



On the Homefront

Administration Efforts to Support Military Families
During the Global War on Terror (2001-2021)

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As we enter the early stages of what was once unthinkable – a 21st-century ground war in Europe – now is a poignant time to release this history, written by my organization – Blue Star Families, detailing the critically creative evolution of presidential administration support that truly made a difference for military families in war from September 11th, 2001, to September 11th, 2021. We compiled this history because we saw the development of collaborative, cross-sector, administration-led support for military families as something extraordinary and important, making our military more ready as a result. Additionally, the lessons we all learned during America’s longest war are easily lost if not captured. Our hope is that this compilation aids policy scholars and practitioners and serves as a guide for those who want to understand and remember an important time in history in order to respond to inevitable future conflict, which may be coming more quickly than anyone imagined.

This paper is presented from Blue Star Families’ point of view. We relied extensively on governmental archives and dozens of interviews with first-person actors from government, nonprofit, philanthropic, and community groups across three presidential administrations. Those interviews are detailed in the paper, and we are grateful for the time and support from everyone who participated. Because Blue Star Families came into existence in 2009, our experience is first-hand from that point on. For insight into the eight years prior (during the Bush Administration), we relied on publicly-available governmental documents and interviews with members of that administration and partners who were active at that time.

Our lens focuses on the military and Veteran family; not the family excluding the service member or Veteran (what we call a “donut” with the center missing) but the service member or Veteran as part of a family unit, with the family both supporting that service member or Veteran and being part of the “unit of service” that serves the country. That deserves and rates our support for the health of the future force. The length of service, demands of service, and likelihood of a service member being married with a family or living off installation were very different in the 20th century, and the need for family support has amplified since 9/11.

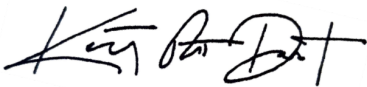
No military in the history of the world has done more to protect and defend global security and stability than the U.S. military. In modern times, it is a very small number of people, and their families do extraordinary acts, without rest on the homefront and throughout the globe. No nation throughout history has devoted more money and resources to supporting Veterans, and rightly so. But the need to support military-connected families is a newer realization. There have been many programs for Veterans alone that are not covered in this history. Our particular focus is on how a policy developed – through enlightened

collaboration and the involvement of non-governmental partners – to recognize and support the role of military families in sustaining and retaining our 21st-century All-Volunteer Force. Key landmarks include increased emphasis on military family policy during the Bush Administration and then the Joining Forces initiative, which was created by then First Lady Michelle Obama and Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden (and since revived by First Lady Dr. Jill Biden).

We hope this history is useful to you. We welcome your corrections and additions, and we will make updates as those inevitably come to light.

Thank you for your attention and interest in our All-Volunteer Force and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kathy Roth-Douquet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Kathy" being the most prominent.

Kathy Roth-Douquet

Foreword

This document provides a brief history of White House-led military and Veteran family support initiatives during the Global War on Terror (2001-2021)—as told from the perspective of nonprofit, philanthropic, corporate, and community stakeholders. Blue Star Families believes that this document might prove useful to public policy practitioners who seek to understand successful models of cross-sector, public-private collaboration.

Blue Star Families does not claim to present a definitive nor comprehensive history of the initiatives described herein. While we attempted to interview a broad range of community stakeholders and observers in compiling this account, our efforts were inevitably constrained by finite resources. For this reason, we intend to occasionally update this report. If you and/or your organization have a story that you would like to include in future versions, please share it with Blue Star Families at: <https://www.tfaforms.com/4965912>.

Since 2009, Blue Star Families has had more direct involvement with administration efforts to support military families and may have a more detailed history of events. We have included information prior to that time through interviews with Bush Administration officials.

The offices of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden took no part in the production of this report; however, it was provided to the Bush Library and Obama Foundation for review prior to publication. Blue Star Families bears sole responsibility for the content.

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Chapter 1: The Bush Administration (2001-2009)

Introduction

On October 7th, 2001—in response to the deadly terrorist attacks on September 11th—U.S.-led coalition forces launched military operations in Afghanistan with the goal of dismantling al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban from power.¹ Two years later, on March 20th, 2003, U.S. troops invaded Iraq in order to “disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, [...] end Saddam Hussein’s support for terrorism, and [...] free the Iraqi people.”² These engagements became part of the “Global War on Terror” (GWOT)—“a war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.”³

While the war in Iraq officially ended in December 2011, America’s longest war (i.e., the war in Afghanistan) represented a commitment that lasted nearly 20 years—culminating with the withdrawal of American forces in August 2021. This was an enormous undertaking, with countless acts of heroism and innovation on the part of our military. Millions of service members and their families bore true faith and allegiance and successfully completed countless missions over the course of two decades. While the benefits of the GWOT will be parsed by history,⁴ its costs were substantial. According to Brown University’s Costs of War project, two decades of post-9/11 conflict cost the United States an estimated \$8 trillion, killed roughly 7,000 U.S. service members, and wounded many times that number.⁵

On the homefront, service members, their spouses, and their children shared the burdens of war. Our All-Volunteer Force and their family members coped with the extended absence of their deployed spouse, parent, or child due to heightened operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and shortened dwell times. The cycle of permanent change of station (PCS) moves and combat deployments continued for years and became part of the active-duty lifestyle. Many families lost loved ones overseas or became permanent caregivers to wounded Veterans.

¹Council on Foreign Relations, “Timeline: War in Afghanistan,” Accessed January 3rd, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

²White House of President George W. Bush, “President Discusses Beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom,” Archived from the original on October 31st, 2011, Accessed January 3rd, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111031010540/http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030322.html>.

³President George W. Bush, “Global War on Terror,” George W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum, October 11th, 2001, Accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror>.

⁴One benefit perhaps being that there were no further large-scale terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

⁵Costs of War project, “Costs of the 20-Year War on Terror: \$8 Trillion and 900,000 Deaths,” Brown University, Accessed January 1st, 2022, <https://www.brown.edu/news/2021-09-01/costsofwar>.

Hundreds of thousands of service members grappled every day with the visible and invisible wounds of war.⁶

It soon became clear that many Americans did not fully appreciate or understand the sacrifices of their military and Veteran family peers. According to Pew Research Center, fewer than 1% of the U.S. adult population served on active duty at any given time after 9/11—resulting in a decreased understanding between military-connected families and the broader U.S. society (otherwise known as the “civil-military divide”).⁷

To complicate matters, the George W. Bush Administration had inherited a military that had taken a “peace dividend” after the end of the Cold War and had focused more on downsizing and cost savings.⁸ As such, there were few dedicated institutions to attend to the needs of military families caught up in an extended cycle of mass deployments. The Bush Administration quickly sought to fill this void.

Wounded Warrior Care

“The war is done for me now. The days of standing in the hot desert sun, setting up ambushes on the sides of mountains and washing the blood from my friend’s gear are over. The battles with bombs, bullets, and blood are a thing of the past. I still constantly fight a battle that rages inside my head.”

– Brian McGough, a 32-year-old Army staff sergeant whose convoy was attacked with IEDs in 2006; from his blog “Inside My Broken Skull”⁹

From 2001 to 2021, approximately 1.9 to 3 million military personnel served overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan—with more than half deploying two or more times. Hundreds of thousands sustained permanent psychological and physical injuries as a result of their service. On the homefront, approximately 1.1 million military family members became permanent caregivers to wounded service members and Veterans.¹⁰

⁶Ibid.

⁷Pew Research Center, “The Military-Civilian Gap: Fewer Family Connections,” November 23r, 2011, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2011/11/23/the-military-civilian-gap-fewer-family-connections/>.

⁸“Between 1987 and 1998, the defense budget fell for 11 straight years as Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton—two Republicans and a Democrat—brought spending down to more sustainable levels as the Cold War wound down.” Lawrence J. Korb, et al., “A Historical Perspective on Defense Budgets,” Center for American Progress, July 6th, 2011, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/a-historical-perspective-on-defense-budgets/>.

⁹U.S. National Council on Disability, “Section 1,” Accessed January 1st, 2022, <https://nacd.gov/publications/2009/March042009/section1>.

¹⁰Rajeev Ramchand, Terri Tanielian, Michael P. Fisher, et al., “Military Caregivers: Who are They? And Who Is Supporting Them?,” RAND Corporation, 2014, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9764.html.

Executive Order 13426

The Dole-Shalala Commission

On March 6th, 2007, President George W. Bush signed Executive Order 13426 to establish the Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors. (This commission later became known as the "Dole-Shalala Commission," in honor of its co-chairs—former Senator Bob Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala).¹¹ The commission was created in response to reports¹² of neglect and mismanagement at Walter Reed Army Medical Center¹³ and was tasked with studying and recommending reforms to the military and Veteran health care systems. In particular, the mission of the commission was to:

- ★ Examine the transition process for wounded warriors returning to civilian life;
- ★ Evaluate the coordination, management, and delivery of health care and other benefits to wounded service members;
- ★ Analyze the effectiveness of existing outreach efforts to wounded soldiers regarding the benefits and services available to them; and
- ★ Consult with foundations, Veterans service organizations, nonprofit groups, faith-based organizations, and other non-governmental entities, in performing the commission's functions.¹⁴

Members of the commission visited military, Veteran, and private-sector treatment facilities; and interviewed injured service members and their families, as well as health care professionals and program managers. Likewise, the commission conducted a national survey of injured service members; reviewed letters and emails from service members, Veterans, family members, and health care personnel; and analyzed recommendations of past

¹¹The White House of President George W. Bush, "Fact Sheet: The President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors," Accessed January 1st, 2022, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/03/20070309-8.html>.

¹²President Bush became aware of these allegations when visiting a wounded Army staff sergeant, Charles Eggleston, at Walter Reed Medical Center. Charles is a founding board member of Blue Star Families. Please contact survey@bluestarfam.org for additional information.

¹³Terri Tanielian, Lisa H. Jaycox, Terry L. Schell, et al., "Invisible Wounds of War: Summary and Recommendations for Addressing Psychological and Cognitive Injuries," RAND Corporation, 2008, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720z1.html>; see also, Dana Priest and Anne Hull, "Soldiers Face Neglect, Frustration at Army's Top Medical Facility," Washington Post, February 18th, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2007/02/18/soldiers-face-neglect-frustration-at-armys-top-medical-facility/c0c4b3e4-fb22-4df6-9ac9-c602d41c5bda/>.

¹⁴The White House of President George W. Bush, "Executive Order: Establishing a Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors and a Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes," Archives, Accessed January 2nd, 2022, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/03/text/20070306-3.html>.

commissions and task forces.¹⁵ Ultimately, the commission's final report centered around three pillars:

1. "To serve those injured in the line of duty while defending their nation";
2. "To support their recovery and successful rehabilitation"; and
3. "To simplify the sometimes overly complex systems that frustrate some injured service members and their families and impede efficient care."¹⁶

In pursuit of these goals, the commission presented six recommendations with specific action steps for the White House and Congress. Significantly, the commission emphasized that it did not recommend "merely patching the [health care] system, as has been done in the past." Instead, the commission stated that "the experiences of [the] young men and women [they interviewed]... highlighted the need for fundamental changes in care management and the disability system."¹⁷

1. **Immediately create comprehensive recovery plans to provide the right care and support at the right time in the right place.**

These recovery plans were meant to smoothly and seamlessly guide service members through their medical treatment, rehabilitation, and disability programs. Moreover, they were meant to help service members obtain services promptly and in the most appropriate care facilities. Each wounded warrior was to be assigned a recovery coordinator who would design and execute the service member's recovery plan and who would ensure that the patient/family had a singular point of contact to whom they could direct all questions and concerns.

2. **Completely restructure the disability determination and compensation systems.**

This recommendation was largely formulated in response to the survey data that the commission collected, which indicated that there was pervasive dissatisfaction, confusion, and a lack of awareness regarding the military's disability evaluation and VA claims process. The report listed action steps to clarify and standardize the disability evaluation process and to begin educating wounded warriors about their benefits earlier in the rehabilitation process.

3. **Aggressively prevent and treat post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.**

¹⁵Dole-Shalala Commission, "Serve, Support, Simplify: Report of the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors," NPR News, July 2007, Accessed January 2nd, 2022, https://media.npr.org/documents/2007/jul/wounded_warriors_final.pdf.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

This recommendation called on Congress to allow every Veteran who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan to receive treatment for PTSD at a VA facility. The commission also encouraged DOD to address its shortage of mental health clinicians and take steps to improve its prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and TBI.

4. **Significantly strengthen support for families.**

Action steps for this recommendation included making combat-injured service members eligible for the TRICARE respite care benefit and providing family caregivers with training and counseling to support them in their roles. The commission also called on Congress to amend the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to allow up to six months' leave for a family member of a service member with a combat-related injury.

5. **Rapidly transfer patient information between the DOD and VA.**

The commission noted that in order to implement the recovery plan recommendation, within 12 months, the DOD and VA must make patient data more accessible. As such, the commission recommended that the DOD and VA work to create a fully interoperable information system that would meet the long-term administrative and clinical needs of all military personnel over time. Meanwhile, the commission advised the DOD and VA to develop a "user-friendly, tailored, and specific" services and benefits portal for service members, Veterans, and family members.

6. **Strongly support Walter Reed by recruiting and retaining first-rate professionals through 2011.**

This recommendation sought to ensure that Walter Reed continued to have the resources it needed to maintain a standard of excellence in both inpatient and outpatient care. To do so, the commission recommended that the DOD implement tailored incentive packages to hire and retain qualified civilian health care and administrative professionals.¹⁸

Many of the commission's recommendations were ultimately implemented. For example, in the FY2008 and FY2010 National Defense Authorization Acts, Congress expanded the FMLA to give the caregivers of seriously wounded service members and Veterans the ability to take leave for up to 26 weeks a year without the threat of losing their job.¹⁹

Interagency Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes

President Bush's Executive Order 13426 also established the Interagency Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes ("Heroes Task Force") composed of the Secretaries

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 § 585; National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 § 565.

of Defense, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Education, plus the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Administrator of the Small Business Administration, and Director of the Office of Personnel Management. The purpose of the task force was to improve the delivery of federal services and benefits to GWOT service members and Veterans. Specifically, it was charged with:

1. Identifying and examining the existing federal services that were provided to GWOT service members;
2. Identifying gaps in such services;
3. Seeking recommendations from federal agencies on ways to fill those gaps as effectively and expeditiously as possible using existing resources; and
4. Ensuring that in providing services to these service members, appropriate federal agencies are communicating and cooperating effectively.²⁰

In recognition of the dire circumstances faced by many wounded warriors in need of care, the Heroes Task Force's timeline to accomplish these tasks was truncated; it had only 45 days from the issuance of the order to submit an action plan to the president. Ultimately, the task force received over 2,400 comments from Veterans, active-duty personnel, Veterans service organizations (VSO), and other interested parties.²¹ Based on this feedback and other analysis, the Heroes Task Force devised 25 recommendations for improving Veteran quality of care, including:

- ★ Developing a joint DOD-VA process to provide more consistent and faster processing of disability determinations;
- ★ Screening all GWOT Veterans who seek VA support for any form of traumatic brain injury;
- ★ Simplifying and expediting the VA enrollment process for health care services and benefits;
- ★ Increasing attendance at Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disability Transition Assistance Program (DTAB) briefings to better educate Veterans about their benefits;

²⁰The White House of President George W. Bush, "Executive Order: Establishing a Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors and a Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes," Accessed January 2nd, 2022, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/03/text/20070306-3.html>.

²¹Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes, "Report to the President," April 19th, 2007, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA466594.pdf>.

- ★ Improving access to care for returning service members in remote or rural areas;
- ★ Expanding access to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s National Housing Locator to ease service members' relocation;
- ★ Improving civilian workforce credentialing and certification to help service members translate their military experience into civilian job opportunities; and
- ★ Expanding eligibility for the Small Business Administration's Patriot Express Loan Program to provide Veterans with a full range of lending, business counseling, and procurement programs.²²

President Bush approved this action plan and ordered the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to begin working with other federal agencies to implement its recommendations.²³ Many of the Heroes Task Forces' proposals were thereafter enacted. For example, shortly after the publication of the report, the VA adopted mandatory TBI screening for all post-9/11 Veterans accessing care in VA that had served in combat operations.²⁴

Security of the Military Family

"This Christmas, many will sit down for dinner thinking of their loved ones half a world away... These families deserve the thanks and the prayers of our whole nation... All these families have already given so much to America, and yet they have found a way to give even more. We thank each of them, and we thank every one of our citizens who supports our troops with letters and donations or prayers."

– President George W. Bush, December 22nd, 2007, during a holiday address to service members and their families²⁵

New Resources

The Bush administration oversaw the creation of many vital military family resources—including Military OneSource and the National Resource Directory (NRD).

²²ibid.

²³Todd Eastham, "Bush Orders Veterans Health Action Plan Implemented," Reuters, April 24th, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-Veterans-bush/bush-orders-Veterans-health-action-plan-implemented-idUSN2420007620070425>.

²⁴U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Polytrauma/TBI System of Care," Accessed January 2nd, 2022, https://www.polytrauma.va.gov/system-of-care/TBI_Screening.asp.

²⁵The Associated Press, "Bush Praises U.S. Troops, Military Families," December 22nd, 2007, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna22370508>.

Military OneSource

In 2004, the DOD launched Military OneSource with the goal of providing military families with a “24/7 connection to information, answers, and support to help [families] reach [their] goals, overcome challenges, and thrive.”²⁶ Today, the website provides robust online information and resources vetted by the DOD. Moreover, Military OneSource connects family members to programs, services, and products developed specifically for military life—including spouse employment assistance, tax services, webinars and online training, relocation and deployment tools, etc. The service also provides access to free, confidential counseling to help family members tackle stressors like deployment and reintegration, parenting, marital issues, grief and loss, and financial concerns—without having to worry about impacting their service member’s career.²⁷

National Resource Directory (NRD)

In 2008, the DOD, Department of Labor (DOL), and VA partnered to create a centralized reference point for service members, their dependents, caregivers, survivors, and wounded warriors alike. The idea was to gather all of the resources that the federal government and non-governmental sector had to offer in a single location and create greater awareness regarding the tools and services available to military families.²⁸ The National Resource Directory (NRD) has remained a fixture for the DOD, DOL, and VA for over a decade, and aggregates resources from across the government and military service organization (MSO) and Veteran service organization (VSO) space. The NRD provides information on services ranging from benefits and compensation to housing, transportation, and travel.

Military.com

In March 2004, Monster Worldwide, Inc, acquired Military Advantage, Inc, which operates Military.com—“the nation’s largest online military destination with over 3 million members.”²⁹ Monster’s acquisition of Military.com allowed the latter to expand its offerings and resources for military- and Veteran-connected communities. This growth precipitated a key partnership with the federal government. As Terry Howell of Military.com noted during a 2016 hearing before the U.S. House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity:

²⁶U.S. Department of Defense, “Military OneSource: About Us,” Accessed January 3rd, 2022, <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/about-us/>.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸National Resource Directory, “About Us: National Resource Directory (NRD),” Accessed January 6th, 2022, <https://nrd.gov/About-Us>.

²⁹Military.com, “Monster Worldwide Announces Strategic Interactive Acquisition,” March 2004, <https://www.military.com/about-us/press-release/2004/monster-worldwide-announces-strategic-interactive-acquisition.html>.

“Military.com was founded in 1999 with a significant mission: connect service members, Veterans, and their families with all the benefits of service and with each other. Today, we’re the largest military and Veteran membership organization [...] Military.com’s free membership connects service members, military spouses, Veterans, and their families to all the benefits of service and related resources [...] In 2004, Military.com joined forces with Monster Worldwide to change the playing field for career and educational opportunities for [the military community] [...]

In the mid-2000s, Military.com was contracted by the Department of Defense to develop an online transition assistance program known as Turbo TAP. The program enabled service members (active and reserve component) to use a simple guided process to create their own Individual Transition Plan (IDP), which they could print or revisit online at any point in the future.

In 2008, Military.com and Monster Worldwide were selected to contribute to the creation of a set of tools for the VA For Vets and later the FedsforVets websites. The centerpiece of this project was our Military Skills Translator, which remains the only skills translator/job matching tool that incorporates the full breadth of a service member’s career experience and training. Users can include their collateral duties, multiple occupation codes, special assigned duties, and previous civilian employment when using this tool. In its application for the VA For Vets website, the Military.com skills translator also serves as the first step in a resume-building process, which helps Veterans explain their military skills in civilian-friendly terms.”³⁰

As this testimony illustrates, public-private partnerships between the federal government and entities like Monster Worldwide, Inc, can produce key resources for military and Veteran communities (e.g., Turbo TAP and the Military Skills Translator).

Spouse Employment and Financial Readiness

MyCAA

In 2007, DOD launched the My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA) Scholarship program—“a workforce development program that provides up to \$4,000 of tuition assistance to eligible military spouses.” The scholarship helps military spouses pursue or maintain a license, certification, or associate degree necessary to obtain employment in their occupation or career field. Military spouses may apply their scholarship money towards the costs of national tests for course credits required in order to graduate with a certain degree (e.g., the College Level Examination Program tests).³¹ As of 2020, MyCAA is available to

³⁰Terry D. Howell, “Written Testimony for the Record by Military.com/Monster Worldwide: Submitted to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity for the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs,” June 2016,

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20160615/105022/HHRG-114-VR10-Wstate-HowellIT-20160615.pdf>.

³¹U.S. Department of Defense, “Fact Sheet—My Career Advancement Account: Helping Spouses Reach Career Goals,” June 2021,

https://myseco.militaryonesource.mil/Portal/Media/Default/Collaterals_Catalog/Program_Overview/MyCAA-Helping-Spouses-Reach-Career-Goals.pdf.

spouses of all enlisted service members (irrespective of rank), as well as spouses of warrant officers (at the W-1 and W-2 ranks) and junior officers (at the O-1 and O-2 ranks).³²

“MyCAA was the first attempt inside the government to try to create financial support for spouses—similar to the tuition assistance that service members receive. The program was also focused in areas that would help spouses get short-term credentials in careers that are mobile [...] [MyCAA] has not grown as much as many of us would have hoped, but the fact that it has survived and kept funding alive shows that it is a valuable tool for the younger members of the military community to be able to advance their education and career aspirations.”

– Leslye Arsht, former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, U.S. Department of Defense; former Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Education in Iraq

Though congressional support for the program has fluctuated since its creation, a 2018 RAND study found indicators that the program was successful, including:

- ★ Spouses who applied for the MyCAA program were likely to have “experienced a military move or a deployment, had [two] or more children, were married to enlisted noncommissioned officers, or lived in states with higher unemployment rates...” This means that scholarship applicants were, in general, the military spouses most likely to benefit from continued education and a wider range of employment opportunities.
- ★ Though MyCAA scholarship recipients were less likely to be employed between 2007 and 2013, by 2013, MyCAA recipients became more likely to be employed than non-recipients.
- ★ Service members with spouses utilizing MyCAA were nearly 10% more likely to be on active duty by the end of the study, compared to those not on the program.³³

³²Congressional Research Service, “Military Spouse Employment,” August 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46498>.

³³Laura L. Miller, et al., “An Early Evaluation of the My Career Advancement Account Scholarship Military Spouses,” RAND Corporation, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2093.html.

Military Children’s Education

Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission (MIC3)

The average military family moves approximately three times as often as the average non-military family.³⁴ Such moves can disrupt a child’s learning, cause them to miss out on extracurricular activities, and impede their ability to fulfill graduation requirements.³⁵ In 2006, the Council on State Governments (CSG) began working with a variety of federal, state, and local officials, as well as national stakeholder organizations, to create a new interstate agreement to alleviate these education-related challenges.³⁶ The resulting Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (“Compact”) was adopted by 11 states in 2008 at the first Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission (MIC3) meeting.³⁷ By 2014, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had adopted the Compact (see Chapter 2).³⁸

“There were many interstate compacts throughout American history, but nobody had ever done one in DOD before. A committee of military-affiliated stakeholders worked on the content of the compact—including representatives from the Defense-State Liaison Office (DSLO), the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), and others. The resulting Compact sought to address the key challenges faced by military-connected children. For example, if your child started kindergarten at the age of five, because you lived in a state that allowed that, and you relocated to a state where children must start kindergarten at the age of six, your child wouldn’t have been able to go the six-year-old kindergarten; they would have had to wait until they turned six to attend. That was simply ridiculous, and we addressed that in the Compact. We tackled similar issues at higher grade levels. For example, if your child took Algebra in eighth grade, and then moved the next year to a school district where they didn’t teach it until ninth grade, your child

³⁴U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, “The Military Interstate Compact,” Accessed January 2nd, 2022, <https://www.dodea.edu/partnership/interstatecompact.cfm>.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission, “Background,” Accessed January 3rd, 2022, <https://mic3.net/background/>.

³⁷Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission, “Organization Timeline,” Accessed January 3rd, 2022, <https://mic3.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Historical-Leadership-2020-1.pdf>.

³⁸U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, “The Military Interstate Compact,” Accessed January 3rd, 2022, <https://www.dodea.edu/partnership/interstatecompact.cfm>.

wouldn't have to take that course again. There were issues around sports and AP eligibility that needed to be ironed out, many topics involved timing and logistics [...] Unfortunately, implementation of the Compact is quite uneven across states and school districts, so it's not a silver bullet. That said, families now at least have a framework in place by which to resolve these issues.”

