 2) the interlocking issues related to economic insecurity.

**Resolution:** The White Oak community is resolved to brainstorm solutions for the issues affecting America's military families, service members, and Veterans. Retreat participants are therefore dedicated to strong collaboration, facilitating the generation of innovative, scalable concepts that can be translated into evidence based, empirically driven legislative action and valuable new programs.

**Members:** The White Oak retreats enable a *process* by which positive transformation is made possible through dialogue, collaborative sharing of information and perspective, inspiration of ideas and future commitment to action amongst cooperative but uniquely focused individual participants. The result is a rare blend of national, regional and grassroots efforts working toward the ultimate goal of creating conditions through which various sectors can better serve the interests and needs of military members, transitioning Veterans and their families and caregivers.

**Consensus Items:** The following breakout topic responses reflect sites of convergence, identifying actionable issue-areas and potential "next steps."

### *Military Family Mental Health*

- **Parenting in the Military:** Recognizing the unavoidable influence of military culture and lifestyle on our military youth, this breakout group focused on what resources and supports are already in place for military connected families and *how* those resources could be accessed more effectively. Acknowledging deployments and relocations are part of service, participants agreed this work should be aimed at 1) equipping families to manage their circumstances, 2) empowering them to take on hardship successfully and 3) naturalizing and removing stigma from accessing support systems. The long-standing tension between career advancement opportunity and family well-being was highlighted as particularly disruptive, driving concern for issues such as consistency in the provision of medical care and education as well as family willingness to participate in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP).

- Coordinated Community Response for Military-Connected Youth Experiencing Mental Health Issues:** Participants agreed efforts to coordinate care between the civilian world, in which military youth mostly exist, with the military world, where there are uniquely tailored supports, are complicated by legal restrictions, need for self-identification and lack of awareness on both sides of the military-civilian community divide. While coordinated models addressing this concern are limited, the Military Child Education Coalition's Purple Star Schools and Student-2-Student programs stand out for promoting military youth well-being. Solutions must extend military competencies to civilian organizations, seek in-school provision of assistance and leverage social media to meet our military youth where they are.
- Veterans and Caregivers—Support for Family and Youth:** Although early efforts to serve caregiver children led by the Hidden Helpers Coalition are in development, attendees were unaware of any currently existing programs, revealing a major gap. Complicating reform, each service has its own caregiving programs, and significant stigma surrounds the issue. Defining "caregiving" and "caregivers" in terms of scope and length of time is important to the identification of and provision of support to military youth. Families may not recognize when children are taking on too much responsibility. Codifying this role and encouraging people to understand themselves as caregivers is critical. Developing stress flags to help parents identify concerning behaviors was suggested.
- Transitions and Continuity of Care:** Permanent changes in duty station and rotations on and off of Reserve and National Guard Duty were observed as representing highly disruptive events for military youth, especially those receiving specialized healthcare. Difficulty in finding a new provider adds to the disruption. Smoothing this transition to ensure constant support, no loss of information and continued progress is vital. RallyPoint was highlighted as a good source of information on finding care although development of a national database of

providers to get ahead of the problem was recommended. School Liaison Officers and Military Family Life Counselors were acknowledged by the group as key resources, but they are not available in all locations.

### *Lived Experiences—Interlocking Issues Related to Economic Insecurity*

- Junior Enlisted Families:** Discussion of these families and economic hardship began with an appreciation for the myriad factors that enter into play, some of which are within control of the service member and his/her family and some of which are not. Recognizing these are the youngest and least experienced of our military community from diverse backgrounds and experiences, a few poor judgment calls are to be expected. The goal of this conversation was to make sure the system is not setting families up for economic distress/failure and to define pathways for future financial success. Critically, participants argued issues of child care, spouse (un-/under-)employment and food insecurity must be considered together to understand the complex causality behind economic insecurity as these are mutually reinforcing features. Education and mentoring were highly recommended as strategies to reduce stigma associated with asking for help and strengthening these young families.
- Senior Enlisted and Officer Families:** While knee-jerk reactions may presume poor judgment, mismanagement or lavish lifestyle habits, a convergence of later-in-life events can put senior enlisted and officer families into circumstances that may put them at financial risk. This breakout group identified care of aging parents, caregiving dynamics, support to children in college and accrued years of limited spouse employment as possible factors. They also posited an "expense of advancing" dynamic, by which families concentrate all efforts on service member promotion at the cost of family financial well-being. As some may not have personal backgrounds in which financial literacy was taught, it was recommended to offer financial management

training to all service members, to avoid embarrassment for those needing help.

- **Families Transitioning Out of the Military:** In discussing interlocking economic issues plaguing these families, the reality of many of these economic stressors impacting wider American society became very clear. Departure from the steady income of the military, however, especially for those who are not retiring, presents additional uncertainty. Transition assistance programs (TAP) were therefore recognized as critical and needing to occur early in the transition preparation process to help set realistic expectations. Creative solutions identified included journey mapping transition, promoting financial cushion creation, developing “after transition” mentor checkpoints and extending aid society services for a window of time beyond transition.
- **National Guard and Reserve Families:** Significant difference was recognized as

characterizing the economic insecurity of the National Guard and Reserve Force populations relative to other populations discussed during White Oak VIII. The very nature of their service implies inconsistency and uncertainty, challenging the capacity to establish stable family finances. Benefits are started and stopped with activation periods, these service members are often called away from their families, and each state has a unique set of guidelines that define their National Guard. Discussion stressed decoupling National Guard and Reserve services would be helpful, as these groups function under different authorities and are characterized by distinct privileges and benefits. One solution identified by the group was to tell positive impact National Guard and Reserve stories to make Americans more aware of what service they provide, helping to create appreciation for these service members and their families.

*“Are the good things we are doing moving down to where the rubber meets the road?”*

**Next Steps:** After a marked hiatus, returning to White Oak inherently included a fresh examination of purpose. Closing conversation questioned, “what did we miss?” There is obviously much still to cover. With this in mind, discussion turned to the potential for a White Oak Conference that would allow for more attendees and a wider range of topics. Relatedly, a need for greater diversity among White Oak participants was collectively identified and unanimously agreed upon during the closing session, lending additional support for transition to an expanded conference-style forum.

**Conclusion:** White Oak VIII brought together excellent thinkers and leaders, bringing robust capacity to the table.

- Engagement on military youth mental health and wellness identified a need for strong support of military parents who struggle with the tension of career opportunities, professional expectations and family well-being. Critically, provision of services for these children must be readily available and easily accessed. A coordinated community response must reflect solid military cultural competency and be capable of immediate response in times of crisis, offer a pipeline of follow-on steps, and include a long game in support of sustained mental health. Breakout groups identified technology and social media as additional venues for engaging kids where they are. Notably, caregiver children were identified as representing a major gap in service to our military-connected youth.
- Discussion of the interlocking issues related to economic insecurity highlighted junior enlisted, National Guard and Reservists as the most vulnerable of our military-connected populations, but at-risk moments and conditions arise in which senior enlisted and officers may also find themselves in economic crisis. The entanglement of child care, spouse employment and food insecurity must be

taken in context as mutually-constituting and intractable. A major recommendation of White Oak VIII is to develop a formal mentorship program designed to build the capacity and resilience of our families and service members over the course of their careers, increasing awareness of support systems, discouraging stigma and promoting knowledge and self-sustainability.