– Leslye Arsht, former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, U.S. Department of Defense; former Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Education in Iraq

According to MIC3, while the Compact “is not exhaustive in its coverage, it does address the key issues encountered by military families: eligibility, enrollment, placement, and graduation.”³⁹ Moreover, “the Compact provides for a detailed governance structure at both the state and national levels with built-in enforcement and compliance mechanisms.”⁴⁰

MIC3's 2021 annual report noted that there are over 600,000 school-age children (ages 5-18) in active-duty families worldwide.⁴¹ The commission continues to work to provide these children with the best possible educational experiences, despite the myriad challenges inherent to the military lifestyle. Many of the governmental departments and non-governmental organizations that collaborated to bring the Compact to fruition continue to work together to shape the future of military children's education—including the DOD, MCEC, National Military Family Association (NMFA), and Military Impacted Schools Association (MISA).⁴²

U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) Grants

Recognizing the importance of high-quality education to military families, in 2008, Congress granted DODEA the ability to “share resources with public schools that educate military-connected students.”⁴³ DODEA was likewise empowered to create and execute a grant program to “support research-based strategies that enhance student achievement and ease the challenges that military children face due [to] their parents' military service.”⁴⁴

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, “2021 Annual Report,” Accessed January 4th, 2022, https://mic3.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MIC3_Annual_Report_2021_Web_FINAL-1.pdf.

⁴²Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, “Ex-Officio,” Accessed January 4th, 2022, <https://mic3.net/ex-officio/>.

⁴³National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008; see U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, “The DoDEA Grant Program,” Accessed January 6th, 2022, <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/grants.cfm>.

⁴⁴Ibid.

As of 2021, the DODEA has awarded nearly 500 grants (totaling approximately \$522 million) to local education agencies (LEAs) serving military-connected students. Moreover, the agency awarded the National Math Science Foundation \$40 million to assist in its efforts to improve graduation rates for military-connected students.⁴⁵ The DODEA has also published a plethora of resources for teachers and administrators about the social, emotional, college, career, and virtual learning needs of military-connected students.⁴⁶

According to the DODEA, Educational Partnership Program grants have reached over 3.2 million students (31% military-connected) in over 3,100 schools across the country. Its data suggests that the grants have yielded “significant improvement in student achievement, increased professional development for teachers, [and] enhanced social and emotional support.”⁴⁷

Boosting Morale

America Supports You

In November 2004, the Bush administration launched the America Supports You (ASY) program, which became one of the first major cross-sector collaborative initiatives to support military and Veteran families.⁴⁸ The mission of ASY was to “recogniz[e] citizens’ support for our military men and women and [to] communicat[e] that support to members of our Armed Forces at home and abroad.” The ASY website, therefore, featured a dialogue box where civilians could submit messages of gratitude and support to active-duty service members, Veterans, and their families. Troops were able to respond to messages and thank civilians and organizations for their support.

ASY also highlighted the work of individuals and nonprofit organizations, such as MSOs/VSOs, to celebrate their contributions and create increased awareness of the ways in which civilians could support military and Veteran families. One such spotlight featured the efforts of country music artists, fans, and the Grand Ole Opry to send the “world’s largest care package” to troops overseas.⁴⁹ Another showcased a New Jersey foundation’s efforts to give school children the opportunity to teleconference with active-duty service members

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, “Tools and Training,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://dodeagrants.org/tools-and-training>.

⁴⁷U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, “The DoDEA Grant Program,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/grants.cfm>.

⁴⁸U.S. Department of Defense Inspector General, “The America Supports You Program,” December 12th, 2008, <https://media.defense.gov/2008/Dec/12/2001712020/-1/-1/1/09-032.pdf>.

⁴⁹Samantha L. Quigley, “Opry to Send ‘World’s Largest Care Package,’” American Forces Press Service, October 5th, 2007, <http://web.archive.org/web/20071009164814/http://www.americasupportsyou.mil/AmericaSupportsYou/Content.aspx?ID=44786942&SectionID=1>

deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. These conversations simultaneously boosted morale for service members and enhanced civilian youths' understanding of military lifestyle and culture.⁵⁰ ASY's spotlights were shared on the ASY website, as well as in the ASY weekly e-newsletter.⁵¹

By 2007, more than 250 groups "representing communities from coast to coast, [had] joined the ASY team to support the troops in many ways, including writing letters and emails, sending care packages, and assisting military families or helping the wounded when they return home."⁵² Cumulatively, these groups:

- ★ Provided more than \$4,600,000 in direct financial support to military members and their families;
- ★ Provided more than 9,000 free airline tickets—worth more than \$11 million—to hospitalized service members and their families, helping to keep them connected during recovery;
- ★ Provided assistance to more than 100,000 military families;
- ★ Built or adapted dozens of homes for wounded service members;
- ★ Provided more than 1,600 computers to military families to help keep them connected with their deployed loved ones;
- ★ Sent more than 3 million care packages to deployed service members;
- ★ Sent more than half a million books to deployed service members; and
- ★ Greeted more than 75,000 troops at the airport as they return home from deployment.⁵³

The ASY initiative was one of the first meaningful post-9/11 attempts within the federal government to address the civil-military divide. Though a well-intentioned effort, the DOD's Office of the Inspector General found that poor oversight and regulation led to challenges in

⁵⁰Samantha L. Quigley, "Foundation Offers FACTs to Schools," American Forces Press Service, September 27th, 2007, <http://web.archive.org/web/20071009171417/https://www.americasupportsyou.mil/americasupportsyou/Content.aspx?ID=4478570>.

⁵¹For the ASY e-newsletter archive, see <http://web.archive.org/web/20071009224350/http://www.americasupportsyou.mil/americasupportsyou/america/newsletter/archive.html>.

⁵²America Supports You, "America Supports You Fact Sheet," March 23rd, 2007, http://web.archive.org/web/20071009204255/http://www.americasupportsyou.mil/americasupportsyou/materials/ASY_Fact_Sheet032307.pdf.

⁵³*Ibid.*

its administration.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, ASY set the stage for future cross-sector, public-private partnerships to support military and Veteran families.⁵⁵

“I think, in general, there's just a feeling that people support the military—and that starts at the top [...] [I]t's very different [...] from Vietnam when [...] [soldiers] came home from war and were spit upon [...] That's not the way it is now [...] I hope our returning Veterans really feel the gratitude and the support of the American public [...] Thousands of Veteran support groups—little mom and pop groups—have sprung up all over the United States because people do want to support our returning vets [...] And the other thing we should look at is what an asset [these Veterans] are. There have been 2.5 million post-9/11 vets and I think another million will be transitioning out in the next year or so. Think of the asset that is for our country! These people chose to serve—volunteered to serve—and now they want to come home. [I]t's up to us [...] to figure out how we can help them keep serving in our community and make a life for themselves that they're happy with, and deal with the trauma that a lot of them have—the trauma of war.”

– First Lady Laura Bush⁵⁶

A Long Way to Go

As the Bush administration came to a close, military and Veteran families continued to face many dire challenges. For example, on the employment front, Veterans and military spouses struggled to find and maintain gainful employment. In early 2009, the unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans was 11.2%—nearly 2% higher than the national 9.4% rate for

⁵⁴U.S. Department of Defense Inspector General, “The America Supports You Program,” December 12th, 2008, <https://media.defense.gov/2008/Dec/12/2001712020/-1/-1/1/09-032.pdf>.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶C-SPAN, “First Ladies' Support for the Military Community,” September 16th, 2016, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?415360-1/michelle-obama-laura-bush-discuss-role-legacy-ladies>.

non-Veterans.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the unemployment rate for military spouses was three times higher than civilian spouses.⁵⁸

On the wellness front, GWOT service members and Veterans were struggling with mental health issues and alarmingly high suicide rates. In 2008, the RAND Corporation's landmark "Invisible Wounds of War" study found that approximately 20% of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans were suffering from PTSD or major depression. A similar percentage was afflicted with a TBI. Unfortunately, only 1 in 4 Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans with PTSD or depression were receiving minimally adequate mental health treatment.⁵⁹ The failure to adequately identify and treat military and Veteran mental health challenges had fatal consequences. In 2008, there were a total of 268 service member suicides.⁶⁰ The Army, in particular, reached a 27-year high of 140 in 2008—an 80% increase since 2004.⁶¹ Meanwhile, approximately 2,546 Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans had committed suicide since 2001.⁶²

Finally, on the education front, military children continued to be impacted by the GWOT. By 2008, approximately two million children had been affected by a parent's deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. According to a 2008 DOD study, more than half of the 13,000 military spouses surveyed reported increased levels of fear, anxiety, and behavioral problems in their children. More than one-third of spouses reported that their children were increasingly acting out in school.⁶³ While the Bush Administration had begun to address many of these issues and had set the stage for cross-sector, collaborative efforts, much of the work remained to be done. Enter Joining Forces.

⁵⁷Vanessa Williamson, "Supporting Our Troops, Veterans, and their Families: Lessons Learned and Future Opportunities for Philanthropy," Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund (IADIF) of the California Community Foundation, November 2009, https://www.calfund.org/wp-content/uploads/CCF_IADIF_FullReport_WebOptimized-1.pdf.

⁵⁸U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Military Spouse Education and Employment," Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, Military Community & Family Policy, January 2008.

⁵⁹Terri Tanielian and Lisa H. Jaycox, eds., "Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery," RAND Corporation, 2008, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720.html>.

⁶⁰U.S. Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Suicide Event Report (DODSER) CY 2008," Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://www.dsps.mil/Portals/113/Documents/2008-DoDSER-Annual-Report.pdf>.

⁶¹T. W. Lineberry and S.S. O'Connor, "Suicide in the US Army," Mayo Clinic Proceedings, 2012, 87(9), 871-878, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mayocp.2012.07.002>.

⁶²Vanessa Williamson, "Supporting Our Troops, Veterans, and their Families: Lessons Learned and Future Opportunities for Philanthropy," Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund (IADIF) of the California Community Foundation, November 2009, https://www.calfund.org/wp-content/uploads/CCF_IADIF_FullReport_WebOptimized-1.pdf.

⁶³Ibid.

Chapter 2: The Obama Administration (2009-2017)

Touching the mantle in the red room to ground myself in the experience

Be Present

Witnessing my heroes stand up in support of my journey

She saves the world in so many ways

The idea of Hidden Heroes, the idea that I might be one

The leadership that inspires action and support and love

My heart sinks with the responsibility and swells with the possibilities

A validation for all these years sleeping with the war

The honor of my life to care for the love of my life

A day to hold like a compass heading in the right direction

I am Joining Forces.

– Melissa Comeau

Director, Military and Veteran Caregiver Network,

American Red Cross

Written on April 14th, 2014

“The spirit of service and selflessness that is seen in military communities across our country represents what is best about America, and as a Nation, we owe our brave service members and their families more than gratitude – we owe them the support they have earned. Joining Forces will ask all Americans to take action, because each of us has a role to play in reconnecting with military families in our communities.”

– First Lady Michelle Obama⁶⁴

“As a military mom, I know how a simple act of kindness can make a difference to a soldier. It is our sacred duty to honor the service of those who sacrifice for our country – and we can all play a role with a simple act of service.”

– First Lady Jill Biden⁶⁵

“Our men and women in uniform stand watch abroad and more are readying to deploy. To each and every one of them, and to the families who bear the quiet burden of their absence, Americans are united in sending one message: we honor your service, we are inspired by your sacrifice, and you have our unyielding support.⁶⁶ And just as they must have the resources they need in war, we all have a responsibility to support them when they come home.”

– President Barack Obama⁶⁷

“All Americans should know that one act of kindness extended to a family of a soldier, sailor, airman, marine, or coast guardsmen reverberates across the water, over the mountains, through the deserts into the heart of the warrior who is standing alone, think as much about his or her family as their family is thinking about him or her. I promise you... it

⁶⁴Jason K. Dempsey and C. Bradford Cooper, “Joining Forces: Bridging the Civil-Military Divide,” Berkeley Electronic Press, October 11th, 2011, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2202/1540-8884.1461/pdf>.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶President Barack Obama, “Presidential Address to Joint Session of Congress,” The White House of President Barack Obama, February 24th, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-to-joint-session-of-congress/.

⁶⁷President Barack Obama, “Presidential State of the Union Address,” The White House of President Barack Obama, January 27th, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-pressoffice/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

matters.”

– President Joe Biden⁶⁸

In 2011, First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden launched Joining Forces, a “comprehensive national initiative to mobilize all sectors of society to give our service members and their families the opportunities and support they have earned.”⁶⁹ Joining Forces worked hand in hand with public and private sectors to ensure that service members, Veterans, and their families had the opportunities, resources, and support they needed to thrive. Ultimately, the power of Joining Forces came from its ability to shine a light on the unique experiences and strengths of America’s military and Veteran families, and to catalyze cross-sector collaboration to address the challenges and concerns of military and Veteran communities.

The Road to Joining Forces

When President Obama took office in 2009, the GWOT had been raging for more than seven years. Over the course of that time, millions of Americans had volunteered to serve their country in uniform, and hundreds of thousands had been deployed multiple times overseas. Approximately 6,000 brave men and women had died in the line of duty.⁷⁰ Tens of thousands had been wounded—many suffering from TBI and PTSD.⁷¹ Moreover, with fewer than 1% of the U.S. population serving in uniform, many military families felt as though the American public did not truly understand or appreciate the sacrifices their families were making in the prosecution of these conflicts.⁷²

“It’s hard to communicate just how difficult things were in 2009. I had to make regular casualty calls to families in our unit telling them that someone we knew had died or was injured [...] We were worried about retention, and about the readiness and mental health of our force and families [...] Joining Forces shined a spotlight on these issues and created a national level of awareness about what we were going through, which paved the way for some really impactful nonprofit and public/private

⁶⁸Vice President Joe Biden, “Joining Forces to Support Military Families,” The White House of President Barack Obama, April 12th, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1CrFKf6qeQ>.

⁶⁹Jason K. Dempsey and C. Bradford Cooper, “Joining Forces: Bridging the Civil-Military Divide,” Berkeley Electronic Press, October 11th, 2011, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2202/1540-8884.1461/pdf>.

⁷⁰Vice President Joe Biden, “Joining Forces to Support Military Families,” April 12th, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1CrFKf6qeQ>.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Only 6% of military family respondents to Blue Star Families’ 2009 Military Family Lifestyle Survey said that they felt “understood” and “appreciated” by the general public. (Please contact Jennifer Akin, Co-Director of Applied Research at Blue Star Families, for more information: jakin@bluestarfam.org.)

initiatives.”

– Laura Schmiegel, former Chair, Blue Star Families Board of Directors; founding Director of the Military Spouse Program, Hiring Our Heroes

Unlike during the Vietnam war, American civilians largely regarded post-9/11 service members with respect and admiration. According to Pew Research Center, 84% of U.S. adults in 2009 said that members of the armed services contribute “a lot” to society’s well-being—topping a list of professions that included teachers, medical doctors, scientists, engineers, clergy, and journalists.⁷³ As then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen noted, there was a “sea of goodwill” on the American homefront: “Today, unlike any generation in history, citizens across the country are supportive in word and deed of the American Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard Soldier, Sailor, Airman, Marine, and Coast Guardsman.⁷⁴ The challenge [...] is how do you connect that sea of goodwill to the need?”⁷⁵

On the Campaign Trail

While on the campaign trail in 2007, Michelle Obama, spouse of then-Senator Barack Obama, organized and participated in a series of roundtable discussions with working mothers—a number of which included military spouses. These were the first of many “fact-finding” conversations she would have with military and Veteran family members. Roundtable participants spoke candidly about the challenges faced by active-duty families, including (but not limited to) the effects of frequent permanent change of station (PCS) moves on dependent children’s education, as well as a spouse’s ability to maintain meaningful employment. Family members also discussed their experiences with extended deployments and a lack of sufficient dwell time to recover—which were due, in part, to the surge of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mrs. Obama learned that the rising operations tempo (OPTEMPO)

⁷³Pew Research Center, “Public Esteem for Military Still High,” July 11th, 2013, <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/11/public-esteem-for-military-still-high/>.

⁷⁴J. Copeland and D. Sutherland, “Sea of Goodwill: Matching the Donor to the Need,” 2011, retrieved from First in Families of North Carolina: http://www.fifnc.org/programs/Sea_of_Goodwill.pdf.

⁷⁵Admiral Michael Mullen, “Brain Injury Research Warrants Urgency,” U.S. Department of Defense, February 9th, 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=56537>.

was contributing to a growing incidence of mental health issues among military family members.⁷⁶

“Meeting our service members [and] spending time on military bases fundamentally changes who you are as a civilian—and I know that was true for me because [...] I was like most Americans: I had limited connection to the military community [...] [I]t wasn’t until Barack’s campaign in 2008 that I started meeting military spouses and hearing their voices—voices that you don’t hear in regular conversation. We talked about all the challenges that working mothers had [...] financial worries, worr[ies] about raising your kids [...] [B]ut with these women [...] there were the [additional] worries of multiple deployments, [...] moving their kids every two years in service of their country, worr[ies] about whether there are adequate special ed[ucation] programs in the schools they’re moving to, [etc.]. [A]nd [they navigated] all of this with a grace and a pride that [...] blew me away. [...] I wish every American had an opportunity [...] to go to a base, to meet with families, to meet with service members, to sit down with our Veterans, because we would think differently about our challenges as individuals.”

– First Lady Michelle Obama in 2016, reflecting on her experiences interacting with military spouses on the campaign trail⁷⁷

In August 2008, Senator Obama selected Senator Joseph Biden, Jr. to be his presidential running mate. Shortly thereafter, Biden’s son Beau deployed to Iraq with his Delaware Army National Guard unit.⁷⁸ As a military mom whose son was on active duty overseas, Dr. Jill Biden shared Mrs. Obama’s passion for addressing the needs and concerns of military and Veteran families. The two decided early on that, if their husbands were to win the election, military and Veteran families would be a key focus of their work as First and Second Lady.⁷⁹

“During the 2008 campaign, both Mrs. Obama and Dr. Biden knew that if they won, they’d want to prioritize military family issues. [...] Back in

⁷⁶Information obtained from Blue Star Families’ interview with Tina Tchen, former Chief of Staff to First Lady Michelle Obama, on April 15th, 2021.

⁷⁷C-SPAN, “First Ladies’ Support for the Military Community,” September 16th, 2016,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?415360-1/michelle-obama-laura-bush-discuss-role-legacy-ladies>.

⁷⁸Karen Travers, “VP Biden Welcomes Home Son’s National Guard Brigade, Thanks Troops for Service,” ABC News, September 29th, 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/vice-president-joe-biden-speaks-son-beau-bidens/story?id=8705947>.

⁷⁹Information obtained from Blue Star Families’ interview with Tina Tchen, former Chief of Staff to First Lady Michelle Obama, on April 15th, 2021.

2007, we were knee deep in deployments [...] Over the course of the primary campaign, Mrs. Obama became very committed to resolving these issues. Once Senator Biden was chosen as Senator Obama's running mate, Mrs. Obama and Dr. Biden connected and realized that they both shared this passion [...] Thereon, Mrs. Obama had her staff do critical thinking about the status of military and Veteran families' issues and how the White House could make an impact. Mrs. Obama really wanted to ensure that whatever she and Dr. Biden chose to do, it had an impact."

- Tina Tchen, former Chief of Staff, Office of the First Lady; President & CEO, Time's Up Now and Time's Up Foundation

A "Whole of Government" Approach

Rome was not built in a day, and neither was Joining Forces. The initiative was crafted over the course of two years, as the Obama administration worked to manage competing priorities (including economic recovery in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008). Moreover, the White House wanted to ensure that the program would have a meaningful impact on the lives of service members, Veterans, and their families. As such, the administration devoted time and energy in 2009 and 2010 towards strategizing how best to leverage the bully pulpit of the White House in support of military and Veteran families.⁸⁰

In May 2010, President Barack Obama commissioned **Presidential Study Directive-9 (PSD-9)**, "Strengthening Our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment," which directed National Security Staff and the Domestic Policy Council to examine the needs of, and challenges faced by, military and Veteran family members. PSD-9 further called upon Cabinet secretaries and agency heads to examine their department/agency's support for military families and create commitments unique to their department/agency to accelerate efforts to bolster support.⁸¹ The goal of the study directive was to create "a unified Federal Government approach"⁸² to help ensure that:

- ★ The U.S. military recruits and retains America's top talent;
- ★ Service members maintain both strong families and a high state of readiness;

⁸⁰Rory Brosius, "Joining Forces: Lessons Learned," A Battle Plan For Supporting Military Families (Springer International Publishing, 2018), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-68984-5>.

⁸¹The White House of President Barack Obama, "Presidential Initiative Supports Military Families," Archive, January 24th, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/24/presidential-initiative-supports-military-families>.

⁸²Ibid.

- ★ Family members can live fulfilling lives while supporting their service member(s); and
- ★ The American people better understand and appreciate the experience, strength, and commitment of those who serve and sacrifice on their behalf.

“From November 2009 through 2010, we spent a year pulling every Cabinet member’s staff together to come up with ‘here’s how the executive branch is going to support military families.’ [...] After President Obama commissioned PSD-9, we held a series of sub-interagency policy committee meetings. I led those efforts. We had 1-2 representatives from every Cabinet department in attendance and ran monthly committee meetings to make sure everybody was aligned in their efforts. We spent a lot of time at those meetings presenting ideas and talking about what worked and what didn’t work [...] Every agency had a series of pledges that they were going to make [...] For example, the Department of Labor was going to work on state licensure and certification requirements; the Department of the Interior was going to make national parks available for free to military families, etc. We wanted the front page of the final study directive to be signed by every Cabinet member—to signal the whole of government support. So, the day before a Cabinet meeting in January 2011, a friend and I drove around Washington, D.C. all morning, afternoon, and night, collecting signatures. We then presented the document to President Obama the next day, and the report was officially released on January 24th—right in time for the State of the Union on January 25th. That was pretty exciting [...] PSD-9 really got our government house in order—which we felt was important to do before we went out and asked the nonprofit and private sectors to do the same. Rosye Cloud (in the National Security Council Staff) tracked government process on the commitments and Jason Dempsey (in the First Lady’s Office) took the report and started gathering commitments from the private sector as part of *Joining Forces*.”

– Mike Harasimowicz, former Director for Defense Policy & Strategy, National Security Council, White House; Principal AI Engineer, Lockheed Martin

In particular, PSD-9 sought to centralize the federal government’s efforts around four strategic priorities, which the administration identified via listening sessions with military and Veteran families:

1. Enhance the well-being and psychological health of the military family;
2. Ensure excellence in military children’s education and their development;
3. Develop career and educational opportunities for military spouses; and
4. Increase child care availability and quality for the Armed Forces⁸³

In the final report (released on January 24th, 2011), the various Cabinet secretaries and agency heads made nearly 50 commitments to reform, strengthen, and better coordinate the ways in which their department/agency provided support for military families. The commitments made in PSD-9 were wide-ranging and included:

- ★ Initiatives by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to strengthen the services provided by behavioral health care systems to military families;
- ★ Collaboration between the VA, DOL, HUD, and DHHS to provide early intervention and test strategies to prevent Veterans from becoming homeless; and
- ★ The establishment of an Office of Servicemember Affairs in the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, to address the financial challenges facing military families.⁸⁴

White Oak I, “America Joins Forces with Military Families”

The administration recognized that the needs of military and Veteran families could not be addressed through government efforts alone. Tackling the challenges faced by military and Veteran families, while leveraging their unique skills and attributes, would require an all-hands, cross-sector strategy involving nonprofits, corporations, philanthropy, academia, and state/local governments. A successful strategy, they realized, would necessitate a new level of engagement between military-connected families and civilian society—one that weaved awareness of, and support for, the armed forces into myriad aspects of everyday life.

⁸⁵ Thankfully, a number of cross-sector efforts to support military and Veteran families were already underway, which the administration was able to coordinate and leverage.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴The White House of President Barack Obama, “Strengthening Our Military Families: Meeting America’s Commitment,” January 2011, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a550567.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Jason K. Dempsey and C. Bradford Cooper, “Joining Forces: Bridging the Civil-Military Divide,” Berkeley Electronic Press, October 11th, 2011, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2202/1540-8884.1461/pdf>.

From January 22nd-24th, 2010, 45 senior leaders from across the government, nonprofit, private, and philanthropic sectors gathered together for a three-day retreat at the White Oak Conference Center in northern Florida. The convening, titled “America Joins Forces with Military Families,” was inspired by the interest of the First and Second Lady, and was developed by a group of nonprofit organizations in consultation with the First Lady’s office, National Security Council, and Vice President’s office.⁸⁶ The purpose of the retreat was to identify gaps and redundancies in existing military and Veteran family programs and initiatives, and brainstorm solutions to the issues affecting modern military-connected families.

“The White Oak [Retreat] was an important part of coalescing the Department of Defense with the rest of leaders of different NGOs to step in and say, ‘Here’s what we want to do.’ That’s where I first met folks that to this day are good friends and helped me with orchestrating Presidential Study Directive-9.”

– Mike Harasimowicz, former Director for Defense Policy & Strategy, National Security Council, White House; Principal AI Engineer, Lockheed Martin

“White Oak created open, honest conversations. It was all about getting key force multipliers in the same room together, putting aside any sense of competition, and acknowledging that we all share the same mission of strengthening our military community. I remember the collegiality of those first gatherings—just how wonderful it all was. The relationships that were formed back then are still strong today [...] White Oak transformed the way our community communicated.”

– Bonnie Carroll, President & Founder, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

Participants at the White Oak Retreat came as subject matter experts—not as institutional representatives—and ideated in a series of small workshops and off-the-record, non-attribution conversations. These discussions were held amidst the surge of troops to the war in Afghanistan and focused on the critical need to support military family readiness during this difficult time.

⁸⁶The original sponsors of the retreat were Blue Star Families, the American Red Cross, USO, CNAS, ServiceNation, and the Howard Gilman Foundation.

“When Kathy Roth-Douquet, Rob Gordon, and Doug Wilson kicked off White Oak I in 2010, we were surging troops in Afghanistan, and we’d already been at war for almost 10 years—things were bad. However, there wasn’t a consolidated focus on military families. For the first decade or so of the wars, everyone was focused on the military and its deployments [...] White Oak jump-started the conversation around ‘What do military families need in terms of support?’ The questions we needed to answer were different than they were 40 years ago (the last time we had continual deployments). Moreover, the population—the service members and their families—were different because we now had an All-Volunteer Force. Plus, the culture was different because there are more women in the military, spouses want to work, etc. There was a recognition that we had to start answering military family readiness questions. That’s where White Oak came in [...] White Oak didn’t initiate every discussion around military families; however, it was a consolidation of those conversations. The folks who were in the room were the people who were involved in those discussions across the government. White Oak played an organizing function. Kathy, Rob, Doug, and others put all of the key players in the same room and said, ‘Ok, let’s figure this out.’”

– Margaret Mullins, former Staff Lead, White Oak Retreats; National Security Advisor, U.S. Senator Raphael Warnock (D-GA)

In her opening remarks on January 22nd, 2010, Kathy Roth-Douquet, CEO & Co-Founder of Blue Star Families, outlined the *raison d’être* of the White Oak Retreat:

“Military families are important to the health of our country—to the national security of our country. The well-being of military families is the whole country’s business, not just the business of the Department of Defense or the government [...] It is right and proper for the U.S. government to take leadership in directing the country’s attention to military families, and to take leadership in developing key programs to support the strength of military families. But ultimately, neither the government nor DOD can or should be the only, or perhaps even the main solution for military families [...]”⁸⁷

Kathy went on to describe the importance of engaging the community in an all-hands, cross-sector effort to support military and Veteran families.

⁸⁷Kathy Roth-Douquet, “Opening Remarks,” White Oak Retreat I, January 22nd, 2010. Please contact survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

“By bringing together so many representatives of key community and national resources, we hope to underscore the key partnerships that can be developed to help military families [...] Eight years into a war that still has many more years to go, military families are under great stress. Solutions will come from creative joint action between the government, community, and the families themselves.”⁸⁸

In the consensus-driven recommendations that emerged from the retreat, participants emphasized the need to better integrate military and Veteran families with their local civilian communities. Reflecting on the so-called “sea of goodwill,” participants acknowledged that “Americans want to help, but need to be asked to become involved and offered specifics.”⁸⁹ They recommended that “community roadmaps” or “blueprints” be developed to empower civilian communities to reach out to and engage military families. Moreover, participants recommended that national leaders use their platforms to rally American civilians in support of military and Veteran families.⁹⁰

“I remember having an epiphany moment similar to George Bailey in ‘It’s A Wonderful Life.’ What would the military family space look like if we didn’t have White Oak to call out the issues faced by military and Vet families, and target cross-sector solutions?”

– Harriet Dominique, former Chief Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Corporate Responsibility Officer, USAA

“White Oak, in fairness, helped to give rise to Joining Forces. It was the nexus [...] White Oak, to me, is an example of the power of the citizenry—what people can accomplish when they are organized. It was the enduring part of Joining Forces.”

– Steve Parker, former Director, Joining Forces; President, WorkMerk

Since the original “America Joins Forces” conference in 2010, the retreats have been held biannually and annually (now in Lansdowne, Virginia) to brainstorm solutions to the challenges faced by military and Veteran families.⁹¹

The End of the War in Iraq

Speaking from the White House on October 21st, 2011, President Obama announced the final withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Please contact Blue Star Families’ Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for a copy of this report.

⁹¹For more information, please visit: <https://bluestarfam.org/whiteoakretreat/>.

“Over the next two months, our troops in Iraq—tens of thousands of them—will pack up their gear and board convoys for the journey home. The last American soldier[s] will cross the border out of Iraq with their heads held high, proud of their success, and knowing that the American people stand united in our support for our troops [...] Here at home, the coming months will be another season of homecomings. Across America, our servicemen and women will be reunited with their families. Today, I can say that our troops in Iraq will definitely be home for the holidays. This December will be a time to reflect on all that we’ve been through in this war. I’ll join the American people in paying tribute to the more than 1 million Americans who have served in Iraq. We’ll honor our many wounded warriors and the nearly 4,500 American patriots—and their Iraqi and coalition partners—who gave their lives to this effort.”⁹²

U.S. military leaders marked the official end of the war in Iraq with a flag-lowering ceremony in Baghdad on December 15th, 2011. Three days later, the last convoy of American service members left the country (with the exception of those assigned to the U.S. embassy mission in Baghdad). According to Brown University’s Costs of War project, more than 190,000 people were killed during the war in Iraq (including 4,488 U.S. service members), and the conflict cost the United States approximately \$2.2 trillion.⁹³

Speaking to a gathering of service members and their families at Fort Bragg on December 14th, 2011, First Lady Michelle Obama reaffirmed the administration’s commitment to supporting military and Veteran families, notwithstanding the end of the war in Iraq.

⁹²President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Ending the War in Iraq,” The White House of President Barack Obama, October 21st, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/21/remarks-president-ending-war-iraq>.

⁹³Costs of War project, “Iraq War: 190,000 Lives, \$2.2 Trillion,” Brown University, March 14th, 2013, <https://news.brown.edu/articles/2013/03/warcosts>.

“[W]hen I think of all that you do and all that your families do, I am so proud and so grateful. But more importantly, I’m inspired. But like so many Americans, I never feel like I can fully convey just how thankful I am, because words just don’t seem to be enough [...] I want you to know that this nation’s support doesn’t end as this war ends. Not by a long shot [...] We’re going to keep finding new ways to serve all of you as well as you have served us.”⁹⁴

– First Lady Michelle Obama

The Launch of Joining Forces

On Tuesday, April 12th, 2011, First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden launched Joining Forces—a collaborative, cross-sector initiative to support and honor America’s service members, Veterans, and their families. With no formal authority or budget, the initiative aimed to leverage the power of the White House bully pulpit to energize and channel the efforts of private sector, nonprofit, and philanthropic partners. Ultimately, Joining Forces encouraged all Americans to “do what you do best” to support military and Veteran families.⁹⁵

“Government can’t do it all [...] There was no way to achieve what we wanted to achieve, without a non-governmental ecosystem to support the agencies. That’s why ‘Joining Forces’ was the right name for the First Lady’s initiative; the load is heavy, but many hands make light work.”

– Steve Parker, former Director, Joining Forces; President, WorkMerk

Primary Objectives of Joining Forces

The primary objectives of the Joining Forces initiative were as follows:

- ★ Bring attention to the unique experiences and strengths of America’s service members, Veterans, and their families;
- ★ Inspire, educate, and spark action from all sectors of society – citizens, communities, businesses, nonprofits, faith-based institutions, philanthropic organizations, and

⁹⁴First Lady Michelle Obama, “Remarks by the President and First Lady on the End of the War in Iraq,” The White House of President Barack Obama, December 14th, 2011,

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/14/remarks-president-and-first-lady-end-war-iraq>.

⁹⁵Rory Brosius, “Joining Forces: Lessons Learned,” A Battle Plan For Supporting Military Families (Springer International Publishing, 2018), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-68984-5>.

government – to ensure service members, Veterans, and their families have the opportunities, resources, and support they have earned;

- ★ Showcase the skills, experience, and dedication of America’s service members, Veterans, and their families to strengthen our nation’s communities; and
- ★ Create greater connections between the American public and the military.⁹⁶

These commitments suffused the key pillars of the Joining Forces initiative.

Key Pillars of Joining Forces

Through conversations with military and Veteran families, as well as experts in the space, First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden identified three pillars around which to organize the efforts of the Joining Forces initiative: Employment, Education, and Wellness.⁹⁷ A commitment to public awareness/education suffused Joining Forces’ work within each of these focus areas.

The East Wing outlined a series of secondary objectives within each pillar:

Employment

- ★ Expand employment and career development opportunities for Veterans and military spouses
- ★ Highlight the workforce potential of Veterans and military spouses
- ★ Educate employers about the need to create military family-friendly workplaces
- ★ Work to reduce or eliminate licensing and credentialing barriers

Education

- ★ Promote expanded education opportunities that:
 - Ease transferability for military-connected students
 - Increase job training opportunities for military spouses and Veterans
- ★ Support the academic achievement of military children by enhancing awareness of the unique needs of military children and families

Wellness

⁹⁶The White House of President Barack Obama, “About Joining Forces,” 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/joiningforces/about>.

⁹⁷Ibid.

- ★ Call attention to the critical issues facing Veterans and military families
- ★ Expand access to wellness programs and resources for military spouses and families

The bulk of Joining Forces' activities revolved around these secondary objectives and the primary objectives outlined above. The initiative itself was staffed by a small team in the First Lady's office and led by a rotating active-duty detailee director and White House-funded deputy director.

"I don't think we could have achieved the success we did early on without having a senior active-duty officer direct the initiative. There was great skepticism inside the national security and military apparatus about the launch of Joining Forces (many figured that it would just be another 'feel good' activity and nothing more). Having a senior active-duty officer oversee Joining Forces was critical to our access to military institutions, the authenticity of our efforts, and building our overall credibility."

– Tina Tchen, former Chief of Staff, Office of the First Lady; President & CEO, Time's Up Now and Time's Up Foundation

"The thing I've been most pleased about with Joining Forces is [the fact that] it's really been a call to partnership with all sectors—[the] corporate sector, with our safe communities, with our schools, our educators, our medical community. And what we have seen is that when you ask, people step up without hesitation. That's the power of our platform [...] The business community has created millions of jobs for our Veterans and our military spouses because of an ask that we made [...] They've helped them to get training, to be able to retain those jobs, and to advance within those jobs—and the same is true for military spouses as well. We've been pleased with our local leaders who have answered the call to end Veterans' homelessness—which was part of our call to action with Joining Forces. The notion that we have even one single Veteran living on the streets should be [...] considered a travesty to all of us. There are many mayors [...] [and] some states [that] have essentially eliminated Veteran homelessness because they've answered that call. The Hollywood community has also stepped up. We worked closely with writers and producers who helped develop plot lines that involved our military families [...] [I]ntegrating those stories into everyday life helped

to normalize these men and women and their families and familiarize the rest of the civilian community with those issues in [...] a non-preachy way. If you make things fun, if you get people to laugh, then you can get people to listen [...]"

– First Lady Michelle Obama⁹⁸

Public Awareness Campaign

Immediately after the launch of Joining Forces, First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden set out to raise awareness regarding the challenges faced by, and strengths of, military and Veteran families. They did so by engaging the news and entertainment sectors.

“In terms of trying to get national movement on an issue, the first step is awareness and education. Before anything else can happen, awareness and education have to happen. People have to care; they have to see the issue, and understand it. The next step is to get everybody to do something meaningful.”

– Jason Dempsey, former White House Fellow, Office of the First Lady; Adjunct Senior Fellow of the Military, Veterans, and Society Program, Center for a New American Security (CNAS)

Joining Forces Launch Tour

Joining Forces’ communications and outreach strategy was targeted to a wide range of media. On April 12th, 2011 (the day of the launch), First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden interviewed with Entertainment Tonight, regional TV conglomerates (including Hearst, Cox, and Belo), Associated Press, USA Today, Dateline NBC, Military.com, Stars & Stripes, and Military Times. On April 13th and 14th, they embarked on a two-day national tour to spotlight Joining Forces, which covered four states: North Carolina, Texas, Colorado, and Ohio. Those visits generated significant media coverage, and Mrs. Obama and Dr. Biden were joined by senior military personnel, local government officials, and members of Congress along the way. Each city stop highlighted one of the three pillars of the initiative.⁹⁹

⁹⁸C-SPAN, “First Ladies’ Support for the Military Community,” September 16th, 2016,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?415360-1/michelle-obama-laura-bush-discuss-role-legacy-ladies>.

⁹⁹Joining Forces, “Joining Forces News Summary,” April 12th-14th, 2011. Please contact survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

Engaging the Entertainment Industry

"The entertainment industry captures our imaginations, opens our eyes, and touches our hearts, and I'm proud to work with them on our Joining Forces initiative. By sharing the stories of strength and resilience that define our military families, we can motivate even more Americans to honor these courageous individuals in new ways. That's why I'm looking forward to working with the industry in the months and years ahead."

– First Lady Michelle Obama¹⁰⁰

Throughout the first year of the initiative, First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden worked with A&E Television Networks, AOL, Disney ABC, Major League Baseball, NASCAR, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Sesame Street, USO, Viacom's Nickelodeon, and countless other news and media outlets to shine a light on the service, sacrifice, and needs of military and Veteran families.

Inter-Guild Joining Forces Task Force

In June 2011, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), American Federation of Television & Radio Artists (AFTRA), Directors Guild of America (DGA), Producers Guild of America (PGA), and Writers Guild of America West (WGAW) co-founded the Inter-Guild Joining Forces Task Force to provide communications and production support to the Joining Forces initiative. The objective of the task force was to help the East Wing raise awareness regarding the resilience of, and challenges faced by, America's military families.¹⁰¹ These efforts included the creation of public service announcements by Tom Hanks, Oprah Winfrey, and Steven Spielberg, which were played on television and in movie theaters across the country.¹⁰²

"The White House knew that they wanted to work with the entertainment industry to amplify Joining Forces. The First Lady's team immediately reached out to the Hollywood guilds and production companies—one of those being J.J. Abrams' and Katie McGrath's production company, Bad Robot. Academy Award-winning producer Bruce Cohen and I facilitated the early relationship-building efforts to

¹⁰⁰Alex Ben Block, "Alec Baldwin, Sarah Jessica Parker Enlisting in Michelle Obama's Campaign to Help Veterans," The Hollywood Reporter, May 9th, 2012, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/got-your-six-michelle-obama-alec-baldwin-322664>.

¹⁰¹SAG-AFTRA, "SAG and Joining Forces Inter-Guild Task Force Members Host Conversation with First Lady Michelle Obama," June 13th, 2011, <https://www.sagaftra.org/sag-and-joining-forces-inter-guild-task-force-members-host-conversation-first-lady-michelle-obama>.

¹⁰²The White House of President Barack Obama, "Joining Forces Accomplishments Overview," https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/joining_forces_first_anniversary_accomplishments.pdf.

help get the ball rolling. Our goal was to initiate and mobilize grass-tops involvement in order to inspire and activate grassroots efforts. Right from the beginning, we were able to get the major studios – Disney, Warner Bros, Universal, and 20th Century Fox – to agree to donate major motion picture releases like “Pirates of the Caribbean,” “Harry Potter,” “Green Lantern,” “Dolphin Tale,” “Chipwrecked,” and “Cowboys and Aliens,” which were screened on dozens of bases across the country for thousands of military families. Similarly, theater chains donated tickets to military families. The movie studios and networks held job fairs and made Veteran and military family hiring commitments. We ran a series of PSAs with Tom Hanks, Oprah Winfrey, and Steven Spielberg that played during the Emmys and the TV upfronts that year, and MLB played them at games. The National Association of Theater Owners played the PSAs during previews in their movie theaters as well as online. In addition, the major television networks – NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox – all played the PSAs during prime-time and donated online advertising for their biggest shows at the time. At the kickoff event with Mrs. Obama in Los Angeles, we convened a group of television producers and writers’ rooms for a briefing on how to include military family narratives, which resulted in storylines being placed in popular television shows like Army Wives and Grey’s Anatomy. The Fox Broadcasting Company immediately stepped up in a big way once we launched, and we did tie-ins with most of their shows in prime-time. For example, they agreed to do an American Idol tie-in, where they highlighted the experiences of an active-duty family. It was a wonderful six months of coordinating the task force activities because nobody ever said ‘no.’ It was such an important issue and everyone knew the impact would be tremendous.”

– Wendy Smith, former Co-Chair, Joining Forces Entertainment Industry Committee; Strategic Marketing/Communications and Public Affairs, Forbes Tate Partners

Got Your 6

In May 2012, Be the Change—the same nonprofit behind : Mission Serve—launched the Got Your 6 campaign, which aimed to ensure that service members and Veterans were portrayed

accurately in film and television.¹⁰³ The idea for the campaign was formed during a meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative and was directly inspired by the Joining Forces initiative.¹⁰⁴ As part of the campaign, Hollywood studios, TV networks, talent agencies, and talent guilds joined with two dozen nonprofits to help Veterans find jobs, increase educational opportunities, secure housing for the homeless, strengthen the role of families, and turn out volunteers in communities nationwide. Early leaders of the initiative included social impact leader Greg Propper (President of Propper-Daley), Army Veteran Chris Marvin (founder of Got Your 6), and entertainment executives Anne Nicholas (NBC News), Val Nicholas (NBC News), Joe Schlosser (Endemol Shine), Cindy Gardner (NBCU), Amy Gravitt (HBO), and many more.

Industry partners in the Got Your 6 campaign included A&E Networks, ABC, Bad Robot Productions, Creative Artists Agency, CBS Corporation, the Directors Guild of America, Entertainment Industries Council, and many more. Stars such as Tom Hanks, Alec Baldwin, Michael Douglas, Tracy Morgan, Milla Jovovich, Bradley Cooper, Sarah Jessica Parker, Brian Williams, Pharrell Williams, and Wendy Williams joined forces to record a PSA in support of the campaign.¹⁰⁵

“Got Your 6 was originally run out of Be The Change, Inc. The goal of the initiative was to help break down the civil-military divide by effectively utilizing the entertainment industry. In 2018, the Bob Woodruff Foundation acquired Got Your 6, and it has become our main storytelling arm. Joining Forces taught us that, in order to remain central in people’s hearts and minds, you have to have an enduring call to action and connect with communities via mainstream media. Everyone’s competing for attention. We’ve taken that lesson to heart.”

– Anne Marie Dougherty, CEO, Bob Woodruff Foundation

The Impact of Joining Forces

First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden’s attention to military and Veteran family issues helped catalyze a new wave of effort to support military- and Veteran-connected communities, even prior to the official launch of Joining Forces.

¹⁰³Directors Guild of America, “DGA Participates in ‘Got Your 6 Campaign,” May 12th, 2012, <https://www.dga.org/News/PressReleases/2012/05102012-DGA-in-Got-Your-Six.aspx>.

¹⁰⁴Tim Molloy, “Hollywood Unites Behind ‘Got Your 6’ Initiative for Veterans,” The Wrap, May 9th, 2012, <https://www.thewrap.com/hollywood-unites-behind-got-your-6-initiative-veterans-39201/>.

¹⁰⁵Got Your 6, “Got Your 6 Official Celebrity PSA- 2012,” May 8th, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZbJkZiobFo>.

“Joining Forces created the connective tissue to activate public-private partnerships and collaboration amongst stakeholders in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Through this collaboration, a holistic approach to equalizing opportunity for Veterans and military families was taken rather than initiating single-issue efforts.”

– Eric Eversole, President, Hiring Our Heroes; Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce

“By shining a light on Veteran and military families, we empowered very capable and willing individuals and organizations in the private sector, who created programs and solutions that, on our own, the government would never have been able to come up with [...] Inspiring excellence in organizations all around the country allowed aggregated efforts to go beyond our wildest dreams, over and over again.”

– VADM Brad Cooper, former Executive Director, Joining Forces; Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander, Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. Fifth Fleet

Civil-Military Divide

Joining Forces aimed to bridge this civil-military divide by raising awareness regarding the service and sacrifice of military families. Moreover, Joining Forces catalyzed efforts across the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors to bridge this divide through community service and engagement. The following initiatives were inspired or encouraged by the efforts of Joining Forces.

Blue Star Families

In April 2009, a group of military spouses founded Blue Star Families—a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering military families to thrive as they serve. The First and Second Lady’s attention to military and Veteran families was a key ingredient in the spouses’ decision to launch Blue Star Families.

“We knew that there was a great pent-up demand within our community to try to work with partners to improve things for military and Veteran families. Since we knew that First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden were considering focusing on military families, we felt emboldened to found Blue Star Families. The attention of the White House gave us hope that

we might be able to make a real difference [...] Especially in those early years, we felt as though many of our supporters were motivated and inspired by Joining Forces to work with organizations such as ours to help military-connected communities.”

– Kathy Roth-Douquet, CEO & Co-Founder, Blue Star Families

Blue Star Families has since grown rapidly. Its programs and resources now reach over one million military and Veteran families each year, and it has mobilized over \$150 million in direct and in-kind benefits for its members. In Blue Star Families’ 2009 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, only 6% of military families reported they felt like the general public “understood” and “appreciated” their sacrifice. By 2016, thanks in part to Joining Forces, that figure had climbed to 13%.¹⁰⁶

In 2010, Blue Star Families, the National Endowment for the Arts, and museums across the country launched the **Blue Star Museums Program**, offering free entrance to approximately 1,200+ participating museums for military families from Memorial Day through Labor Day.¹⁰⁷ Over one million military-connected family members visit museums every summer for free through this popular program.

Originally, participating museums did not structure their admissions benefit to include National Guard families. Thanks to the efforts of Dr. Biden, whose son Beau was serving in the Delaware National Guard, Blue Star Families was able to convince participating museums to expand the program to include National Guard and Reserve families in 2011. The program thereafter received Joining Forces’ recognition.¹⁰⁸

“In 2010, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) worked closely with Blue Star Families to launch Blue Star Museums. I thought that program was fantastic [...] The NEA was not part of the Cabinet, but, in keeping with PSD-9, they were an executive agency that had something to offer military families. I often called them the ‘little engine that could,’ because they stepped up to the plate in a meaningful and creative way in support of military families. I often used their partnership with Blue Star Families as a model for how the government could engage in public-private partnerships in support of military and Veteran families.”

¹⁰⁶Blue Star Families, “2016 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ComprehensiveReport-33.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷National Endowment for the Arts, “Blue Star Museums Kicks Off Today,” May 23rd, 2011, <https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2011/blue-star-museums-kicks-today>.

¹⁰⁸For more information, please contact Blue Star Families’ Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org.

– Mike Harasimowicz, former Director for Defense Policy & Strategy, National Security Council, White House; Principal AI Engineer, Lockheed Martin

ServiceNation: Mission Serve

“What we witnessed with Hiring Our Heroes and Joining Forces was a public-private partnership that bridged the civilian-military divide in corporations, large and small, by demonstrating the value of Veterans in the workplace. In a similar way, a common experience of service shared between civilians and military families can bridge the civilian-military divide in communities nationwide. If you’re a civilian, and you come to a service project in your community, you might find yourself standing side by side with a military spouse, or a Veteran, or an active-duty service member, or a National Guardsman. Hopefully these engagements will enable meaningful conversations that also provide opportunities for military families to tell their stories about life in the military, like I do every time I represent Operation Gratitude at a service project involving hundreds of civilians. It’s in those moments when service members can reach halfway across the bridge and talk about what it is like to spend thousands of nights away from their kids—never tucking them into bed or eating dinner with them; missing soccer games, holidays, special occasions, and their birthdays. They can share what it is like for their kids to move six times in 11 years, change schools, and say goodbye to countless friends. As service members and Veterans, we don’t tell our civilian counterparts these things to elicit sympathy or even to complain about the challenges. We do it to create understanding and empathy, and to ultimately build bridges. Those bridges—between military families and their civilian neighbors—will ultimately make our military families stronger.”

– Kevin Schmiegel, Founder, Hiring Our Heroes, former Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation; former President & CEO, Operation Gratitude

On Veterans Day, November 11th, 2009, ServiceNation—an affiliate of the 501(c)(3) Be The Change, Inc.—launched Mission Serve, an effort to connect military and civilian communities

through shared service and volunteerism. The campaign was inaugurated with 36 newly-formed partnerships between civilian service organizations and various military and Veteran supporting nonprofits. Mission Serve was supported by the First Lady and Dr. Biden and was an early signal of the East Wing's support for cross-sector collaboration in service to military-connected communities.

“First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden came and spoke at the Mission Serve launch event, which was very powerful. They endorsed the idea of using service to bridge the civilian-military divide and underscored the importance of recognizing military and Veteran families as being civic assets to their communities. Looking back, I think that the event was a pre-Joining Forces indication of the First & Second Lady giving their stamp of approval to innovative, cross-sector efforts to support and empower military and Veteran families.”

– Ross Cohen, former Executive Director, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation; former Executive Director, Veteran Jobs Mission, JPMorgan Chase; Chief External Affairs Officer, Blue Star Families

Mission Serve's cross-sector collaborative model inspired similar military and Veteran support efforts in the United Kingdom.

“Mission Serve is about something more than just men and women in uniform. It is about our other halves. The half that makes the loved one's duty and sacrifices possible and worthwhile. It is about you: families, partners, and friends. The idea behind ServiceNation: Mission Serve – an initiative strongly supported by The First Lady and Dr. Biden – is simple, but truly inspirational. To help those returning from active service to open a new chapter in their lives and find employment when they retire from the military. ServiceNation: Mission Serve, and all the companies and employers taking part today, are providing opportunities which mean something very immediate and personal to us. Catherine and I both have friends back in Britain who could benefit from a brilliant initiative like this. I am delighted, therefore, that our Foundation [...] is a partner in

today's event. We have much to learn from you.”

– Prince William, Duke of Cambridge¹⁰⁹

Operation Honor Card

In 2011, the American Red Cross, Blue Star Families, Points of Light, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), and ServiceNation: Mission Serve, in partnership with Joining Forces, launched Operation Honor Card—an effort dedicated to encouraging American civilians to volunteer in support of military and Veteran families. Operation Honor Card’s original goal was to achieve 3,000,000 volunteer hours pledged from Americans across the country on behalf of military families. By 2011, Americans had volunteered 13,000,000 hours and pledged to volunteer another 21,000,000—far exceeding the original goal. The resounding success of Operation Honor Card demonstrated the clear desire of American civilians throughout the country to support military and Veteran families. Major contributors to these volunteer efforts included Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of America, and American Legion Auxiliary.¹¹⁰

Participants in Operation Honor Card signed physical cards in which they made their volunteer pledge and wrote a letter of appreciation to a military or Veteran family member. These cards were then displayed on “Honor Walls” in the Capitol Rotunda, VA hospitals, military bases, and other public venues on September 11th, 2011.¹¹¹

Community Blueprint Initiative

At the first White Oak Retreat in 2010, participants recommended that “community roadmaps” or “blueprints” be developed to empower civilian communities to reach out to and engage with military families.

Soon thereafter, members of 80 national nonprofit organizations—many of whom were present at White Oak I—spent the next two years creating a Community Blueprint “toolbox” to help local leaders and volunteers coordinate service, leverage community assets, and meet the needs of their Veteran and military families. Key participants included Give an Hour, Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), and the Armed Forces Services Corporation. These efforts were organized by eight impact areas: volunteerism, behavioral health, education (K-12 and post-secondary), Veteran and military spouse employment,

¹⁰⁹Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, “A Speech by The Duke of Cambridge at ServiceNation Mission Serve,” The Royal Household, July 10th, 2011, <https://www.royal.uk/speech-hrh-duke-cambridge-service-nation-mission-serve?page=2>

¹¹⁰The White House of President Barack Obama, “Joining Forces Accomplishments Overview,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/joining_forces_first_anniversary_accomplishments.pdf.

¹¹¹Operation Honor Cards, “Operation Honor Cards Kit,” Accessed May 11th, 2021, http://www.vfwpost8561.org/PHOTOS/WELCOME/2011_Operation_Honor_Cards_Kit_Final.pdf.

family strength, financial management and legal assistance, housing stability and homeless assistance, and reintegration. The Community Blueprint toolbox contained promising practices on developing successful programs within each of these impact areas.

Implementation of the Community Blueprint was spearheaded by Points of Light—a nonprofit organization dedicated to volunteer service. Points of Light worked to establish networks of local nonprofit organizations and volunteers to implement solutions in their areas. This work was supported by AmeriCorps VISTA members and catalyzed by Joining Forces’ call for communities to step up in support of military and Veteran families.

“I came back from Afghanistan in 2011 and decided that I really wanted to help my fellow Veterans [...] I found myself volunteering with a group of nonprofit leaders who were working on a project called the Community Blueprint. Later, I learned that these individuals had all met at the first White Oak Retreat [...] The Community Blueprint was basically a toolbox of one-pagers and helpful hints and promising practices that could be boxed up and given to local community leaders. Once it was finished, the Community Blueprint was passed on to Points of Light. I was offered a job running Points of Light’s military initiatives and was specifically asked to shepherd the implementation of the Community Blueprint. Through that work, I became involved in Joining Forces.”

– Mike Monroe, former Vice President of Military Initiatives, Points of Light; Director of Veterans Programs, A. James & Alice B. Clark Foundation

Thanks to the Community Blueprint:

- ★ Military initiatives were activated in 24 states, engaging more than 300 partner organizations;
- ★ 52 Community Blueprint Networks were established, which implemented 475 volunteer projects;
- ★ Nearly 19,000 military and civilian volunteers engaged in 90,000 hours of service to address community issues;

- ★ Over 60,000 community members and Veteran families were impacted during MilVet National Days of Service;¹¹² and

Points of Light identified 20 sites across the country to serve as official Community Blueprint locations—the first being Rally Point 6 (RP/6) in Lakewood, WA, near Joint Base Lewis-McChord.¹¹³ That organization was later acquired by USO and became the Pathfinder program.¹¹⁴

Philanthropy-Joining Forces Impact Pledge & Veterans Philanthropy Exchange

On May 2nd, 2014, First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden joined Vikki Spruill (President & CEO of the Council on Foundations), Bonnie McElveen-Hunter (Chairman of the Board of the American Red Cross), and Kathy Roth-Douquet (CEO and Co-Founder of Blue Star Families), as well as several other senior government officials, military leaders, and foundation executives from across the country to announce the Philanthropy-Joining Forces Impact Pledge. The pledge—initiated by the Blue Shield of California Foundation, Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation, Lincoln Community Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Council on Foundations Veterans' Advisory Group, and participants from the annual White Oak Retreat—aimed to create a community of funders and generate momentum for community-based programs that would support military and Veteran families.¹¹⁵ As of April 2016, at least 35 philanthropic organizations and corporations had joined the Philanthropy-Joining Forces Impact Pledge, and nearly \$283 million had been committed to the effort.¹¹⁶

¹¹²Blue Star Families, "White Oak Scorecard," 2018,

https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2018_White_Oak_Scorecard.pdf.

¹¹³VA Military, "Rallypoint 6," Accessed May 27th, 2021, <https://www.wamilitary.com/rallypoint-6>.

¹¹⁴USO, "RP/6: The USO's New Exit Strategy," February 3rd, 2016, <https://www.uso.org/stories/166-rp-6-the-uso-s-new-exit-strategy>.

¹¹⁵Philanthropy in Focus, "Announcing the Philanthropy-Joining Forces Impact Pledge," Wings Blog, May 2nd, 2014,

<https://philanthropyinfo.org/2014/05/15/announcing-the-philanthropy-joining-forces-impact-pledge/>.

¹¹⁶Council on Foundations, "Philanthropy-Joining Forces Impact Pledge Announces \$7 Million In New Commitments," April 12th, 2016, <https://www.cof.org/news/philanthropy-joining-forces-impact-pledge-announces-7-million-new-commitments>.

“The Philanthropy-Joining Forces Impact Pledge originated as the response of several Council on Foundation members to the First Lady and Dr. Biden’s national call to action. These organizations wanted to raise awareness within the philanthropic community regarding the challenges faced by service members who were returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan and needed support. The imperative of welcoming military and Veteran families into their local communities resonated deeply with these organizations. The founding partners used the Council’s platform to make appeals to other funders. They put together a pledge that other foundations could join in support of military and Veteran families. Over the course of two years, we were able to garner 35 philanthropic partners—which collectively pledged to spend \$270 million in their grantmaking over the course of a five-year period. This was the philanthropy sector’s response to Joining Forces.”

– Stephanie Powers, Senior Advisor for Public Policy & Partnerships, Council on Foundations

Meanwhile, the Council on Foundations developed an online, peer-to-peer network called the Veterans Philanthropy Exchange to encourage funders to collaborate in support of military and Veteran families—by sharing resources, promising practices, and information.¹¹⁷

“We likewise created a digital, community-based platform for philanthropic funders that supported military and Veteran families. It was meant to serve as a space where the funders could come together, talk to each other, learn from each other’s organizations, and share promising practices. At the time, there was no specific group in philanthropy that was dedicated to Veterans’ issues. The Veterans Philanthropy Exchange serves as a model for how we, in the philanthropy community, responded to a challenge and created an infrastructure that was durable and effective.”

– Stephanie Powers, Senior Advisor for Public Policy & Partnerships, Council on Foundations

¹¹⁷Council on Foundations, “Veterans Philanthropy Exchange Online Community,” Accessed May 10th, 2021, <https://www.cof.org/ad/Veterans-philanthropy-exchange>.

“I started working at the McCormick Foundation in August 2014. Joining Forces provided me with a great way to learn about what was going on in the military and Veteran family space, and to partner with folks across the country [...] The Council on Foundations played an active role in bringing funders together who were interested in the military and Veteran space, as well as those who had been in the space for a while. The message was that if you’re working in employment, or behavioral health, or education, etc., you’ll probably end up working with the military-connected population in some form or fashion [...] We try to get together at least once a year as part of the Veterans Philanthropy Exchange [...] Joining Forces helped to break down silos and get all of our organizations to work together in support of military and Veteran families. They pushed collaboration, not competition.”

– Megan Everett, Veterans Program Director, Robert R. McCormick Foundation

Joining Community Forces

“When the First Lady and Dr. Biden launched Joining Forces, we recognized that the National Guard was uniquely suited to support their grassroots efforts. (After all, in some states, the National Guard is the primary military presence.) By 2012, we had created Joining Community Forces as an adjunct to the national initiative, with the goal of energizing the states to develop grassroots solutions to better support military and Veteran families. JCF was uniquely tailored to the state—they each made it their own [...] We pushed our National Guard state family program directors to be the lead coordinators at the state and regional levels. They organized committees and working groups to identify and leverage community assets that could help support military and Veteran families—assets like the American Red Cross and other nonprofit groups. We brought representatives from these organizations to the table and asked how we could best work together to support military-connected communities.”

– Anthony Wickham, J1 Readiness Director, National Guard Bureau

Early on, the White House recognized that the National Guard would be well suited to expand and sustain the Joining Forces initiative at a local level, thanks to its unique presence in almost every ZIP code in the United States. In 2012, the National Guard Bureau (NGB) launched Joining Community Forces (JCF)—an initiative patterned on its national counterpart that built upon the pre-existing Inter-Service Family Assistance Committees (ISFAC) at the state and regional levels. JCF focused on grassroots solutions to maximize the impact of community resources (civilian and military) for wounded warriors, Veterans, service members, and families, in order to build resilience and foster a sustainable community network.¹¹⁸

JCF sought to build networks of support among governmental, non-governmental, nonprofit, private sector, and local civilian partners. The NGB established a website that assisted the various state National Guards in building their own initiatives with examples, formats, and lessons learned from other states.¹¹⁹

“My predecessor, Major General Larry Ross, represented the National Guard Bureau at meetings with Admiral Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his efforts to coordinate and communicate the ‘Sea of Goodwill.’ At those meetings, the Chairman assigned the National Guard Bureau to lead communication efforts regarding these initiatives. Strategically, the National Guard could serve as the common communication platform as each state has a National Guard Headquarters with standardized programs and resources across the 54 states, territories, and District of Columbia. Resources included a State Family Programs Director, Family Assistance Centers, Employment Program Specialists, Transition Assistance Advisors, Yellow Ribbon Events, etc. Our goal in helping to shepherd Joining Community Forces across the states was not to be prescriptive. We simply wanted to make sure every state was mobilizing around Joining Forces and bringing government, non-government, and nonprofits together to tackle service member and family issues related to employment, education, and wellness. The National Guard was not the lead in every state for Joining Community Forces; in some cases, that role was undertaken by a

¹¹⁸Anthony Wickham, J1 Readiness Director, National Guard Bureau, email correspondence. Please contact Blue Star Families’ Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

¹¹⁹Military OneSource, “Joining Community Forces,” Accessed May 11th, 2021, <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/national-guard/joining-community-forces/>.

nonprofit or the VA. At the national level, however, the J1 Office established a Joining Community Forces web platform wherein states could tailor their Joining Community Forces site to reflect their initiatives and grassroots solutions in support of military families. The states could also add their community partners, volunteer opportunities, and anything else that they wanted to communicate. The idea was to create a ‘no wrong door network of support.’ If our community partners worked together routinely, it wouldn’t matter whether an individual seeking support entered at a nonprofit, NGO, or government office—everyone would know what resources were available and refer that individual to the right place.”

– Marianne Watson, former Director, Manpower and Personnel (J-1), National Guard Bureau, Brigadier General (Ret.), U.S. Army National Guard

JCF focused on employment, wellness, and education, and utilizing a “no wrong door” approach to finding resources. States established initiatives unique to their own communities and needs. Some, such as Illinois’ Joining Forces, Minnesota’s Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, and Nevada’s Green Zone Initiative developed state-level programs to help fill gaps in their support to military and Veteran families.

The White House facilitated JCF by acting as a convening authority. For example, they brought together various agencies to speak about behavioral health and family readiness in the military. This opened up multiple levels of communications between NGB and executive agencies such as the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Small Business Administration (SBA), and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) that are still active today.

From October 28th-30th, 2014, more than 400 state and federal representatives, including local leaders, state employees, federal contractors, adjutants general, senior members of the National Guard, and senior leaders of the DOD and VA gathered for the inaugural **JCF workshop**. There, participants heard from state representatives who shared promising practices regarding how to implement a JCF program. Participants then broke down into small groups where they discussed how best to address the critical issues faced by military

and Veteran families. Participants likewise discussed the appropriate local, state, and federal roles in meeting the needs of military-connected communities.¹²⁰

Employment

“Joining Forces helped to transform the narrative around Veteran and spouse hiring. It went from being a patriotic and charitable act to hire a Veteran or military spouse to a profitable one. Joining Forces helped to showcase that Veterans and military spouses have unique characteristics, strengths, and talents, and are valuable assets to companies. It’s not charity to hire a Veteran or military spouse, it’s good business.”

– Anne Marie Dougherty, CEO, Bob Woodruff Foundation

In 2011, the unemployment rate for Veterans who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces at any time since September 2001 was 12.1%. The jobless rate for all Veterans was 8.3%.¹²¹ According to the RAND Corporation, these elevated figures were likely due to prolonged periods of job searching among recently separated service members—as a result, in part, of the economic recession and a failure of transition programming.¹²²

Meanwhile, the unemployment rate for military spouses in 2011 was approximately 26%.¹²³ According to Blue Star Families’ research, this elevated figure (which has not significantly improved since 2012)¹²⁴ is likely due to service member day-to-day job demands,¹²⁵ a lack of affordable child care,¹²⁶ hiring/promotion discrimination,¹²⁷ and frequent permanent change

¹²⁰Jim Greenhill, “Joining Community Forces Taps National Guard’s Nationwide Presence to Help All Service Members,” National Guard Bureau, November 3rd, 2014, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article-View/Article/576687/joining-community-forces-taps-national-guards-nationwide-presence-to-help-all-s/>.

¹²¹U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “News Release,” March 20th, 2012, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet_03202012.pdf.

¹²²David S. Loughran, “Why Is Veteran Unemployment So High?,” RAND Corporation, 2014, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR284.html.

¹²³U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress on Plans for the Department of Defense for the Support of Military Family Readiness,” Accessed May 11th, 2021, https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/FY2011_Report_MilitaryFamilyReadinessPrograms.pdf.

¹²⁴Office of People Analytics, “2019 Survey of Active-Duty Spouses,” December 2nd, 2020, <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/survey-findings/2019-spouses-survey/>.

¹²⁵Blue Star Families, “2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/BSF-2019-Survey-Comprehensive-Report-Digital-rev200305.pdf>.

¹²⁶Blue Star Families, “2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FULL.pdf.

¹²⁷Ibid.

of station (PCS) moves.¹²⁸ Other important, but less common factors include state licensure barriers and gaps in resumes due to frequent PCS moves.¹²⁹ Joining Forces put a spotlight on these employment-related issues and helped to catalyze the following initiatives.

Veterans on Wall Street

In December 2010, Veterans on Wall Street was founded as a coalition of major financial institutions—including Citi, Deutsche Bank, and Goldman Sachs—dedicated to honoring former military personnel and employees by facilitating career and business opportunities in the financial services industry.

“In 2008, the financial crisis had just struck. Meanwhile, politicians could only really agree on two things: (1) new bank regulation was needed; and (2) Veterans are valuable assets, and we need to do something about Veteran unemployment. We found ourselves at the intersection of those two important policy agendas. We believed that by attracting transitioning Veterans to Wall Street, they could help steer our economy towards recovery. In 2009, we gathered representatives from major financial firms and proposed that we all join forces and work together to recruit Veterans into the banking industry. We agreed to share best practices for a successful transition and focused on Veteran empowerment. After that meeting, Deutsche Bank reached out to us. They offered to let us use their trademark, “Veterans on Wall Street (VOWS),” for our cross-sector coalition effort [...] The true value of VOWS is the network itself. We don’t compete with one another. We share best practices and extend invitations to speak at and attend events to all firms.”

– Christopher Perkins, Co-Founder, VOWS; Managing Director, Citi

VOWS aims to raise money in support of VSOs and share best practices for hiring transitioning Veterans seeking jobs on Wall Street. In the past 10 years, the organization has raised \$15 million to support a wide range of VSOs. According to Christopher Perkins at Citi, Joining Forces played a key role in facilitating that work.

¹²⁸Blue Star Families, “2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>.

¹²⁹Blue Star Families, “2018 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>.

“The goal of VOWS is not charity. Our mission is to showcase that Veterans are valuable assets to society, and that companies should want to hire them because they’re good for business. The White House was very supportive of that narrative at a strategic level—which was invaluable [...] When we host our annual symposium, there are essentially two audiences that we’re trying to reach: Veterans and hiring managers. We need that overarching narrative to make its way down to both communities in order to be successful. That’s where Joining Forces played a key role.”

– Christopher Perkins, Co-Founder, VOWS; Managing Director, Citi

Hiring Our Heroes

In March 2011, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce launched Hiring Our Heroes (HOH)—a nationwide initiative to help Veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses find meaningful employment opportunities. A month later, the White House launched Joining Forces. According to Kevin Schmiegel, the founder of Hiring Our Heroes, the Chamber and Joining Forces coordinated efforts in support of Veteran and military spouse employment:

“We created a movement through a unique public-private partnership between the White House and U.S. Chamber of Commerce—the world’s largest business federation—focused on the employment of Veterans and military spouses [...] Hiring Our Heroes and Joining Forces led the way, bringing together nonprofits, military service organizations, Veteran service organizations, etc., to partner together to achieve a greater impact. On the Veteran employment side of things, Hiring Our Heroes was in a great position to help lead collaborative efforts, since we were a part of the world’s largest business federation and had local chambers of commerce that wanted to get involved. Companies large and small made commitments and followed through with actions coordinated by our team at Hiring Our Heroes at more than 500 hiring fairs in communities across America. We had a vision and we executed a grassroots movement at the local level, but we needed that megaphone, that voice, that support from the White House to get it done.”

– Kevin Schmiegel, Founder, Hiring Our Heroes, former Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation; former President & CEO, Operation Gratitude

During the early days of Hiring Our Heroes, the First Lady leveraged the White House bully pulpit to generate momentum in support of the Chamber’s efforts.

“When Hiring Our Heroes was getting started, the First Lady came to two events—the Chamber’s Veterans Day gathering on November 10th, 2011, and a jobs fair at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii a few days later. It was extremely helpful to have her imprimatur on our efforts early on. The White House’s support definitely helped HOH garner partners and media attention.”

– Ross Cohen, former Executive Director, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation; former Executive Director, Veteran Jobs Mission, JPMorgan Chase; Chief External Affairs Officer, Blue Star Families

Within the first two years of its existence, Hiring Our Heroes went to 500 communities nationwide as part of its employment efforts.¹³⁰

100,000 Jobs Mission

In March 2011, JPMorgan Chase launched the 100,000 Jobs Mission (later known as the Veteran Jobs Mission)—a coalition of 11 companies focused on improving Veteran unemployment.

“At the time, companies were just starting to wrap their heads around the fact that if folks were going to volunteer to serve their country, we had a responsibility to make sure that they weren’t worse off for their service, in terms of their re-entry into the civilian workforce. The 100,000 Jobs Mission, or the Veteran Jobs Mission, as it is now called, started out with just 11 companies. Now, it includes well over 200. The coalition focused on sharing information and promising practices with respect to Veteran employment. The work we did was very much aligned with the efforts of Joining Forces. In fact, the focus that Joining Forces brought to the Veteran unemployment issue really helped to accelerate the work of the Veteran Jobs Mission.”

– Maureen Casey, former Managing Director of Military & Veterans Affairs, JPMorgan Chase; Chief Operating Officer, Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University

The goal of the initiative was to hire 100,000 Veterans into private-sector jobs by 2020. Since then, the coalition has grown to more than 200 leading member companies representing virtually every industry in the United States. The coalition has (as of April 2021) collectively hired more than 700,000 Veterans.¹³¹

¹³⁰Kevin Schmiegel, Founder, Hiring Our Heroes, former Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce; former President & CEO, Operation Gratitude, email correspondence. Please contact Blue Star Families' Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

¹³¹Veteran Jobs Mission, “About the Mission,” Accessed April 26th, 2021, <https://Veteranjobsmission.com/about-the-mission>.

“It was always very rewarding when Joining Forces could work to find common ground with people that did not align with the administration, politically or in areas tied to specific policies or ideological perspectives. It was common for our team to engage Republican political leaders (Sen. Elizabeth Dole, governors, and staff on the Hill) and conservative-leaning organizations to come together to co-create value. For instance, Steve Schwarzman, Blackstone’s CEO, once introduced me at an event where I was scheduled to speak by saying, ‘There are plenty of areas where I do not agree with the President...’ He told his assembled team of leaders from across the country, ‘This is not one of the areas where we disagree.’ The Blackstone Group was an innovative and driven platinum partner in support of Veteran and family employment. Up front, this well-known Wall Street leader made a major and very public commitment to our hiring strategy. When you get someone who says, ‘Let’s leave our differences at the door, and come together on this,’ that’s pretty spectacular.”

– Rich Morales, former Director, Joining Forces; Colonel, U.S. Army, Professor and Head of Department of Systems Engineering, West Point

Military Spouse Employment Partnership

On June 29th, 2011, Dr. Biden joined military spouses, corporate leaders, and DOD officials – including Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy Rob Gordon – at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce headquarters in Washington, D.C., to launch the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP)—aimed to connect military spouses to partner organizations and companies that had committed to recruiting, hiring, promoting, and retaining military spouses in portable careers. As Dr. Biden said at the event, “Every day, our military spouses are giving back to our country. While their loved ones are called to serve, they serve right alongside them. Now we must serve them as well as they serve us.”¹³²

MSEP originally consisted of 70 companies that pledged to recruit, hire, promote, and retain military spouse employees. Dr. Biden used her platform to urge other companies to join this effort: “If you’re looking for hard-working, highly-skilled, and educated, dedicated employees

¹³²Courtney O’Donnell, “Opening Doors for our Military Spouses,” The White House of President Barack Obama, June 30th, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/06/30/opening-doors-our-military-spouses>.

[...] our military spouses are precisely the employees you need.”¹³³ Today, over 300 corporations and small businesses have joined the MSEP and regularly post job openings on the MSEP Career Portal, mentor military spouses, and provide employment data regarding the military spouses they have hired.¹³⁴

“When tackling the military spouse unemployment problem, we first had to ask ourselves: Who are the companies that aren’t just interested in hiring military spouses, but are actually committed to it? Most importantly, are those companies committed to retaining their spouse employee through their PCS moves? [...] In 2011, Dr. Biden launched the Military Spouse Employment Partnership, which originally consisted of just 70 companies who were willing to make those commitments publicly. Today, I believe the program has grown to over 300 companies. As best as I can tell, those organizations have kept their word.”

– VADM Brad Cooper, former Executive Director, Joining Forces; Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander, Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. Fifth Fleet

Veterans & Military Spouse Employment Advisory Councils

“At the national level, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation launched a Veterans Employment Advisory Council (VEAC) and a Military Spouse Employment Advisory Council (MSEAC), which were comprised of some of the biggest companies in the country. Those groups met routinely and created a community of believers, advocates, and doers who effected change inside their companies and in their communities.”

– Kevin Schmiegel, Founder, Hiring Our Heroes, former Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce; former President & CEO, Operation Gratitude

On November 10th, 2011—one year after announcing its intent to launch Hiring Our Heroes—the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation launched the Veterans Employment Advisory Council (VEAC), with First Lady Michelle Obama in attendance. The VEAC was a

¹³³Elaine Sanchez, “Career Opportunities Expand for Military Spouses,” U.S. Army, July 1st, 2011, https://www.army.mil/article/60851/career_opportunities_expand_for_military_spouses#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIf%20you're%20looking%20for,they%20serve%20right%20alongside%20them.

¹³⁴U.S. Department of Defense, “DoD Military Spouse Employment Partnership Reaches Milestone,” February 29th, 2016, [https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/681788/dod-military-spouse-employment-partnership-reaches-milestone/.](https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/681788/dod-military-spouse-employment-partnership-reaches-milestone/)

group of more than 30 of the biggest employers in the U.S., representing every major industry. Members of the council were committed to:

- ★ Hiring Veterans and military spouses;
- ★ Establishing best practices for Veterans' employment;
- ★ Reporting measures (job opportunities, interviews, placements);
- ★ Providing mentors to help transitioning service members and military spouses, with the support of the Chamber's extensive grassroots network; and
- ★ Enlisting the commitment of thousands of small- and medium-sized businesses across America to do the same.¹³⁵

On January 12th, 2012, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce launched the Hiring Our Heroes military spouse program to address the high rate of unemployment among military spouses.¹³⁶ A year later, in March 2013, the Chamber likewise launched the Military Spouse Employment Advisory Council (MSEAC). MSEAC was one of the first private sector-led councils formed specifically to address military spouse unemployment. The purpose of that council is to connect military spouses to national and local employers of every size and industry.¹³⁷ Meanwhile, Hiring Our Heroes had also launched its military spouse program in 2012 to tackle that same issue.

“We launched the Hiring Our Heroes military spouse program in January 2012. With the support of Joining Forces and many members of the White Oak coalition, we held an event at the Washington Convention Center with over 100 employers, one dozen nonprofits, and 1,000+ military spouses—including every spouse of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and senior enlisted spouses. It was a turning point for building awareness about an issue that crystallizes the often-unseen sacrifices that military families make when they choose to serve their country, and the White House's focus on the issue was key to building on that success.”

¹³⁵U.S. Chamber of Commerce, “Veterans Employment Advisory Council (VEAC),” Accessed May 3rd, 2021, <https://www.uschamber.com/Veterans-employment-advisory-council-veac>.

¹³⁶Laura Schmiegel, founding Director of the Military Spouse Program, Hiring Our Heroes, email correspondence. Please contact Blue Star Families' Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

¹³⁷Hiring Our Heroes, “Our Partners: Leading the Way,” U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Accessed May 3rd, 2021, <https://www.hiringourheroes.org/partners/#:~:text=The%20Hiring%20Our%20Heroes%20Military,of%20every%20size%20and%20industry>.

- Laura Schmiegel, former Chair, Blue Star Families Board of Directors; founding Director of the Military Spouse Program, Hiring Our Heroes

Licensing & Certification Initiative

Military families move an average of once every three years.¹³⁸ Consequently, military spouses in licensed occupations often undertake the costly and time-consuming process of obtaining a new license/recertification every time they embark on a permanent change of station (PCS) across state lines. While speaking before the National Governors Association (NGA) in February 2012, First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden called upon all 50 U.S. governors to take executive or legislative action to streamline state licensing for military spouses by the end of 2014.¹³⁹

“In 2011, there were only three states (TX, FL, IL) that had licensure portability legislation for military spouses. We decided to push to get all 50 states to enact similar legislation [...] By the fall of 2012, more than 20 states had implemented military spouse licensure laws.¹⁴⁰ Since then, many other states have enacted legislation to make it easier for military spouses to transfer their licenses [...] In 2018, Congress enacted a policy to allow the Services to reimburse spouses up to \$500 for licensure and certification costs resulting from relocations or PCS moves that cross U.S. state lines.¹⁴¹ Joining Forces helped to catalyze that entire effort.”

- VADM Brad Cooper, former Executive Director, Joining Forces; Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander, Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. Fifth Fleet

Transitioning service members likewise face barriers that make it difficult to find jobs conducive to the skills they gained through their military education and experience. In many states, service members and Veterans are required to repeat education or training in order to receive industry certifications and state occupational licenses—despite the fact that their

¹³⁸ Jim Garamone, “Military Children Serve, Too,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 12th, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/719407/military-children-serve-too/>.

¹³⁹ Brad Cooper, “First Lady and Dr. Biden Urge Action from State Governors on Military Spouse Hiring,” The White House of President Barack Obama, February 27th, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2012/02/27/first-lady-and-dr-biden-urge-action-state-governors-military-spouse-hiring>.

¹⁴⁰ Jaime Ballard and Lynne Borden, “A Study on Military Spouse Licensure Portability in Legislation and Practice,” Journal of Financial Counseling and Planning, Volume 31, Number 2, 2020, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1279873.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ This provision was included in the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2021. See U.S. Department of Defense, “Program Makes Moves Cheaper for Military Spouses,” July 24th, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1908122/program-makes-moves-cheaper-for-military-spouses/>.

military training and experience overlaps with credential requirements.¹⁴² At an NGA meeting in February 2013, First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden called upon the governors to take legislative or executive action to help transitioning service members get the credentials they need by the end of 2015.

Today, all 50 states and Puerto Rico have enacted legislation, assisting active-duty service members and Veterans in transferring and obtaining occupational licenses and certifications.¹⁴³ Similarly, 49 states have enacted legislation to streamline the process for military spouses transferring a license or certification between states.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, these statutes are not perfectly comprehensive, and licensure and certification remain a barrier to military spouse employment in many fields.

“Military spouses are smart; they’re resilient; they’re multitaskers; they’re great spokespeople; they’re great managers; they’re great leaders—but many of them have had their own careers disrupted because they’re supporting a spouse. When you’re moving every two years, how do you keep your job? One of the issues we worked on with Joining Forces was military spousal licensing. If you have a job that requires any kind of license [...] and move to another base in another state, oftentimes there was no reciprocity. Many spouses had to go through hours of retraining and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to get recertified just to work in their profession [...] We put a call out to all of the governors—a lot of whom didn’t realize that their states didn’t have reciprocity [...] Slowly, we started to see state legislatures enact new licensing laws. This was one of those no-brainer, nonpartisan issues [...] Now, finally, all 50 states have military spousal licensing reciprocity. But we would have never accomplished that had we not had conversations with those men and women—to hear their challenges, to see what they were going through, to find out what kind of things we

¹⁴²Colleen Curtis, “First Lady Michelle Obama Challenges Governors of All 50 States to Ease Service Members’ Transition to Civilian Work Force,” The White House of President Barack Obama, February 25th, 2013,

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/25/remarks-first-lady-and-dr-jill-biden-national-governors-association..>

¹⁴³Jennifer Schultz, “State Help for Returning Veterans,” National Conference of State Legislatures, April 9th, 2018,

<https://www.ncsl.org/research/military-and-veterans-affairs/state-help-and-benefits-for-returning-veterans.aspx>.

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

could do on the ground.”

– First Lady Michelle Obama¹⁴⁵

Veterans & Military Spouses in Tech

Joining Forces catalyzed efforts to hire Veterans and military spouses into high-tech industry jobs. According to Steve Parker, a former Director of Joining Forces, “The jobs we were hoping to channel Veterans and military spouses [into] downstream weren’t all created equal. We wanted to prioritize high-tech jobs and get commitments from CEOs in those sectors. One of our top accomplishments was getting tech companies to signal to our transitioning service members that their talents were wanted and welcome.”

At a White House Joining Forces event in April 2016, 40 tech companies pledged to hire more than 110,000 Veterans and military spouses. Amazon’s CEO, Jeff Bezos, personally vowed to hire 25,000 Veterans and military spouses in the next five years. He likewise committed to training 10,000 Veterans and spouses in cloud computing, which offers a path to Amazon Web Services certification and entry into a high-demand field.¹⁴⁶

"In 2016, Amazon’s CEO, Jeff Bezos, joined First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House and pledged to hire 25,000 military Veterans and military spouses and train 10,000 more in cloud technology by 2021. That commitment accelerated Amazon’s military recruiting program, and today, we proudly employ more than 40,000 Veterans and 8,000 military spouses. Joining Forces also served as the catalyst to establish Amazon’s Military Affairs team, which now delivers much more than recruiting, including mentorship, development, skills training, and community engagement programs focused on Veteran suicide, homelessness, and urgent needs. We are looking forward to celebrating the fifth anniversary of our Joining Forces commitment in May, and are ready to partner with Joining Forces again, to help address the challenges affecting Veterans and their families."

– John Quintas, Director, Military Affairs, Amazon

In the lead-up to the Joining Forces White House event, other companies answered the call to hire Veterans and military spouses into tech jobs. JPMorgan Chase, for example, pledged

¹⁴⁵C-SPAN, “First Ladies’ Support for the Military Community,” September 16th, 2016,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?415360-1/michelle-obama-laura-bush-discuss-role-legacy-ladies>.

¹⁴⁶Charlsy Panzino, “Companies ‘Join Forces’ to Hire or Train 100,000-Plus More Vets, Spouses,” Military Times, May 5th, 2016,

<https://www.militarytimes.com/2016/05/06/companies-join-forces-to-hire-or-train-100000-plus-more-vets-spouses/>.

to recruit and hire 1,000 Veterans into technology positions over the course of the next five years. The pledge expanded upon the 10,000+ Veteran hires made across the firm since 2011 and was announced as part of JPMC’s renewed Joining Forces employment commitment.¹⁴⁷

“I went to JPMorgan Chase in October 2015 to serve as the Executive Director for the Veteran Jobs Mission. A primary focus of our efforts at that time was hiring Veterans into tech jobs. In April 2016, a series of tech companies pledged to hire Veterans and military spouses. We used those commitments to convince our colleagues to hire 1,000 Veterans into technology positions at JPMC. These efforts were directly inspired by Joining Forces.”

– Ross Cohen, former Executive Director, Hiring Our Heroes and Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation; Chief External Affairs Officer, Blue Star Families

According to First Lady Michelle Obama, these companies made these commitments because “time and again they saw for themselves that our Veterans and military spouses are simply the best employees around [...] [T]hey realized that training and hiring these folks isn't just the right thing to do — it's the smart thing to do for their bottom lines.” The First Lady acknowledged that this was especially true for tech jobs: “If [Veterans] can set up wireless networks in Baghdad or do satellite reconnaissance in the mountains of Afghanistan, I'm pretty confident that they can handle whatever's happening in Silicon Valley.”¹⁴⁸

Education

As part of their education pillar, the First Lady and Dr. Biden chose to concentrate on the unique educational needs of military-connected children and Veterans’ use of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill.

Of the approximately 1.2 million school-aged military children, more than 80% attend public schools.¹⁴⁹ The average military-connected child moves three times as often as their civilian peers.¹⁵⁰ Multiple moves have been associated with educational consequences, such as gaps in learning and difficulty transferring credits and meeting graduation requirements—which

¹⁴⁷Kim Morton, “JPMorgan Chase Pledges to Hire 1,000 Vets in Tech,” JPMorgan Chase & Co., May 5th, 2016, <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/news-stories/jpmorganchase-pledges-to-hire-1k-tech-vets>.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹U.S. Department of Education, “Military Families and Veterans,” Accessed June 12th, 2020, <https://www.ed.gov/Veterans-and-military-families>.

¹⁵⁰U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, “All About DoDEA Partnership,” 2019, <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/about.cfm>.

might entail repeating classes. As an educator, Dr. Biden was extremely passionate about alleviating these education-related challenges for military children.

“There are so many challenges involved in moving a military kid [...] If [your child is in] a great special ed program [...] and you're moving to another base, you don't know if that school has that same program [...] Just think about what it takes to get [a non-military child] from kindergarten to 12th grade sanely in one school. The average military kid attends seven, eight, nine, or even 10 schools over the course of their entire primary and secondary school education. And these kids are still graduating on time; they are still at the top of their class; they are still amazing. But there's a parent at home that's doing a lot of heavy lifting to make that happen—a lot of advocating. One of Jill Biden's initiatives—as a blue star mom in her own right—is working with the education community on a range of these issues.”

– First Lady Michelle Obama¹⁵¹

On the Veteran education front, Joining Forces sought to support programs and initiatives designed to ease the transition of service members into higher education. The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill expanded education benefits for transitioning service members and qualifying family members by providing tuition coverage, housing stipends similar to those received by active-duty service members, allowances for books and supplies, and access to “Yellow Ribbon” funds that would supplement funding to cover costs at schools with higher tuition rates. Nevertheless, implementation of the newly updated G.I. Bill suffered from confusion regarding new benefits, delayed payments to Veterans, and transferability issues.¹⁵²

The following education-related initiatives were inspired or catalyzed by the efforts of the First and Second Lady.

Operation Educate the Educators

“As a military mom and educator, Dr. Biden embodies the nexus between education and the military lifestyle. Her tireless advocacy on behalf of military-connected students brought energy and authenticity to that

¹⁵¹C-SPAN, “First Ladies' Support for the Military Community,” September 16th, 2016,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?415360-1/michelle-obama-laura-bush-discuss-role-legacy-ladies>.

¹⁵²Many of these issues have since been resolved by the Forever G.I. Bill of 2017. See U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Education and Training: Forever G.I. Bill – Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act,” Accessed May 25th, 2021,

<https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/FGIBSummaries.asp>.

work. She was a major force behind Operation Educate the Educator.”

– Rebecca Porter, Ph.D., President & CEO, Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)

In April 2011, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and MCEC launched “Operation Educate the Educators,” as part of the Joining Forces initiative, to raise awareness regarding the social, emotional, and academic challenges faced by military-connected children, and to better prepare teachers to support those students.¹⁵³ By October 2012, more than 100 colleges and universities had committed to preparing educators to develop classroom and school cultures that are more responsive to the needs of military-connected children.¹⁵⁴

Implementation of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children

“In 2011, implementation of the Interstate Compact [on Educational Opportunity for Military Children] had slowed. A combined pressure from government officials and nonprofit and private sector partners, thanks in part to the efforts of Dr. Biden and the First Lady, really got things moving.”

– VADM Brad Cooper, former Executive Director, Joining Forces; Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander, Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. Fifth Fleet

In 2008, the Department of Defense, in collaboration with the National Center for Interstate Compacts and the Council of State Governments, developed the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children to address the educational transition issues of children of military families. As of April 2011, only 36 states had signed onto the compact.¹⁵⁵

Dr. Biden and First Lady Obama—alongside the MIC3, DOD, and MCEC—actively encouraged the outstanding 14 governors to sign on to the Compact. By August 2014, thanks in part to their efforts, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had agreed to join

¹⁵³Lisa Johnson, “AACTE and MCEC Announce Partnership to Enhance Education and Support for Military-Connected Students,” American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, April 12th, 2011,

<https://aacte.org/2011/04/aacte-and-mcec-announce-partnership-to-enhance-education-and-support-for-military-connected-students/>.

¹⁵⁴The White House of President Barack Obama, “AACTE, MCEC Join Dr. Jill Biden to Celebrate Milestone for Joining Forces Commitment ‘Operation Educate the Educators,’” October 3rd, 2012,

[https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/10/03/aacte-mcec-join-dr-jill-biden-celebrate-milestone-joining-forces-com](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/10/03/aacte-mcec-join-dr-jill-biden-celebrate-milestone-joining-forces-commit)
[mitm](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/10/03/aacte-mcec-join-dr-jill-biden-celebrate-milestone-joining-forces-com).

¹⁵⁵Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission, “State Adoption Dates by Governor Signatures,” Accessed April 12th, 2021,

<https://mic3.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/state-adoption-dates-by-governor-signatures.pdf>.

the Compact.¹⁵⁶ While implementation of the Compact varies across states and school districts, Blue Star Families' 2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey found that military families have benefited greatly from its transition-related components.¹⁵⁷

Revitalization of Public Schools on Military Installations

“One of our major achievements was the revitalization of public schools on military installations [...] We were able to secure approximately \$250 million to reconstruct and revitalize those schools, thanks in part to the spotlight Joining Forces shone on military children’s education.”

– Rob Gordon, former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy

Approximately 160 schools in the United States operate on military land but are administered by local school superintendents (not the Department of Defense Education Activity). In 2010, the Department of Defense launched an Education Review to assess its effectiveness in meeting the educational needs of military children.¹⁵⁸ As part of this review, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy directed the establishment of a sub-task force to assess the capacity and condition of public schools on military installations, and identify options to renovate, expand, and or replace those in the worst condition.

Over the course of the next six months, the sub-task force reviewed 157 public schools located on military installations (three of the schools were new and not included in the study).¹⁵⁹ This assessment resulted in the creation of the “Public Schools on Military Installations Priority List,” which represented the department’s prioritization of those public schools on military installations with the most serious capacity or facility condition deficiencies.¹⁶⁰ Using this list, the Office of Economic Adjustment conducted a grant program to award grants to assist these public schools with the most serious capacity or facility-condition deficiencies.¹⁶¹ These grants—totaling \$250 million—were funded by

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

¹⁵⁷Blue Star Families, “2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/BSF-2019-Survey-Comprehensive-Report-Digital-rev200305.pdf>.

¹⁵⁸Homeland Magazine, “What Schools Are Available to Children on Military Installations?,” Accessed May 4th, 2021, <https://homelandmagazine.com/schools-available-children-military-installations/>.

¹⁵⁹U.S. Department of Defense, “Update to the Report on Assistance to Local Educational Agencies for Defense Dependents’ Education,” February 2012, <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/upload/Reports-to-Congress-2012.pdf>.

¹⁶⁰Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Secretary of Defense’s 2018 Public Schools on Military Installations (PSMI) Prioritized List,” [https://oldcc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-04-15_DSD%20Approved%202018%20PSMI_Prioritized_List%20\(Landscape\).pdf](https://oldcc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-04-15_DSD%20Approved%202018%20PSMI_Prioritized_List%20(Landscape).pdf).

¹⁶¹U.S. Department of Defense, “Update to the Report on Assistance to Local Educational Agencies for Defense Dependents’ Education,” February 2012, <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/upload/Reports-to-Congress-2012.pdf>.

Congress in the Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act of 2011 (Section 8109 of P.L. 112-10).¹⁶²

Principles of Excellence & 8 Keys to Veterans' Success

In April 2012, President Obama issued Executive Order 13607, "Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members," to address issues related to higher education for military and Veteran family members. Specifically, the executive order directed the DOD, VA, and Department of Education (DOE) to establish "principles of excellence" to apply to educational institutions receiving federal funding from military and Veterans educational benefits programs. Among other things, these principles required schools to provide "meaningful information" to prospective students about the cost of attendance, how to best use federal funds/benefits, etc., as well as put an end to any "fraudulent and unduly aggressive recruiting techniques" and misinformation activities.¹⁶³

A year later, President Obama announced the 8 Keys to Veterans' Success program at the 2013 Disabled American Veterans National Convention in Florida. These keys were developed by the administration, DOE, and VA, in conjunction with more than 100 education experts, and represented eight concrete steps that institutions of higher education could take to help Veterans and service members thrive in the classroom. These steps were:

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for Veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all Veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all Veterans, together with the creation of a designated space (even if limited in size).
5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for Veterans.

¹⁶²Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, 2011, <https://www.congress.gov/112/plaws/publ10/PLAW-112publ10.pdf>.

¹⁶³The White House of President Barack Obama, "Executive Order: Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members," April 27th, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/27/executive-order-establishing-principles-excellence-educational-institutions>.

6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on Veterans, including demographics, retention, and degree completion.
7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to Veterans.
8. Develop systems that ensure the sustainability of effective practices for Veterans.¹⁶⁴

In his speech, President Obama announced that 250 community colleges and universities had committed to implementing the 8 Keys to Veterans' Success on their campuses.¹⁶⁵ Within a year, that number had nearly doubled to more than 400 colleges and universities.¹⁶⁶

Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University

Joining Forces also inspired, in part, the revitalization of Syracuse University (SU)'s commitment to Veteran education. The university's relationship with the U.S. military goes back at least as far as World War I, when SU established a Students Army Training Corps (SATC) on campus. It maintained close connections to the military during WWII, and approximately 18,000 faculty, students, and alumni served in uniform. After the war, Chancellor Tolley opened SU to any Veteran wanting to pursue a degree.

Fast forward to 2011, and SU officially established the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)—an interdisciplinary research institution that focuses on the social, economic, education, and policy issues affecting service members and their families post-service. Since its founding, IVMF has played a key role in advancing research on the unique challenges and strengths of military and Veteran families.¹⁶⁷

In 2014, Kent Syverud reaffirmed the importance of SU's commitment to Veterans during his inauguration speech as university chancellor: "I believe Syracuse University must once again become the best place for Veterans. We have the capacity, we have the opportunity, to be the best in the world at providing opportunity and empowerment to the Veterans of our armed forces and their families [...] We have an unrivaled capacity to bring to bear our expertise in the professions, in disabilities, in entrepreneurship and information, and in the arts and sciences, for the benefit of our university and of those who have borne the battle and their

¹⁶⁴The White House of President Barack Obama, "8 Keys to Success: Supporting Veterans, Military and Military Families on Campus," August 13th, 2013,

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/08/13/8-keys-success-supporting-Veterans-military-and-military-families-campus>.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

¹⁶⁶Robert MacFarlin, "8 Keys to Veterans' Success Receives More than 400 College and University Commitments," U.S. Department of Education, July 30th, 2014,

<https://blog.ed.gov/2014/07/8-keys-to-Veterans-success-receives-more-than-400-college-and-university-commitments/>.

¹⁶⁷Institute for Veterans and Military Families, "History," Syracuse University, Accessed May 13th, 2021,

<https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/about-ivmf/history-timeline/>.

families. So let's just do it. Because if we do, we will have done so much for our university, for this country, and for our Veterans."¹⁶⁸ This reaffirmation of SU's commitment to Veterans was inspired, in part, by Joining Forces.

"Joining Forces' focus on education coincided with the arrival of a new chancellor here at Syracuse University. One of his priorities was making Syracuse University the best school for Veterans. Now, SU has a long history with the military, dating back to World War I when our campus was taken over by soldiers preparing to go to war [...] When Chancellor Syverud came on board, he reaffirmed SU's commitment to Veterans. The fact that First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden were both focusing on Veterans' education reinforced the idea that now was a good time for SU to reevaluate and improve how we are providing opportunities for Veterans."

– Maureen Casey, former Managing Director of Military & Veterans Affairs, JPMorgan Chase; Chief Operating Officer, Institute for Veterans & Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University

Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University

"All of our work at MFRI is in the spirit of Joining Forces, insofar as it is aimed at helping communities do a better job of supporting the military-connected families in their midst."

– Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D., Director, Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University

In 1994, Purdue University founded the Center for Families to improve the quality of life for families.¹⁶⁹ Seven years later, the center created the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI), which conducts research and outreach for communities and professionals who serve military and Veteran families.¹⁷⁰ MFRI collaborates with other organizations to help shape policies, programs, and practices that improve military and Veteran families' overall

¹⁶⁸Kent Syverud, "Inauguration," Syracuse University, July 1st, 2014, <https://Veterans.syr.edu/why-su/chancellors-support/chancellor-syverud/>.

¹⁶⁹Purdue University, "Center for Families: About," 2021, <https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/cff/about/>.

¹⁷⁰The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, "About Us: Our History," Accessed May 7th, 2021, <https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/about-mfri-history/>.

well-being. The institute also helps communities and organizations leverage research and best practices to achieve their goals within the military and Veteran space.¹⁷¹

A Battle Plan for Supporting Military Families

In 2015, MFRI convened senior cross-sector leaders from across the government, philanthropy, and nonprofit space to discuss and distill lessons learned about serving military families after 9/11.¹⁷² This two-day event, called “The Battle Plan for Supporting Military Families Symposium,” was held in the spirit of Joining Forces,¹⁷³ and culminated in the production of the fifth book in MFRI’s “Risk and Resilience in Military Families” series, titled “A Battle Plan for Supporting Military Families: Lessons for the Leaders of Tomorrow.”¹⁷⁴ Joining Forces’ leaders participated in the symposium and contributed a chapter to the book.¹⁷⁵

Measuring Communities

In April 2016, MFRI launched Measuring Communities, an online social indicators project designed to strengthen community efforts to support military and Veteran families.¹⁷⁶ Data from more than 30 diverse, reliable, and nationally representative sources provided military-specific information about communities in 10 topical areas.¹⁷⁷ This effort was organized according to the Community Blueprint (see above) and modeled after Joining Forces’ community mobilization activities. Blue Star Families was the first nonprofit partner to contribute data to the Measuring Communities collective effort.¹⁷⁸

Wellness

In 2011, service members were returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan bearing the invisible wounds of war—post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury

¹⁷¹The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, “About Us: Mission,” Accessed May 7th, 2021, <https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/about-mfri-history/mission/>.

¹⁷²The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, “A Battle Plan for Supporting Military Families,” Accessed May 7th, 2021, <https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/resources-and-research/battleplan/>.

¹⁷³Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D., Director, Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University, email correspondence. Please contact Blue Star Families’ Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

¹⁷⁴The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, “A Battle Plan for Supporting Military Families,” Accessed May 7th, 2021, <https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/resources-and-research/battleplan/>.

¹⁷⁵Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D., Director, Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University, email correspondence. Please contact Blue Star Families’ Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

¹⁷⁶The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, “Research with Impact: The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University 2015-2016 Review,” Accessed May 7th, 2021, https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2015-2016_MFRI_Review.pdf.

¹⁷⁷The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, “Family Support: Measuring Communities,” Accessed May 7th, 2021, <https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/outreach-programs/>.

¹⁷⁸Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D., Director, Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University, email correspondence. Please contact Blue Star Families’ Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

(TBI). Service members were also suffering from traumatic physical injuries obtained in combat and inflicted by improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

The stressors endemic to the military lifestyle were also contributing to adverse mental health outcomes among military and Veteran families.¹⁷⁹ Needless to say, the mental health and wellness of active-duty families is central to sustaining optimal military readiness, resilience, and retention.

Finally, the second decade of the 21st century saw record rates of Veteran homelessness in the United States. On a single night in January 2010, 76,329 Veterans were living in an emergency shelter, transitional housing, or in an unsheltered place—e.g., on the streets, in cars, or in abandoned buildings.¹⁸⁰ (This was known as the Point in Time count.)¹⁸¹ Approximately 43% of those homeless on a single night were unsheltered. During a 12-month period (October 2009 through September 2010), an estimated 144,842 Veterans spent at least one night in emergency shelter or transitional housing programs, accounting for 11.5% of all homeless adults. In 2010, homeless Veterans accounted for 1 in 150 Veterans and about 1 in 9 Veterans living in poverty.¹⁸²

As such, the wellness pillar of Joining Forces was perhaps the most broadly defined of the initiative's efforts. Actions were undertaken to support holistic wellness of military and Veteran families, with particular focus on the caregivers of wounded warriors; the mental health of service members, Veterans, and their families; homelessness; and military cultural competency for health care providers. The following wellness-related initiatives were inspired or catalyzed by the efforts of the First and Second Lady.

Medical Community Commitments

Association of American Medical Colleges

On January 11th, 2012, First Lady Obama visited Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to announce a commitment by 101 members of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) to create a new generation of doctors, medical schools, and research

¹⁷⁹Blue Star Families, "2012 Military Family Lifestyle Survey," Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2012-Blue-Star-Families-annual-Military-Family-Lifestyle-Survey-Comprehensive-Report.pdf>.

¹⁸⁰U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Veteran Homelessness: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment to Congress," Accessed May 11th, 2021, <https://www.va.gov/homeless/docs/2010aharVeteransreport.pdf>.

¹⁸¹U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Point in Time (PIT) Count," Accessed January 11th, 2022, https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/pit_count.asp.

¹⁸²U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Veteran Homelessness: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment to Congress," Accessed May 11th, 2021, <https://www.va.gov/homeless/docs/2010aharVeteransreport.pdf>.

facilities, to ensure that service members and Veterans receive medical care attuned to their needs.¹⁸³ The participating schools committed to supporting Joining Forces by pursuing groundbreaking research in the areas of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Furthermore, they pledged to unite with the AAMC and American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine to enhance education and share research, information, and best practices to better serve Veterans and their families. VCU was selected to host the announcement due to its position as a national leader in TBI research and its strong partnership with the Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center Veterans Affairs Hospital.¹⁸⁴

Nursing Schools & Organizations

On April 11th, 2012, First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden visited the University of Pennsylvania (home to one of the country's top nursing schools) to announce a commitment from 150 state and national nursing organizations and over 500 nursing schools to ensure that nurses are prepared to meet the unique health needs of military and Veteran families. Specifically, these schools and organizations pledged to educate current and future nurses on how to recognize and care for service members, Veterans, and family members impacted by PTSD, TBI, depression, and other service-related illnesses. The initiative was led by the American Nurses Association, American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and the National League for Nursing, in coordination with the DOD and VA.¹⁸⁵

Hidden Heroes: The National Coalition for Military Caregivers

“In 2013, we began discussing a major collaborative effort with the Joining Forces team around responding to the findings of the RAND study that we commissioned in 2012, Hidden Heroes: America’s Military Caregivers. That was a seminal research project dedicated to quantifying the needs of military caregivers and examining existing policies and programs to meet those needs [...] In April 2014, shortly after the release of the report, Senator Elizabeth Dole and other members of our team were invited to the White House, where, alongside First Lady Michelle

¹⁸³Anne Buckley, “Michelle Obama at VCU to Announce National Initiative,” Virginia Commonwealth University, January 11th, 2012, https://www.news.vcu.edu/article/Michelle_Obama_Visit.

¹⁸⁴Ibid.

¹⁸⁵The White House of President Barack Obama, “America’s Nurses Join Forces with the First Lady and Dr. Biden to Support Veterans and Military Families,” April 11th, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/11/americas-nurses-join-forces-first-lady-and-dr-biden-support-Veterans-and>.

Obama, Dr. Jill Biden, and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, we announced a series of EDF-facilitated commitments from our new coalition of partners. That coalition is called 'Hidden Heroes,' and included 300+ partner organizations [...] The ability to work with Joining Forces proved critical in gaining substantive commitments to change and impact the lives of countless military and Veteran caregivers. Within a year's time most of our coalition members had rolled out key initiatives, and Joining Forces stuck with us every step of the way."

– Steve Schwab, CEO, Elizabeth Dole Foundation

In 2012, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct the largest study ever undertaken of military caregivers to help identify gaps in the policies and programs that support them.¹⁸⁶ In its report, *Hidden Heroes: America's Military Caregivers*, RAND estimated that there are about 5.5 million military caregivers in the United States and that 1.1 million of them are caring for those who served in the military post-9/11. They were, and continue to be, an unpaid national workforce, providing services worth \$15 billion annually.¹⁸⁷

According to RAND, the post-9/11 cohort of caregivers tends to be younger, employed, and more likely to be caring for a younger individual with a mental health or substance use condition. Furthermore, RAND found that those caring for post-9/11 Veterans were suffering adverse effects (e.g., health-related issues and financial challenges) at a higher rate than civilian caregivers and their fellow military caregivers from prior war eras. RAND argued that these caregivers need holistic services and support.¹⁸⁸

On April 11th, 2014, Senator Elizabeth Dole and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter joined First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden at the White House to issue a national call to action in support of military and Veteran caregivers. There, Senator Dole announced the launch of a national coalition of individuals and organizations committed to raising awareness and providing support to America's 5.5 million military caregivers. This Hidden Heroes coalition was founded on the cornerstone of the eponymous RAND report and aims to:

- ★ Raise awareness of the issues military caregivers confront every day;

¹⁸⁶Elizabeth Dole, "May is Month of the Military Caregiver: It's Time to Honor our Hidden Heroes with Substantive Support and Meaningful Legislation," *Hidden Heroes*, May 2nd, 2017,

<https://hiddenheroes.org/news/senator-dole-may-blog-post-legislation-support-military-caregivers/>.

¹⁸⁷Elizabeth Dole and Michael D. Rich, "Military Caregivers Are Hidden Heroes," RAND Corporation, April 2nd, 2014,

<https://www.rand.org/blog/2014/04/military-caregivers-are-hidden-heroes.html>.

¹⁸⁸Rajeev Ramchand, Terri Tanielian, Michael P. Fisher, et al., "Hidden Heroes: America's Military Caregivers," RAND Corporation, 2014,

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR499.html.

- ★ Inspire individuals, businesses, communities, and civic, faith, and government leaders to take action in supporting military caregivers in their communities; and
- ★ Establish a national registry, encouraging military caregivers to register at HiddenHeroes.org to better connect them to helpful resources and support.

The Hidden Heroes coalition is now 300+ members strong and is composed of leaders in public, private, nonprofit, labor, and faith communities. These members have helped to develop programs and resources for military caregivers, including free training webinars, job fairs, respite retreats, mental health and family counseling resources, pro bono legal support, assistance with health care claims, online resource guides for managing finances, and a free hotline to talk with financial planning experts. Thanks to their collective efforts, many military and Veteran support organizations now include caregivers in their missions.¹⁸⁹

Star Behavioral Health Providers

In 2011, the MFRI, in partnership with the Center for Deployment Psychology at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and the Indiana National Guard, launched Star Behavioral Health Providers (SBHP)—an online portal and database where military-connected individuals can find behavioral health professionals with specialized training in understanding and treating military and Veteran families.¹⁹⁰ Providers listed in this registry have completed a series of trainings that are intended to make them better able to provide counseling to military-connected family members. SBHP began in Indiana and is now offered in more than 15 states.¹⁹¹ The initiative was partly inspired by the White House’s attention to military and Veteran wellness.¹⁹²

The Campaign to Change Direction

“Mental health affects all Americans—one in five Americans is dealing with some kind of mental health diagnosis. The challenge that we face is that there is still a stigma. So people don’t feel good about identifying [with a mental illness] and getting the help that they need. Sometimes it’s viewed as a weakness. And when you think about that, it’s just ludicrous! [...] It’s an illness. Could you imagine claiming that a cancer patient

¹⁸⁹The Elizabeth Dole Foundation, “National Coalition Partners,” Accessed May 10th, 2021, <https://www.elizabethdolefoundation.org/about-the-foundation/national-coalition-partners/>.

¹⁹⁰Star Behavioral Health Providers, “Home: What is SBHP?,” Accessed June 15th, 2021, <https://starproviders.org/>.

¹⁹¹Star Behavioral Health Providers, “Find a Provider,” Accessed June 15th, 2021, <https://starproviders.org/find-a-provider/>.

¹⁹²Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D., Director, Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University, email correspondence. Please contact Blue Star Families’ Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

seeking chemotherapy was somehow being weak or telling someone with a heart disease to toughen up? But that's where mental health is, and our military can play a big role in changing the conversation around mental health for the entire country—because we know these men and women are heroes. We know that they're brave [...] If they can be brave enough to step up and get the help they need, perhaps that will help some kid in some community who's depressed and maybe thinking about suicide. Maybe the research that is happening for our Veterans and wounded warriors can be translated to help everybody. And that's one of the reasons that Joining Forces has been working with something called the Campaign to Change Direction. The goal there is to help the rest of the nation understand the five signs that they need to look out for when somebody has a mental illness—sort of like CPR training or training on a defibrillator [...] Everyone should be aware: employers, teachers, educators—so that when you see the signs, you know how to identify them and you can find the resources to get that person the help they need. This is true for many military spouses as well; it's not just the service members. The stresses of being a caregiver, the stresses of being a spouse dealing with four kids while their service member is deployed—we have to make sure that these individuals feel like they can reach out when they need help and they're not drowning all alone.”

– First Lady Michelle Obama¹⁹³

In March 2015, First Lady Obama spoke at the launch of the Campaign to Change Direction, a nationwide effort to raise awareness around mental health in America.¹⁹⁴ Spearheaded by the nonprofit Give an Hour and co-sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the campaign is designed to change the story of mental health across the nation by urging all Americans to learn the five signs that someone might be in distress.¹⁹⁵

“It’s time to tell everyone who’s dealing with a mental health issue that they’re not alone, and that getting support and treatment isn’t a sign of

¹⁹³C-SPAN, “First Ladies’ Support for the Military Community,” September 16th, 2016.

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?415360-1/michelle-obama-laura-bush-discuss-role-legacy-ladies>.

¹⁹⁴The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by The First Lady at ‘Change Direction’ Mental Health Event,” May 4th, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/04/remarks-first-lady-change-direction-mental-health-event>.

¹⁹⁵Rory Brosius, “Changing the Story about Mental Health in America,” The White House of President Barack Obama, March 4th, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/03/04/changing-story-about-mental-health-america>.

weakness, it's a sign of strength. That's something that my husband believes strongly as President. Because in this country, when you're fighting an illness — whether that's mental or physical — you should be able to get the help you need, end of story."

– First Lady Michelle Obama, speaking at the Campaign to Change Direction launch event, Newseum, Washington, D.C.¹⁹⁶

In May 2015, First Lady Obama and Dr. Biden were featured in the Campaign to Change Direction public service announcements, which ran on the jumbotron in New York City's Times Square and www.changedirection.org.¹⁹⁷ The campaign has since garnered more than 115 pledges from campaign partners committed to educating Americans about the five signs.

"The third pillar—wellness—had a lot to do with removing the stigma of seeking help. We worked with great partners like Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen at Give an Hour to highlight the need to change direction and reduce stigma as a national priority. Moreover, we really tried to put post-traumatic stress and similar invisible wounds of war into the larger context of mental health in America: 1 in 4 adults in the U.S., not just service members, had a diagnosable mental health illness [...] I think we made some progress normalizing that conversation, and making it a more of an American issue rather than just a service member or Veteran issue."

– Steve Parker, former Director, Joining Forces; President, WorkMerk

Veteran Homelessness Initiative

"First Lady Obama really pushed for progress in ending Veteran homelessness. In June 2014, we announced the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, and featured the cities and states that pledged to work with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness to meet those goals and criteria [...] Mrs. Obama had a famous saying: 'When Veterans come home and kiss the ground, none of them should ever have to sleep on it.' We made demonstrative change in Veteran homelessness during the period that I worked for her office. The stage had already been set for movement on this issue. Joining Forces just helped to push it across the

¹⁹⁶The White House of President Barack Obama, "Remarks by The First Lady at 'Change Direction' Mental Health Event," May 4th, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/04/remarks-first-lady-change-direction-mental-health-event>.

¹⁹⁷The Campaign to Change Direction, "First Lady Michelle Obama Featured in PSA For Change Direction," May 10th, 2015, <https://www.changedirection.org/first-lady-michelle-obama-featured-in-psa-for-change-direction/>.

line. The highlight of the initiative was the grand opening of the Conway House in Washington, D.C. Here was something tangible. Multiple local and regional nonprofits came together to support that project, and the Home Depot Foundation came in and helped furnish the place. All these organizations worked together in support of a common good.”

– Will Johnson, former Director, Joining Forces; Committee Staff, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives

Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness

In 2010, the Obama Administration set the goal of preventing and ending homelessness among Veterans by the end of 2015. In June 2014, as part of Joining Forces, First Lady Obama announced the commitment of 77 mayors, four governors, and four county officials to meet that goal, and called on all mayors and local leaders to commit to ending Veteran homelessness in their communities by the end of 2015.

Hundreds of mayors, county representatives, and governors have since accepted the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness (overseen by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness).¹⁹⁸ As of January 2022, 82 communities and three states have ended Veteran homelessness—having met the requirements laid out in federal criteria and benchmarks.¹⁹⁹

John and Jill Ker Conway Residence

In January 2017, Washington, D.C. opened the John and Jill Ker Conway Residence—a 124-unit, mixed-income residence for chronically homeless Veterans and low-income residents. This building was the first of its kind in D.C. and was constructed with a combination of federal, city, private, and nonprofit funds.²⁰⁰ Veteran tenants pay 30% of their income as rent and have on-site supportive services such as social workers, job and education counseling, and mental health specialists. Their average age is 62 and their services are coordinated by case managers who work directly with the D.C. Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) staff.²⁰¹ According to D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser, who spoke at the

¹⁹⁸U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Veterans Experiencing Homelessness,” February 19th, 2019, https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/Mayors_Challenge.asp.

¹⁹⁹U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, “Communities that Have Ended Homelessness,” Accessed January 12th, 2021, <https://www.usich.gov/communities-that-have-ended-homelessness>.

²⁰⁰Tara Bahrapour, “After Years on the Streets, Homeless Vets in D.C. Get New Building to Call Their Own,” The Washington Post, January 11th, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/after-years-on-the-streets-homeless-vets-in-dc-get-new-building-to-call-their-own/2017/01/11/1e502710-d83f-11e6-9f9f-5cdb4b7f8dd7_story.html.

²⁰¹Ibid.

ribbon-cutting, the project benefited from the Obama Administration’s focus on ending Veteran homelessness.²⁰²

Reaching Rural Veterans

Roughly one-third of all Veterans in the United States live in rural areas. These Veterans are often less likely to have access to needed services than those in urban locales.²⁰³ As such, in March 2021, the MFRI launched Reaching Rural Veterans (RRV)—a collaboration with faith-based food pantries in rural areas, aimed at bringing communities together to address the basic needs of former service members. Originally piloted in Indiana and Kentucky, RRV was officially established in five rural counties in Illinois, thanks to funding from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.²⁰⁴

The primary objective of RRV is to provide food, medical, and behavioral health support, education, and resources (including VA benefits) to low-income, homeless, and low-resource Veterans in rural areas. The project also seeks to: educate local faith communities, food pantry staff, and other community organizations about Veteran families; engage local faith communities and others in providing support and assistance to military-connected families; and educate low-income, homeless, and low-resource Veteran families about nutrition and health.²⁰⁵ According to MFRI director Dr. Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, the initiative grew out of community Stand Downs that were partly inspired by Joining Forces’ community mobilization efforts.²⁰⁶

Stakeholder Reflections

“Joining Forces was a humbling and amazing opportunity to do good. Where else does an Army Colonel get the chance to work with such an incredible group of people on a program led by the First Lady of the United States? Joining Forces didn’t have a political agenda; it didn’t have an angle or anything like that; we just wanted to do good.”

– Will Johnson, former Director, Joining Forces; Committee Staff, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives

²⁰²Ibid.

²⁰³Kristen Cavallo, “Reaching Rural Veterans Helps Connect Services to People in Need,” The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, April 22nd, 2021, <https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/reaching-rural-veterans-helps-connect-services-to-people-in-need/>.

²⁰⁴Ibid.

²⁰⁵Ibid.

²⁰⁶Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D., Director, Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University, email correspondence. Please contact Blue Star Families’ Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org for more information.

“Joining Forces was an unbelievable experience. We worked with thousands of extraordinary Americans, from all across our great country, to better support our Veterans and military spouses. The efforts of our country’s private sector, teaming closely with the government at multiple levels, were impactful and inspiring. The Joining Forces initiative demonstrated what we can accomplish if we approach a problem collaboratively.”

– VADM Brad Cooper, former Executive Director, Joining Forces; Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander, Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. Fifth Fleet

The Joining Forces initiative was many things. Most importantly, it was...

The Right Framework for Attacking the Problem

“The military and their families do such heavy lifting for the country, and because fewer than one percent serve, the larger society often doesn’t know that they need help or how to help—or they assume that the Department of Defense has it covered. But military families don’t sign up to protect and defend the Pentagon, we serve the nation, and as such, we belong not just to the government, but also to the communities, the nonprofits, the philanthropies, and the companies that make up American society. By leveraging leadership at the highest levels and activating the entire country, Joining Forces helped correct the narrative about who military families are, provided a framework for action, and created an emphasis on measurable impact that continues to improve the lives of military and Veteran families.”

– Kathy Roth-Douquet, CEO & Co-Founder, Blue Star Families

Proof Positive that Working Together Works

“What worked best at Hiring Our Heroes and Joining Forces on the Veteran employment issue was that people worked together to solve the problem. That’s not always easy in the private and nonprofit sectors. Not all companies and not all nonprofits want to work together. There’s inherent competition. Joining Forces and Hiring Our Heroes managed to create collaborative momentum, and we realized the true potential and power of public-private partnerships.”

– Kevin Schmiegel, Founder, Hiring Our Heroes, former Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce; former President & CEO, Operation Gratitude

A National Call to Action

“Joining Forces inspired me to do real things for Veterans, service members, and their families. Thanks, in part, to the White House’s national call to action, I’ve been very involved in the space—funding organizations like Got Your 6, as well as efforts to provide food assistance to food insecure Veterans and military families. The ethos of Joining Forces also inspired me to sponsor efforts to provide Veterans with cybersecurity training and to fund Blue Star Families’ New York Tri-State Chapter—which aims to ensure that military families are welcomed in the communities in which they live.”

– Craig Newmark, Founder, craigslist and Craig Newmark Philanthropies

A Critical Empowerment Mechanism

“The overarching success of Joining Forces was its ability to bring the military and Veteran communities together and give us all a voice. The White House recognized that military and Veteran family well-being is a key component of national security. Families, caregivers, and survivors all play a role in making our military stronger, and therefore in making our nation stronger. Joining Forces created a space for us to feel as though we could share challenges and move initiatives forward as a community.”

– Bonnie Carroll, President & Founder, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

A Unique, Cross-Partisan Initiative

“Joining Forces leveraged an opportunity to bring people together from across the political divide. Not long ago, the IVMF conducted some research regarding the proclivity of Americans to support military-connected causes, and one of the variables considered was political ideology. Ultimately, what we found was that those individuals most likely to support military-connected causes were those with the most strongly held political positions, whether those views were strongly conservative or strongly liberal. That told us that supporting our Veterans and military families is one of those rare issues that people on both ends of the political spectrum are able to get behind. In that regard, Joining Forces was brilliant because it created a platform for folks who don’t agree on a whole slew of issues, to agree on one thing and turn that agreement into action.”

– Mike Haynie, Executive Director & Founder, Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University

“One of the great things about Joining Forces was that it wasn’t partisan. It really transcended party politics. A lot of prominent Republicans got involved because they wanted to support our troops [...] Moreover, it motivated some people to make military and Veteran families the focus of their advocacy work in Washington. It will be important to continue to bring people into the fold from across the aisle, and to keep them energized in support of this work.”

– Wendy Smith, former Co-Chair, Joining Forces Entertainment Industry Committee; Strategic Marketing/Communications and Public Affairs, Forbes Tate Partners

A Meaningful Effort to Bridge the Civilian-Military Divide

"You don't need to grow up in a military family to empathize with what military families are going through or to really appreciate the role that military families play in our larger society. After all, the First Lady wasn't

from a military family [...] one of the enduring outcomes of Joining Forces was helping citizens engage with the government's effort to support other citizens.”

– Steve Parker, former Director, Joining Forces; President, WorkMerk

An Initiative Grounded in Personal Investment

“The way the Obamas and Bidens did things with Joining Forces was so personal. They always made the military and Veteran families they interacted with feel safe and comfortable sharing their stories, their struggles, their pain [...] Vice President Biden attended two of our major gatherings: the National Military Survivors Seminar and the Good Grief Camp, where he came and spoke about loss. Our most-watched YouTube video is actually a film of that talk [...] It was a very open and honest conversation about grief. As he spoke to a room of 1,200 survivors—spouses, parents, and children—you could have heard a pin drop. One little boy came up to him afterwards and said, ‘At first, I did not think you understood us. But then you spoke to my heart.’”

– Bonnie Carroll, President & Founder, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

“Mrs. Obama and Dr. Biden were personally invested in the Joining Forces initiative. I remember they were often present at events—which meant a lot to people in the room [...] As part of HOH, I got to spotlight the work of Veterans and military spouses who were leading hiring initiatives at their companies. Those individuals got to meet the First Lady and the Second Lady and could see that the White House supported their efforts. That’s life changing. The personal involvement of the First Lady and Dr. Biden created a community of believers, doers, and advocates within the space. Those folks went back to their companies—they went back to their communities—determined to create change [...] It’s not just about using the national megaphone. It’s about creating personal connections. The First and Second Lady invested their time and energy in Joining Forces, and people saw that. They inspired the trust and confidence of folks in the space and made everyone want to do more.”

– Kevin Schmiegel, Founder, Hiring Our Heroes, former Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce; former President & CEO, Operation Gratitude

“I remember that Dr. Biden hosted a holiday party at the Vice President’s quarters. She invited a classroom of elementary school kids from northern Virginia. There was a young boy in the class whose father was deployed overseas. They worked with United Through Reading to set up a way for the dad to video conference into the quarters, and he read a book to his son’s class. I was invited to attend as a military psychologist and member of MCEC’s Science Advisory Board. I spoke to the kids to try to get them to think about what it must be like to have a parent deployed. Dr. Biden spent hours with these kids, and you could always tell that—as a military mom and educator—she was deeply invested in these issues.”

– Rebecca Porter, Ph.D., President & CEO, Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)

“In 2011, Vice President Biden and Dr. Biden hosted Thanksgiving dinner at their residence for a group of wounded warriors and their families. The Joining Forces staff joined them. The way those Veterans described their experiences and challenges was so personal. The Bidens knew first-hand what this meant as a military family. Their empathy, authenticity, and care was on full display at that very special dinner. If Vice President Biden said it once, he must have said it a dozen times: We have a sacred obligation as a nation to provide for the men and women that we send into harm’s way, and to do everything possible to make their transition back into civilian society workable. He said at the event, ‘I’ll always be on your side, pushing this. I don’t know what else I could be doing that’s more important.’”

– Rich Morales, former Director, Joining Forces; Colonel, U.S. Army, Professor and Head of Department of Systems Engineering, West Point

Chapter 3: The Trump Administration (2017-2021)

Introduction

While the Trump administration did not continue the Joining Forces initiative, it engaged in various efforts to support military and Veteran families—particularly in the realms of Veteran health care and military spouse employment.

Veteran Health & Well-being

VA MISSION Act

In 2014, a VA inspector general report found that VA officials had falsified records at a medical center in Phoenix, hiding the amount of time that Veterans had to wait for medical appointments. According to the report, 1,700 Veterans had been kept on lengthy waiting lists—with Veterans waiting an average of 115 days for an initial primary care appointment.²⁰⁷ Such wait times were the product of VA staffing shortages relative to the increased number of Veterans accessing VA medical facilities.²⁰⁸

In response to this crisis, Congress enacted the Veteran Choice & Accountability Act, which established the Veterans Choice Program (VCP). Under the VCP, Veterans who lived further than 40 miles from a VA hospital or who faced wait times greater than 30 days could seek private health care funded by the government.²⁰⁹ Simultaneously, Congress channeled about \$2.5 billion towards hiring more doctors, nurses, and other medical staff at VA medical centers.²¹⁰

“The VA is not everywhere. Many Veterans live in rural areas that are a good distance from a VA facility. Even where there is a VA facility, sometimes it will have a backlog of appointments. Other times, a particular service won’t exist at the VA at the level a Veteran needs. As

²⁰⁷Wesley Lowery and Josh Hicks, “‘Troubling’ Report Sparks New Wave of Calls For VA Chief’s Resignation,” The Washington Post, May 28th, 2014,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/troubling-report-sparks-new-wave-of-calls-for-va-chiefs-resignation/2014/05/28/b6af712c-e699-11e3-a86b-362fd5443d19_story.html?itid=ik_inline_manual_21.

²⁰⁸Juan Elosua, “VA Hospitals Still Struggling with Adding Staff Despite Billions From Choice Act,” NPR, January 31st, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/01/31/512052311/va-hospitals-still-struggling-with-adding-staff-despite-billions-from-choice-act>.

²⁰⁹U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Choice Act Summary,” Accessed January 11th, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/documents/choice-act-summary.pdf>.

²¹⁰Juan Elosua, “VA Hospitals Still Struggling with Adding Staff Despite Billions From Choice Act,” NPR, January 31st, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/01/31/512052311/va-hospitals-still-struggling-with-adding-staff-despite-billions-from-choice-act>.

such, sometimes it's easier for a Veteran to be able to get the services they need from the private sector. The goal wasn't to push Veterans into the private sector. The goal was to get the best care for Veterans in the most timely manner possible. The VA is able to provide much of the necessary capability, but sometimes we need to supplement Veterans' care in the community."

– Tom Porter, Executive Vice President for Government Affairs, Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)

Unfortunately, a 2017 investigation by NPR found that, despite Congress' \$2.5 billion investment, wait times at VA facilities had not significantly improved.²¹¹ Meanwhile, according to a 2019 Government Accountability Office report, Veterans continued to wait an average of 51 days to receive care through the VCP.²¹²

President Trump made improving Veteran health care a hallmark of his presidential campaign.²¹³ In June 2018, he signed the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act, which replaced the VCP with the Veterans Community Care Program.²¹⁴ Under the Community Care Program, a Veteran is empowered to seek care in their community if:

1. They need a service not available at any VA medical facility;
2. They live in a state or territory without a full-service VA medical facility;
3. They qualify under the “grandfather” provision related to distance eligibility under the Veterans Choice Program;
4. The VA cannot furnish care within certain designated access standards;
5. Their clinician agrees that it is in the best medical interest of the Veteran to receive community care based on defined factors; or

²¹¹Ibid.

²¹²Government Accountability Office, “Veterans Choice Program: Improvements Needed to Address Access-Related Challenges as VA Plans Consolidation of its Community Care Programs,” June 4th, 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-281>.

²¹³Gretchen Frazee, “Can President Trump Keep His Promises to Veterans?” PBS News, April 14th, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/can-president-trump-keep-promises-Veterans>.

²¹⁴Richard Sisk, “Trump Signs \$55 Billion Bill to Replace VA Choice Program,” June 6th, 2018, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/06/06/trump-signs-55-billion-bill-replace-va-choice-program.html>.

6. The VA has determined that a VA medical service line is not providing care in a manner that complies with VA's standards for quality based on specific conditions.²¹⁵

The MISSION Act also expanded caregivers' assistance to families of disabled Veterans and ordered an inventory of the VA's 1,100+ facilities, with an eye towards trimming excess.²¹⁶

The PREVENTS Initiative

According to a 2018 VA National Suicide Data Report, the Veteran suicide rate in the United States increased by nearly 26% between 2005 to 2016, with a slight decrease from 30.5 per 100,000 population to 30.1 per 100,000 population between 2015 and 2016.²¹⁷ In 2018, the number of Veteran suicides each day averaged 17.6,²¹⁸ and rates of Veteran suicide were higher than that of the U.S. adult population.²¹⁹

In response to this epidemic, President Trump issued Executive Order 13861 on March 5th, 2019, which mandated the creation of the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide—the PREVENTS initiative.²²⁰ This Cabinet-level task force was chaired by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy and included other department secretaries.²²¹ The initiative signaled a “national call to action to improve the quality of life of our nation's Veterans—many of whom have risked their lives to protect our freedom while deployed, often multiple times to areas of prolonged conflict.”²²²

The executive order contended, “To reduce the Veteran suicide rate, the Federal Government must work side-by-side with partners from state, local, territorial, and tribal governments—as well as private and nonprofit entities—to provide our Veterans with the

²¹⁵Department of Veterans Affairs, “VA Launches New Health Care Options under MISSION Act,” June 6th, 2019, <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5264>. See also Congressional Research Service, “Introduction to Veterans Health Care,” October 24th, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10555>.

²¹⁶Richard Sisk, “Trump Signs \$55 Billion Bill to Replace VA Choice Program,” June 6th, 2018,

<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/06/06/trump-signs-55-billion-bill-replace-va-choice-program.html>.

²¹⁷U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “VA National Suicide Data Report 2005–2016,” Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, September 2018, https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/OMHSP_National_Suicide_Data_Report_2005-2016_508.pdf.

²¹⁸Ibid.

²¹⁹Ibid.

²²⁰The White House of President Donald Trump, “Executive Order 13861: National Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End Suicide,” March 5th, 2019,

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/03/08/2019-04437/national-roadmap-to-empower-veterans-and-end-suicide>.

²²¹Members of the PREVENTS task force included: the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Education, Secretary of Energy, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Secretary of Homeland Security, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Secretary of Labor, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, Veterans Health Administration Executive in Charge. See U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “PREVENTS Roadmap,” June 17th, 2020,

https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/docs/PRE-007-The-PREVENTS-Roadmap-1-2_508.pdf.

²²²Ibid.

services they need. At the same time, the Federal Government must advance our understanding of the underlying causal factors of Veteran suicide. Our collective efforts must begin with the common understanding that suicide is preventable and prevention requires more than intervention at the point of crisis. The Federal Government, academia, employers, members of faith-based and other community, non-governmental, and nonprofit organizations, first responders, and the Veteran community must all work together to foster cultures in which Veterans and their families can thrive.”²²³

The PREVENTS task force was charged with creating a roadmap, within one calendar year, to “empower Veterans to pursue an improved quality of life, prevent suicide, prioritize related research activities, and strengthen collaboration across the public and private sectors.”²²⁴ This roadmap was to include a proposal for “community integration and collaboration [...] [to] better coordinate and align existing efforts and services for Veterans” and a “research strategy [...] to advance [the] administration’s efforts to improve quality of life and reduce suicide among Veterans by better integrating existing efforts of governmental and non-governmental entities.”²²⁵

Ultimately, the PREVENTS roadmap made 10 recommendations for preventing Veteran suicide via a “whole-of-Nation approach.”²²⁶ These recommendations were made in consultation with “over 150 subject matter experts from more than 15 federal agencies” who “(1) identified the most critical problems for existing suicide prevention efforts, (2) carefully studied existing background information to understand the current state, (3) conducted a detailed analysis of potential solutions, and (4) recommended next steps for solving each problem.”²²⁷ The roadmap likewise identified four focus areas under which its recommendations were organized: communications, research, programs, and policies.²²⁸ Finally, the task force outlined a six-step, phased approach for implementing the PREVENTS recommendations.

By the end of 2020, the PREVENTS team had successfully:

- ★ Created the REACH public health campaign, wherein PREVENTS partnered with agencies in the task force, “as well as non-governmental organizations, corporations, faith-based leaders, and sub-populations to provide targeted messaging that

²²³The White House of Donald Trump, “Executive Order 13861: National Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End Suicide,” March 5th, 2019, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/03/08/2019-04437/national-roadmap-to-empower-veterans-and-end-suicide>.

²²⁴Ibid.

²²⁵Ibid.

²²⁶U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “PREVENTS: The President’s Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide,” June 17th, 2020, https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/docs/PRE-007-The-PREVENTS-Roadmap-1-2_508.pdf.

²²⁷U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “PREVENTS Roadmap,” June 17th, 2020, https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/docs/PRE-007-The-PREVENTS-Roadmap-1-2_508.pdf.

²²⁸Ibid.

empowers the public to recognize risks.” The campaign had over 2.8 billion impressions, 7.7 million clicks to the REACH website (REACH.gov), and over 15,000 signees to the “PREVENTS Pledge to REACH”;²²⁹

- ★ Established a grant opportunities database, with 195+ programs, representing more than \$2.6 billion in funding;²³⁰
- ★ Secured proclamations in 42 states and one U.S. territory expressing the commitment of those communities to the PREVENTS effort;²³¹
- ★ Leveraged relationships across the government, military, and non-governmental organizations to create 24 National Ambassadors to serve as advocates for PREVENTS;²³²
- ★ Partnered with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation’s Hiring Our Heroes program to “[bring] together coalition companies and organizations to support employees’ mental health and wellness.” The pledge was signed by numerous companies at ceremonies in November 2019 and August 2020;²³³ and
- ★ Cultivated relationships with the American Medical Association, American Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers, and American Heart Association to find and distribute best practices on well-being, mental health, and belonging.²³⁴

Military Spouse Employment

“Military spouses deserve the opportunity to find meaningful jobs and fulfilling careers as they serve our nation. It has been an honor to lead this effort to better elevate, encourage, and recognize the resilient strength of our nation’s military spouses and the unique challenges they face. They are great assets to our American workforce and do so much

²²⁹U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Priority 1: Launch a National Public Health Campaign Across the United States,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/accomplishments.asp>.

²³⁰U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Priority 3: State, Local, and Community Grant Program(s),” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/accomplishments.asp>.

²³¹U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Priority 5: State Proclamations,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/accomplishments.asp>.

²³²U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Priority 6: PREVENTS Ambassadors Program,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/accomplishments.asp>.

²³³U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Priority 7: PREVENTS Employer Pledge and Toolkit,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/accomplishments.asp>.

²³⁴U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Priority 9: Professional Credentialing and Certification,” Accessed January 7th, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/accomplishments.asp>.

for the strength and readiness of our Armed Forces. We must continue to do all that we can to better improve and enhance their quality of life.”

– Second Lady Karen Pence²³⁵

In May 2018, the White House Council of Economic Advisers reported that—according to industry estimates—military spouses were unemployed at nearly twice the rate of U.S. working-age adults.²³⁶ Moreover, compared to all working age, non-institutionalized, civilian labor market participants who earned more than \$1,000 in 2015—and accounting for differences in sex, age, race, ethnicity, and education—military spouses earned, on average, 26.8% less in wage and salary income than their non-military spouse peers.²³⁷ The report noted that military spouses continued to be plagued by occupational licensing barriers, despite efforts to improve interstate reciprocity.²³⁸

In September 2018, Second Lady Karen Pence—whose son was an officer in the Marine Corps—launched an awareness campaign to elevate and encourage our nation’s military spouses and recognize their unique employment and career challenges. As part of this effort, Mrs. Pence traveled across the country and met with military spouses, business leaders, government officials, and non-governmental leaders to discuss the employment-related challenges faced by military spouses.²³⁹ She likewise visited states with large active-duty populations to highlight the creation of military spouse economic empowerment zones and showcase existing spouse employment programs.²⁴⁰

“Mrs. Pence recognized that military spouses are amazing people who unfortunately are too often overlooked and don’t seem to get the recognition they deserve. She decided early on that this was a population she wanted to focus on, so she hosted listening sessions with military

²³⁵The White House of Donald Trump, “Second Lady Karen Pence’s Efforts to Support our Nation’s Military Spouses and Families,” August 27th, 2020,

<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/second-lady-karen-pences-efforts-support-nations-military-spouses-families/>

²³⁶The White House of Donald Trump, “Military Spouses in the Labor Market,” White House Council of Economic Advisers, May 2018,

<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Military-Spouses-in-the-Labor-Market.pdf>.

²³⁷Ibid.

²³⁸Ibid.

²³⁹The White House of Donald Trump, “Second Lady Karen Pence’s Efforts to Support our Nation’s Military Spouses and Families,” August 27th, 2020,

<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/second-lady-karen-pences-efforts-support-nations-military-spouses-families/>

²⁴⁰U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, “Second Lady Karen Pence Shows Her Support for Military Spouses at the Texas MSEEZ Launch,” October 2nd, 2019,

<https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/blog/post/second-lady-karen-pence-shows-her-support-military-spouses-texas-mseez-launch>. See also Brian Alvarado, “Second Lady Karen Pence: Her Mission Continues for Military Spouse Employment,” Military Spouse, January 2020, <https://www.militaryspouse.com/military-life/second-lady-karen-pence-military-spouse-employment/>.

spouses at numerous military installations across the country and OCONUS. The military spouses who participated in the listening sessions repeatedly emphasized that they felt employment challenges stood as the biggest challenge for the community as a whole. That was the genesis of her military spouse awareness campaign [...] Through the campaign, she really wanted to make sure more Americans, including government officials and private sector and nonprofit leaders, were aware of the challenges faced by military spouses and would in turn work together to address these issues [...] We knew that there were a lot of great organizations in the space working on these issues, so we partnered with a number of them to raise awareness and support their efforts [...]"

– Sara Egeland, former Deputy Assistant to the Vice President and Policy Director to the Second Lady

In particular, Mrs. Pence encouraged state and military leaders to address outstanding licensing and certification barriers, which continued to plague military spouses in licensed professions. For example:

- ★ During the 2018, 2019, and 2020 NGA Winter Meetings, Mrs. Pence spoke to governors and their spouses about addressing licensing reform in their states;
- ★ In September 2020, Mrs. Pence participated in a roundtable discussion with Governor Doug Ducey, military spouses, and military service organization representatives to discuss Arizona’s military spouse licensing progress; and
- ★ In June 2020, Mrs. Pence convened a meeting with the three military service secretaries and Coast Guard leadership at the White House. There, she encouraged the services to prioritize programs for military spouses and fully implement existing policies designed for military spouses, especially as it relates to licensing reforms.²⁴¹

“Licensing reform is very complicated, and it was something that Mrs. Pence was especially passionate about. She made it a primary focus in recognition that it was such a big part of the employment hurdle.”

²⁴¹The White House of Donald Trump, “Second Lady Karen Pence’s Efforts to Raise Awareness on Licensing Reform for Military Spouses,” October 22nd, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/second-lady-karen-pences-efforts-raise-awareness-licensing-reform-military-spouses/>.

– Sara Egeland, former Deputy Assistant to the Vice President and Policy Director to the Second Lady

These efforts were supplemented by President Trump’s May 2018 Executive Order 13832, “Enhancing Noncompetitive Civil Service Appointments of Military Spouses,” which removed requirements of a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) move and geographic area of the permanent duty station when applying for non-competitive civil service appointments until August 13th, 2023.²⁴²

Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses (TEAMS)

In September 2020, Second Lady Pence and former Secretary of Labor Eugene Scalia announced the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses (TEAMS) initiative under the DOL’s Veterans Employment and Training Service. The program aimed to “assist military spouses in their career endeavors with training on employment essentials, tailored to their unique circumstances.”²⁴³ According to Secretary Scalia, “The TEAMS initiative [was designed to] equip military spouses with skills they can use to participate more fully in our nation’s economy even as they shoulder the challenges of life in a military family.”²⁴⁴ As part of this effort, the DOL created a series of online, instructor-led workshops dedicated to helping military spouse participants prepare for their job search and achieve their employment goals.

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²⁴² The White House of Donald Trump, “Executive Order 13832, “Enhancing Noncompetitive Civil Service Appointments of Military Spouses,” May 9th, 2018, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/05/14/2018-10403/enhancing-noncompetitive-civil-service-appointments-of-military-spouses>.

²⁴³ U.S. Department of Labor, “Second Lady Karen Pence and U.S. Secretary of Labor Eugene Scalia Announce Program to Assist Military Spouses,” Veterans Employment and Training Service, September 20th, 2020, <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/vets/vets20200930>.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, “TEAMS Workshops,” Accessed January 11th, 2022, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/teams-workshops>.

Chapter 4: The Biden Administration (2021-Present)

Joining Forces 2.0

On April 7th, 2021, Dr. Jill Biden officially announced the relaunch of the Joining Forces initiative. Speaking from the White House to a virtual audience of 100 military-connected family members and advocates, First Lady Biden explained that the new iteration of Joining Forces would focus on employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, military child education, and the overall health and well-being of military and Veteran families.²⁴⁶

“Make no mistake: military families are critical to our national defense. We have an All-Volunteer Force—and it continues only because generations of Americans see the honor, dignity, and patriotism of military service. How can we hope to keep our military strong if our service members are forced to choose between their love of country and their love of family?”

– First Lady Jill Biden, speaking at the virtual Joining Forces launch event on April 7th, 2021²⁴⁷

The White House made a series of pledges in association with each focus area, copied below:

1. **Employment and Entrepreneurship:** “The Department of Defense’s 2019 Active-Duty Spouses Survey indicates, even pre-pandemic, a military spouse unemployment rate of approximately 22%. Frequent moves and transfers, state licensing requirements, child care (costs, long waitlists for on-base providers, and lack of access to off-base providers), caregiving, and deployments, all contribute to the unique challenges military spouses face in building sustainable and long-term careers. Joining Forces will work with the government at all levels and the nonprofit and private sectors to mitigate these challenges and drive economic opportunities. We will work with employers to create more flexible, transferable, and remote job opportunities for military spouses, as well as increasing resources for those interested in entrepreneurial endeavors. We will also ensure that military families are

²⁴⁶The White House of President Joe Biden, “Joining Forces,” April 7th, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/>.

²⁴⁷Ibid.

included in the administration’s overall policies aimed at improving economic security for all families.”²⁴⁸

2. **Military Child Education:** “There are more than two million children in classrooms in the United States whose parents are active-duty military service members, National Guard, or reservists, or military Veterans. Military life can be unpredictable: these children often experience multiple moves, extended separation from family members, and increased fear for their parents’ safety during deployments. We must understand and account for the lifelong impact of service on military-connected children and ensure that children in Veteran families, caregiving families, and surviving families will also be included in the initiative’s work. We also recognize that military children with disabilities, including those enrolled in DOD’s Exceptional Family Member Program, face additional challenges with changes of duty station. Joining Forces will advance programming to support military-connected children in their classrooms and help ease the burdens created by the highly mobile military lifestyle.”²⁴⁹
3. **Health and Well-being:** “Supporting the overall physical, social, and emotional health of military families is a national security imperative. While our country lauds the strength and resilience of military families, it is critical to acknowledge that they too shoulder the weight of the past 20 years of sustained warfare. Members of military families and caregivers may experience mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Caregiving for a wounded, ill, or injured family member can have an outsized impact on a caregiver’s health, financial stability, and economic security. Additionally, some military families report a lack of consistent access to enough food to live an active, healthy lifestyle. The global pandemic over the past year has intensified these stressors. We will also work closely with service providers in the civilian community to ensure they have the knowledge and tools to effectively support military and Veteran families, caregivers, and survivors.”²⁵⁰

Strengthening America’s Military Families Report

In May 2021, the Office of the First Lady and the National Security Council (NSC) launched a Joining Forces Interagency Policy Committee (IPC) to establish a forum for advancing Joining Forces’ cross-agency priorities. According to the White House, this effort recognized that supporting the overall physical, social, and emotional health of military and Veteran families “is a national security imperative and demonstrates the administration’s whole of

²⁴⁸Ibid.

²⁴⁹Ibid.

²⁵⁰Ibid.

government approach to supporting these communities.”²⁵¹ The IPC likewise served as a mechanism for fostering inter-agency data-sharing and problem-solving.²⁵²

In September 2021, the IPC published its Strengthening America’s Military Families report—outlining over 80 of the administration’s commitments to military and Veteran families, caregivers, and survivors.

“The commitments contained in today’s report represent critical first steps to solving some of the most complex and pressing issues facing the families of our service members and Veterans, their caregivers and survivors [...] From increasing economic opportunities for military spouses to supporting military children in the classroom, to addressing food insecurity, we are working together as a team across the government to share data, create innovative solutions, and implement evidence-based programs and policies. Through Joining Forces, we are bringing a whole-of-government approach to supporting military and Veteran families, caregivers, and survivors. These initial commitments from federal agencies, as well as our commander-in-chief, show the dedication of this administration to those who also serve.”

– Rory Brosius, Executive Director of Joining Forces²⁵³

The report outlined various goals, including making the federal government the employer of choice for military spouses; increasing economic opportunities and reducing job losses related to permanent change of station (PCS) moves; increasing the availability of child care through innovative solutions; increasing support for military and Veteran family economic and education opportunities; and providing support to military-connected students to ease barriers they face in education.²⁵⁴

Various commitments within the report have since been accomplished. For example, executive agencies across the President’s Cabinet joined the Department of Defense’s

²⁵¹The White House of President Joe Biden, “Joining Forces and Hidden Helpers Coalition Pledge Support to Military and Veteran Children in Caregiving Families,” November 10th, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/blog/2021/11/10/joining-forces-and-hidden-helpers-coalition-pledge-support-to-military-and-veteran-children-in-caregiving-families/>.

²⁵²Ibid.

²⁵³The White House of President Joe Biden, “Strengthening America’s Military Families: White House Report on Administration Commitments to Support the Families of Service Members and Veterans, their Caregivers and Survivors,” September 30th, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/blog/2021/09/30/strengthening-americas-military-families-white-house-report-on-administration-commitments-to-support-the-families-of-service-members-and-veterans-their-caregivers-and-survivors/>.

²⁵⁴The White House of President Joe Biden, “Strengthening America’s Military Families,” White House Joining Forces Interagency Policy Committee, September 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Strengthening_Americas_Military_Families.pdf.

Military Spouse Employment Partnership.²⁵⁵ Moreover, to encourage military and Veteran families to find recreational opportunities and increase comprehensive physical, social, mental, and spiritual fitness, the Department of the Interior created a dynamic map available on its website to show where national park access exists in proximity to military installations.²⁵⁶

Moving forward, the IPC pledged to advance its commitments through cross-agency working groups focused on:

- ★ Food Insecurity in Military Families
- ★ Military and Veteran Children in Caregiving Homes
- ★ Federal Employment for Military Spouses²⁵⁷

Each working group was tasked with producing a separate report outlining plans for future research and identifying areas of collaboration between agencies.²⁵⁸

Hidden Helpers

In April 2021, Joining Forces partnered with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and Wounded Warrior Project to launch Hidden Helpers—a new initiative designed to create supportive programming for, and bring awareness to, the 2.3 million children of wounded, ill, or injured service members or Veterans.²⁵⁹

On November 10th, 2021, First Lady Biden, Senator Elizabeth Dole, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, alongside the Hidden Helpers Coalition of more than 50 public and private sector organizations, announced 40 commitments to support the approximately 2.3 million children in military or Veteran caregiving families.²⁶⁰ These commitments aimed to fill critical gaps in support for military-connected children identified in a report commissioned by the Elizabeth Dole

²⁵⁵The White House of President Joe Biden, "Joining Forces: New Year's Update," January 5th, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/>.

²⁵⁶National Park Service, "National Parks Near Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs Facilities," Accessed January 11th, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/military/parks-near-va-facilities.htm>.

²⁵⁷The White House of President Joe Biden, "Joining Forces: New Year's Update," January 5th, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/>.

²⁵⁸The White House of President Joe Biden, "Strengthening America's Military Families," White House Joining Forces Interagency Policy Committee, September 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Strengthening_Americas_Military_Families.pdf.

²⁵⁹The White House of President Joe Biden, "Joining Forces and Hidden Helpers Coalition Pledge Support to Military and Veteran Children in Caregiving Families," November 10th, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/blog/2021/11/10/joining-forces-and-hidden-helpers-coalition-pledge-support-to-military-and-veteran-children-in-caregiving-families/>.

²⁶⁰Ibid.

Foundation—“Hidden Helpers at the Frontlines of Caregiving: Supporting the Healthy Development of Children from Military and Veteran Caregiving Homes.”²⁶¹

Speaking to the children of military-connected caregivers at a White House event in November 2021, First Lady Biden said:

“We’re here to thank you for everything you do to help out at home—all the extra chores you take on or the times you watch your brothers and sisters [...] We know you need a break sometimes — and that you need to be around kids and teachers who understand what you’re going through, without needing it explained.”²⁶²

Community Engagement

Throughout 2021, the White House supported 11 events focused on Joining Forces priorities, including:

- ★ Blue Star Families’ Town Hall for Military-Connected Families and the COVID-19 Vaccines;
- ★ Operation Homefront’s Military Child of the Year;
- ★ Hiring Our Heroes Military Spouse Employment Summit;
- ★ Affordable Care Act Special Enrollment Period for Veteran families with VA and HHS;
- ★ DOD’s Military Spouse Employment Partnership 10th anniversary;
- ★ Military Child Education Coalition’s National Training Seminar;
- ★ VA’s Caregiver Support Program Annual Conference;
- ★ Congressional Military Families Caucus;
- ★ DOD’s Military Spouse Employment Partnership New Partner Induction;
- ★ Hidden Helpers Coalition commitments announcement;
- ★ Hiring Our Heroes Veteran and Military Spouse Employment Advisory Councils;

²⁶¹Steven Malick, Mayra Sandoval, Tatiana Santiago, et al., “Hidden Helpers at the Frontlines of Caregiving: Supporting the Healthy Development of Children from Military and Veteran Caregiving Homes,” Elizabeth Dole Foundation, November 2021, https://hiddenheroes.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Hidden_Helpers_Report.pdf.

²⁶²Danny Reed, “Hidden Helpers Coalition is Working to Support the Children of Military Family Members,” Bob Woodruff Foundation, December 2nd, 2021, <https://bobwoodrufffoundation.org/hidden-helpers-military-family/>.

- ★ Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) listening session with military-connected children in high school;
- ★ Listening session with military child education partners, including MCEC, Sesame Workshop, and Partners in Promise; and
- ★ Launch of Hidden Helpers Coalition, Co-chaired by the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and Wounded Warrior Project²⁶³

Moreover, the administration worked with myriad government and non-governmental partners by participating in activities, including:

- ★ Briefing federal employment partners with DOD's Military Spouse Employment Partnership;
- ★ Announcing efforts with the Interagency Veterans Advisory Council to build a community platform for military spouses in federal employment;
- ★ Working with the National Economic Council on a Consumer Finances Roundtable: Issues Facing Military and Veteran Families;
- ★ Collaborating with the Office of Personnel Management, VA, and Hiring Our Heroes for an educational webinar series on federal employment for military spouses;
- ★ Opening the Teacher Interstate Compact Kick-off with the Council of State Governments;
- ★ Connecting military families with United Through Reading resources; and
- Collaborating with the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) to mark Gold Star Families Remembrance Week by sharing photographs of survivors from 50 states and six territories who received flags flown on the National Mall during Inauguration.²⁶⁴

Writing in a blog post on January 5th, 2022, the Joining Forces team announced that it looked forward to continuing to collaborate with public and private sector partners to support military and Veteran families.

²⁶³The White House of President Joe Biden, "Joining Forces: New Year's Update," January 5th, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/>.

²⁶⁴Ibid.

“As we move into the new year, we look forward to continued collaboration and progress on the needs of military on Employment and Entrepreneurship; Military Child Education; and Health and Well-being.”²⁶⁵

The End of the War in Afghanistan

After two decades of conflict, thousands of brave missions successful completed, safety secured in the homeland, and a period of development for our Afghan allies; four different presidents, \$2 trillion spent, the lives of 2,461 American personnel lost, and 20,744 American service members injured, the last U.S. military aircraft left Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 30th, 2021—officially ending America’s longest war.

Speaking from the White House on August 31st, President Biden acknowledged the service and sacrifices of U.S. military and Veteran families throughout these 20 long years of war.

²⁶⁵Ibid.

“A lot of our Veterans and their families have gone through hell—deployment after deployment, months and years away from their families; missed birthdays, anniversaries; empty chairs at holidays; financial struggles; divorces; loss of limbs; traumatic brain injury; post-traumatic stress. We see it in the struggles many have when they come home. We see it in the strain on their families and caregivers. We see it in the strain of their families when they’re not there. We see it in the grief borne by their survivors. The cost of war they will carry with them their whole lives. Most tragically, we see it in the shocking and stunning statistic that should give pause to anyone who thinks war can ever be low-grade, low-risk, or low-cost: 18 Veterans, on average, who die by suicide every single day in America—not in a far-off place, but right here in America. There’s nothing low-grade or low-risk or low-cost about any war. It’s time to end the war in Afghanistan. As we close 20 years of war and strife and pain and sacrifice, it’s time to look to the future, not the past—to a future that’s safer, to a future that’s more secure, to a future that honors those who served and all those who gave what President Lincoln called their ‘last full measure of devotion.’”

– President Joe Biden, remarks on ending the war in Afghanistan, August 31st, 2021²⁶⁶

In a statement released on August 27th, First Lady Biden pledged to continue to support the military-connected community in the aftermath of the war.

“Dear families of our military members and veterans, their caregivers, and survivors,

For nearly twenty years, Afghanistan has been woven through your life. Many of you scheduled weddings and births around deployments or watched your children reach for a mom or dad who was 3,000 miles away. Some of you sent care packages to Afghan families helping your spouse. You watched loved ones board a plane to Kabul or Kandahar, and wondered if you’d ever see them again. Too many of you lost a piece of your heart forever there. This mission is personal to you, and you have shouldered its enormous weight [...] As a military mom, I’ve seen what makes this community unlike any other. It’s bound together by love—love for our country and the values we are founded upon; love for those who serve, including the allies who stand alongside us; and love for the communities we build together. That love is what drives you to answer your nation’s call, again and again. In this difficult time,

²⁶⁶President Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” The White House of Joe Biden, August 31st, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

the nation, too, has seen your fortitude on display once again. We've seen service members sharing water and food with Afghan children waiting at the Kabul airport. We've seen military families welcoming Afghan refugees home to the United States with donations and friendship. Thank you for your continued service. As our mission in Afghanistan comes to an end, you may be experiencing many emotions. Know that my heart is with you as you navigate what comes next for your family, your community, and our nation. You are not alone. As a nation, we have asked so much of you these last twenty years. From missed birthdays and holidays to illnesses and injuries to the ultimate sacrifice a family can make, you have given us more than we can ever repay. What we can do is match your devotion with our own. We can stand beside you and honor your service."²⁶⁷

Joining Forces 2.0 continues, and the Biden Administration is expected to engage in many more military and Veteran-centric initiatives over the course of the remaining time in office.

²⁶⁷First Lady Jill Biden, "Statement," August 27th, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/FLOTUS/>.

Chapter 5: The Road Ahead

Insights & Recommendations

From April to August 2021, Blue Star Families interviewed 30+ senior leaders from across the nonprofit, philanthropic, government, and private sectors who had engaged with White House initiatives described in this report. At the end of each interview, interviewees were asked whether they had “insights or recommendations” for future cross-sector efforts to support military and Veteran families. The following is a collection of their responses.

“**[K]eep encouraging people to come to the table...**”

“The military is a living organization, people are always coming in and going out. That’s not going to change. And that’s why support programs are still necessary. Military families don’t need a hand-out. They need a hand-up. We need to continue to provide them with the assistance that they’ve earned through their service to our country [...] If I were to foot-stomp one thing, it is the ability for the First Lady’s office to encourage collaboration. I sometimes viewed Joining Forces as a table where everybody was welcome. If you’re genuinely here to do good, you’ll have a seat at the table. If your idea falls flat on its face, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and come with another idea—we’ve still got a seat for you. That ability to bring folks together, to foster collaboration, to encourage ideas that may or may not work, that is what made Joining Forces so valuable [...] Everybody’s going to have a lot of great ideas—which the White House will have to sort through. At the end of the day, however, no matter which pathway they choose, so long as they keep

encouraging people to come to the table, I think the results will be fantastic.”

– Will Johnson, former Director, Joining Forces; Committee Staff, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives

“There are a lot of people in the MSO/VSO space who have been doing this work for a long time. Great relationships have been built over the years [...] That said, there are definitely new players who have entered the space. The White Oak Collaborative has done a good job of bringing many of those new folks to the table. That said, the White House needs to ensure that it incorporates those fresh voices. It’s great to have tried and true nonprofits who have been around for a long time because they have a wealth of knowledge and experiences. However, the original Joining Forces was a breeding ground for new ideas, organizations, and initiatives. It was such a great place to learn and build relationships. There’s an opportunity for

Joining Forces 2.0 and future initiatives to play a similar role...”

– Megan Everett, Veterans Program Director, Robert R. McCormick Foundation

“Some issues—like spouse unemployment—just continue to plague the military-connected community. But that’s not a reflection of our efforts being unsuccessful. These are systems-level issues that require systems-level solutions [...] We need to invite the private sector to the table in a way where they can do more than just pledge to continue to hire military spouses and Veterans. They can do more, and are willing to do more. But we need to give them direction.”

– Anne Marie Dougherty, CEO, Bob Woodruff Foundation

“We need to continue to include National Guard & Reserve in conversations about how best to support military and Veteran families. Guard & Reserve families face unique challenges. Moreover, they can serve as valuable touchpoints in their communities.”

– Anthony Wickham, J1 Readiness Director, National Guard Bureau

“There really is always a need to get force-multipliers around the table and learn what their capabilities are [...] I can tell you that TAPS has phenomenal programs and an expansive network, but if the government isn’t talking to us, then they’re not going to be able to leverage what we have to offer—and that’s a tragic missed opportunity. Just to give you an example: When there’s a suicide in the military, which happens unfortunately on a

daily basis, often the family is not emotionally capable of returning to their home if that’s where it occurred. The government cannot pay for another set of quarters, so TAPS will provide secondary lodging for the family, as well as the cleaning of the home. There are so many things we can do.”

– Bonnie Carroll, President & Founder, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

“Measure your efforts and hold yourself accountable; hold the nation accountable. We can all do more [...] According to the CECF 2021 Giving In Numbers survey, less than 4% of corporations make military and Veteran families a priority. That’s a massive untapped resource that the nation could utilize.”

– Harriet Dominique, former Chief Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Corporate Responsibility Officer, USAA

“We also need to start talking about the impact of national security decisions on the families that we’re asking to implement them and ensure there’s a plan on how to address that impact. [...] The White House should continue to engage the MSOs and VSOs that have their finger on the community’s pulse. The issues affecting military and Veteran families today might not be the same as they were ten years ago [...] There are new organizations in the space now, with unique perspectives and fresh ideas. We need to make sure those voices are included [...] Finally, the White House ought to promote research on military and Veteran family issues. The only large-scale longitudinal study

on military families is the DOD's Millennium Cohort Study. The White House engaged academia and researchers in the first iteration of *Joining Forces*; they ought to continue to engage them and support funding for ongoing research. What we didn't

know about military families when we went to war in 2001 hurt military families for years thereafter.”

– Joyce Wessel Raezer, Executive Director (Ret.), National Military Family Association

“Anchor your efforts... to sustain them for the long haul...”

“I took away three lessons from my time as *Joining Forces* director. Lesson 1: Take the time necessary to figure out which organizations are most vested and invested in being able to move the needle. That takes time. Once that's done, lean on those organizations. Lesson 2: We serve with 330 million generally selfless Americans. It doesn't take a lot of them stepping up to significantly support less than 1% of the U.S. population. Lesson 3: Anchor your efforts within an NGO or government to sustain them for the long haul [...] For example, the Military Spouse Employment Partnership helped to anchor our spouse employment efforts and create an enduring effort. Otherwise, you risk having your efforts end with the administration. Mrs. Obama talked about this all the time. She didn't want *Joining Forces* to be a flash in the pan. She didn't want it to be a baby kissing campaign. She wanted it to be real, and for it to have a lasting, tangible impact on military and Veteran families.” – VADM Brad Cooper, former Executive Director,

Joining Forces; Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander, Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. Fifth Fleet

“We also need to think about sustainability. *Blue Star Families* did a great job carrying the torch these past four years—particularly during the pandemic; but we need to build a lasting infrastructure that will outlive any one administration [...] Finally, we need to create synergies between national and local efforts. There's a lot going on in D.C. and there's a lot going on outside of D.C. We need to message outwards, to get local communities onboard with White House efforts. At the same time, we need to make sure that the White House is aware of what local organizations are doing on the ground, so that they can leverage those efforts.”

– Megan Everett, Veterans Program Director, Robert R. McCormick Foundation

“Military family voices need to be included in broader conversations about [civilian] issues...”

“We need to stop pigeon-holing every military family issue as something unique to military families. Many of the issues impacting military families, from employment to child care to mental health, affect civilian families as well. Military family voices need to be included in broader conversations about these issues. For example, if the White House convenes a working group on post-secondary education, they should make sure that Student Veterans of America is at the table. Post-pandemic discussions on women’s employment and child care should include military family advocates. Not only would that ensure the unique needs of military and Veteran family members are being accounted for in those conversations, but it would also make others in the policy space more aware of the challenges faced by military and Veteran family members...”

– Joyce Wessel Raezer, Executive Director (Ret.), National Military Family Association

“At a time when the nation is faced with a global pandemic, there are civilian families that are facing high unemployment rates; there are civilian families who are food insecure; there are civilian families who are struggling with mental health issues. Obviously, frequent moves and long separations exacerbate these same challenges for military families. However, we

have an opportunity to focus on the areas where civilian and military families share common ground—common struggles. We can celebrate the strength and resilience of military families, and use them as a model for pioneering solutions [...] We’ve been at war for 20 years. And we are facing unprecedented times with the pandemic and socio-political divides. There is an opportunity to start bringing people together in service to our country, to our communities, and to each other. If the White House truly believes that service and simple acts of kindness and gratitude can be a meaningful way to bridge divides, we can bridge more than just the civilian-military divide. We can also bridge other divides that exist in our country right now [...] Government can’t solve this on its own. We need to create a movement around bringing people together. The reason military families feel disconnected and isolated is because they’re not connected with their civilian neighbors. The best way, I believe, to build those connections is through service.”

– Kevin Schmiegel, Founder, Hiring Our Heroes, former Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce; former President & CEO, Operation Gratitude

“The White House ought to continue the work of aligning and knitting together initiatives inside VA and DOD with those of community

organizations. Lessons from the military ought to be shared with civilian leaders. For example, the DOD's child care system (for all of its imperfections) could serve as a model for the rest of the country. Many of the issues military families are facing today are shared issues. There are lessons to be learned in both directions [...] Suicide, mental health, child care, etc. – these are all things that are important in both the civilian and military worlds. We are so focused as a society on the things that drive us apart. The White House

has an opportunity to highlight the things that connect military and Veteran families to the rest of the country. They might just be able to help to turn down the heat. Joining Forces 2.0 might even be able to serve as a model for the way in which we wish everyone would interact with each other.”

– Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D.,
Director, Military Family Research
Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University

“[T]he military personnel system has to change...”

“The unfortunate thing is that we’re continually talking about the same issues. Child care is still a problem. Military spouse employment is still a problem [...] I think there’s a growing recognition that the military personnel system has to change, otherwise families won’t stay. Especially now that deployments, rotations, and OPTEMPO are different from what it was at the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan [...] Focusing on military families is a great way to highlight the ways in which the military needs to evolve. At the same time, we need to ensure that the military family conversation is not one that’s only owned by spouses. This shouldn’t be an FRG issue. Commanders ought to be responsible for ensuring that their service members have access to child care and other necessities, because it’s a readiness issue.”

– Margaret Mullins, former Staff Lead,

White Oak Retreats; National Security
Advisor, U.S. Senator Raphael Warnock
(D-GA)

“We need to move beyond providing band-aids for military spouse employment and take a hard look at our military personnel system—which was designed during an industrial era and has not kept up with modern families and careers [...] Moreover, as a nation, we need to grapple with the concept of differentiating our love for the troops from our support for wars. During Vietnam, people hated the troops because they hated the war. Now, people love the troops, but nobody pays attention to the wars. Our engagements overseas impact our military families, and they need to be part of the conversation. We need to ask if our foreign policy justifies their sacrifice.”

– Jason Dempsey, former White House

Fellow, Office of the First Lady; Adjunct Senior Fellow of the Military, Veterans, and Society Program, Center for a New American Security (CNAS)

“[D]on’t underestimate the power of the bully pulpit.”

“There are three pieces of advice I would give to the new administration. First, don’t underestimate the power of the bully pulpit. I learned during my time in politics that people can be very motivated by the presence of the First Lady to do great things for this country. Take full advantage of that. Second, the President and First Lady can bring enormous comfort to military families, who are motivated by honor and duty in a very special way. The active engagement of the President and First Lady creates a sense of recognition

and comfort for military families. Remember the importance of this role always. Finally, trust your partners. There is a very mature infrastructure of organizations that are like-minded in working together and are eager to support the First Lady as she supports those who serve. Take advantage of those partnerships.”

– Kathy Roth-Douquet, CEO & Co-Founder, Blue Star Families

“Work as one cohesive unit.”

“The White House’s biggest successes came when they listened and validated what they were hearing with the rest of the administration. That kind of dialogue resulted in [the] DOD-VA Caregiver Act of 2010. Neither agency exactly wanted to do it. When the First Lady gets up on stage, however, and says that caregiving matters, that message quickly goes to the DPC, NSC, etc. Do more of that work. Work as one cohesive unit.”

– Koby Langley, former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary and Senior Advisor for the Office of Wounded Warrior Care and Transition Policy, Department of Defense; former Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs; Senior Vice President, American Red Cross

“It will be important to communicate with the National Governors Association, National

League of Cities, and other National Associations and State Agencies to advance change. There is a need to continue to deliberately collaborate, develop, and implement programs at the national level. However, those initiatives may be stifled in some states unless there are catalysts at the state level who can make real on-the-ground changes for military families. Getting each governor's office to sign a proclamation encouraging government, NGOs, and nonprofits in the areas of employment, education, and well-being to collaborate on behalf of military families could serve as a

force-multiplier in the development of coordinated and resourced solutions. The White House needs to leverage national and state-level organizations and encourage the departments to do the same to meet the needs of Veterans, National Guard members, Reservists, and their families in every zip code across the country."

– Marianne Watson, former Director, Manpower and Personnel (J-1), National Guard Bureau, Brigadier General (Ret.), U.S. Army National Guard

“[F]ocus messaging on our military families’ strengths...”

“We need to focus messaging on our military families’ strengths and help connect them with their communities. It's important to avoid victimizing families. Military families are eager to contribute to their communities and do so already. They just need help connecting and integrating and they can take it from there. We know the public respects and supports our military. All we need to do is create some avenues of communication.”

– Laura Schmiegel, former Chair, Blue Star Families Board of Directors; founding Director of the Military Spouse Program, Hiring Our Heroes

“We have to start preparing for transition the day folks join the military. We need to make sure that the armed forces understand the

oath that they've taken. We need to make sure there's an organized community that delivers a sense of purpose to service members as they transition. I'm afraid that some service members lose their sense of purpose and get sucked into webs of conspiracy and hate. That's preventable. The White House can help by continuing to advance the narrative that Veterans are valuable assets to companies. By connecting transitioning service members to jobs, and potential careers, we can help deliver a sense of purpose. As such, we need to make sure that Veterans are being included as a demographic in conversations about environmental and social governance within the private sector. They are a unique and underrepresented population, and are a

major asset to companies.”
– Christopher Perkins, Co-Founder,
Veterans on Wall Street (VOWS);

Managing Director, Global Head of OTC
Clearing, Citi

“Our communications can’t simply be one-size-fits-all...”

“True coordination and public-private partnerships are critical. Take transition, for example. There have been improvements to transition over the years. That said, after 10 years in this business, it still confounds me that you have a whole group of private sector companies and nonprofits standing in the wings, ready to do more to help families who are transitioning, that aren’t being actively utilized by DOD. I understand that it’s hard for them to be focused on transition [...] But that’s where coordinated public-private partnerships are critical. All of those private sector and nonprofit organizations are able to help the family with their transition, they just need a warm handoff from DOD [...] We also need to seriously tackle the civil-military divide [...] Less than 1% of the U.S. population has served in the military post-9/11. For the past few years, the war wasn’t on the front pages, and there’s been a general lack of awareness regarding the experiences of military families [...] I think the civil-military divide becomes a national security issue if people stop seeing military service as an option. We need to tell the stories of our military families. For example, most people don’t know that the National Guard experienced its highest activation since WWII in 2020, due to the pandemic and civil unrest [...] We also have to be

aware of our audience. Our communications can’t simply be one-size-fits all. Mayors, county officials, employers, etc., need to hear less about the challenges faced by military and Veteran families and more about the fact that Veterans and military family members are assets to their community.”

– Maureen Casey, former Managing Director of Military & Veterans Affairs, JPMorgan Chase; Chief Operating Officer, Institute for Veterans & Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University

“It will be important for the White House to ensure that they have robust strategic communications—particularly in a country where trust is so lacking. There is opportunity for the First Lady’s team to leverage more of the government’s public affairs assets to have an administration-wide strategic communications plan around military and Veteran families—as they would for any other priority issue.”

– Ross Cohen, former Executive Director, Hiring Our Heroes and Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation; Chief External Affairs Officer, Blue Star Families

“[C]ontinue to build military cultural competency...”

“The funder world is changing. I’ve seen three or four big name corporations and family-funded foundations restructure recently. A lot of them dissolved their Veterans vertical and dispersed it among other priorities. Veterans and military families are not on the front page of the newspaper anymore. With everything that’s going on, they’re simply not top of mind [...] It’s okay to embed Veterans issues within other verticals, so long as the person running, say, the employment vertical, understands the unique challenges and needs of Veterans. Otherwise, the loss of the Veteran vertical could prove problematic. We need to continue to build military cultural competency within the philanthropic space.”

– Mike Monroe, former Vice President of Military Initiatives, Points of Light; Director of Veterans Programs, A. James & Alice B. Clark Foundation

“The White House can continue to raise awareness around the educational challenges faced by military children—particularly those with special needs. Operation Educate the Educator, in particular, needs a jumpstart. It had not achieved irreversible momentum by the time the Obama Administration closed [...] Military family cultural competency content needs to be more rigorously and ubiquitously included in the curricula for

teachers. It doesn’t matter if you’re teaching near a military installation or not. You could have the children of National Guardsmen in your classroom. Teachers need to have a voice in the back of their mind telling them that this is a special population that they need to look out for.”

– Rebecca Porter, Ph.D., President & CEO, Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)

“You’ve got to establish intragovernmental infrastructure, so that the initiative is not dependent on a First Lady or Second Gentleman [...] The White House should spend some time demystifying the military for those they interact with in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. People always seem to get a bit nervous when dealing with military populations, because they don’t understand the rank structure, and don’t want to be disrespectful. It’s a military cultural competency issue. If you spend a bit of time saying ‘relax, here’s what you need to know,’ and answering any questions they might have, it might help to alleviate any anxiety the person might be facing—whether that be a corporate CEO or a Cabinet secretary.”

– Trooper Sanders, former Deputy Director of Policy, Office of the First Lady; CEO, Benefits Data Trust

“White House efforts are more important now than ever...”

“Some of the most acute needs that our military and Veteran families have are long-term needs—for example, recovery and rehabilitation needs that these families will face for decades. I think that White House efforts are more important now than ever because military and Veteran families are not getting the same attention that they were when the wars were in the daily headlines. Yet so many families need urgent support now and long-term. The White House has an opportunity to generate a renewed sense of urgency and inspiration in all corners of American society. Encouraging companies and communities to prioritize this population is also vital. Study after study suggests that military and Veteran families’ needs are just as, if not more, acute than they were 10 years ago...” – Steve Schwab, CEO, Elizabeth Dole Foundation

“I think the challenge this time is to hear what the call to action is today about Veterans and military families. President Biden ends most of his speeches with ‘God Bless the troops.’ I agree with the president and wonder what philanthropy should be doing to support Veterans now that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are in the rear-view mirror. I think there’s a renewed opportunity to inspire funders to act on the long-term post-war impacts, especially for those Veterans who have been affected by the disparities of the pandemic. A call to action and leadership at the national

level would be enlightening.”

– Stephanie Powers, Senior Advisor for Public Policy & Partnerships, Council on Foundations

“The personal attention of the First and Second Lady to military family issues made a major difference during the first iteration of Joining Forces. As we move into Joining Forces 2.0, that personal attention from the White House will continue to be critical [...] We have an economy that’s transforming, we’re trying to re-engage with the rest of the world, we’re still dealing with the fallout of a pandemic, etc. Military families are not top of mind. As such, we’ll have to be patient but also impatient. We’ll have to raise a little noise. The White House will have to proactively think about how to situate military families within the context of the administration’s broader agenda [...] What does Build Back Better look like? What should the role of the military community be in that? We need to be aggressive in helping to shape that narrative. The military family community can greatly contribute to building back better. After all, our service members are trained in leadership, teamwork, management, and resiliency. There’s a whole litany of strengths that military and Veteran families can offer.”

– Rob Gordon, former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, U.S. Department of Defense

Conclusion

“There's something everyone can do to support [the military and Veteran] community, but the commander-in-chief, the First family, the Second family, the Vice President—they have an obligation to set that tone [...] With this platform, you can raise the bar [...] I hope that [...] every administration will try to top the next one in what they do for these men and women [...] Whether it's Joining Forces or something else, we must continue the work of making sure that this country never forgets the service and sacrifice of military families—particularly Gold Star families—and that we hold them in our hearts. We must not just honor them with words but [must] do things that impact their lives [...] There's still so much work to be done. Everything is not fixed [...].”

– First Lady Michelle Obama²⁶⁸

The leadership of multiple administrations over the course of two decades was instrumental to the growth of the military and Veteran support space. The White House's press, policy, and advocacy efforts spurred cross-sector collaboration, which helped bring much-needed services to members of military and Veteran families. While important challenges remain to be addressed, public-private relationships will prove vital to creating responsive and comprehensive solutions for all those who serve.

For comments, questions, or corrections regarding this report, please contact Blue Star Families' Applied Research team at survey@bluestarfam.org. Blue Star Families intends to occasionally update this document. If you and/or your organization have a story you would like to include in future versions, please share it here: <https://www.tfaforms.com/4965912>.

²⁶⁸C-SPAN, “First Ladies' Support for the Military Community,” September 16th, 2016, Accessed January 3rd, 2022, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?415360-1/michelle-obama-laura-bush-discuss-role-legacy-ladies>.