

## Military Family Lifestyle Survey



Community and Social Context

# 2022 Comprehensive Report

## Military Family Resource Access

In collaboration with

**S** Syracuse University

D'Aniello Institute for  
Veterans & Military Families

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### A greater proportion of active-duty family respondents who had used civilian resources in the 12 months prior to survey fielding reported feeling a sense of belonging to their civilian community compared to their peers who had not used any civilian resources.

For active-duty families, who relocate frequently as part of the military lifestyle and often need to rebuild their resource networks with each relocation, awareness of and access to resources in their community is an important piece of settling into a new community.

As such, resource availability to meet families' needs may impact not only the spouses' stress, but also military retention.<sup>1</sup>

#### Use of Military and Civilian Resources

**Most active-duty family respondents use both civilian and military resources to meet their needs.** The majority (70%) of active-duty family respondents used at least one **military** resource in the 12 months prior to survey fielding and 65% have used a **civilian** resource. Among the most commonly used resources in both the military and civilian community were health care and social support resources (see Table 1).



However, use of civilian or military resources may also be influenced by proximity to the resource. Military families who live further from the installation may be more likely to use civilian resources than their peers who live on the military installation. Forty-one percent of those active-duty family respondents who live on a military installation reported they had not used any civilian resources in the past 12 months.

#### Civilian Resources

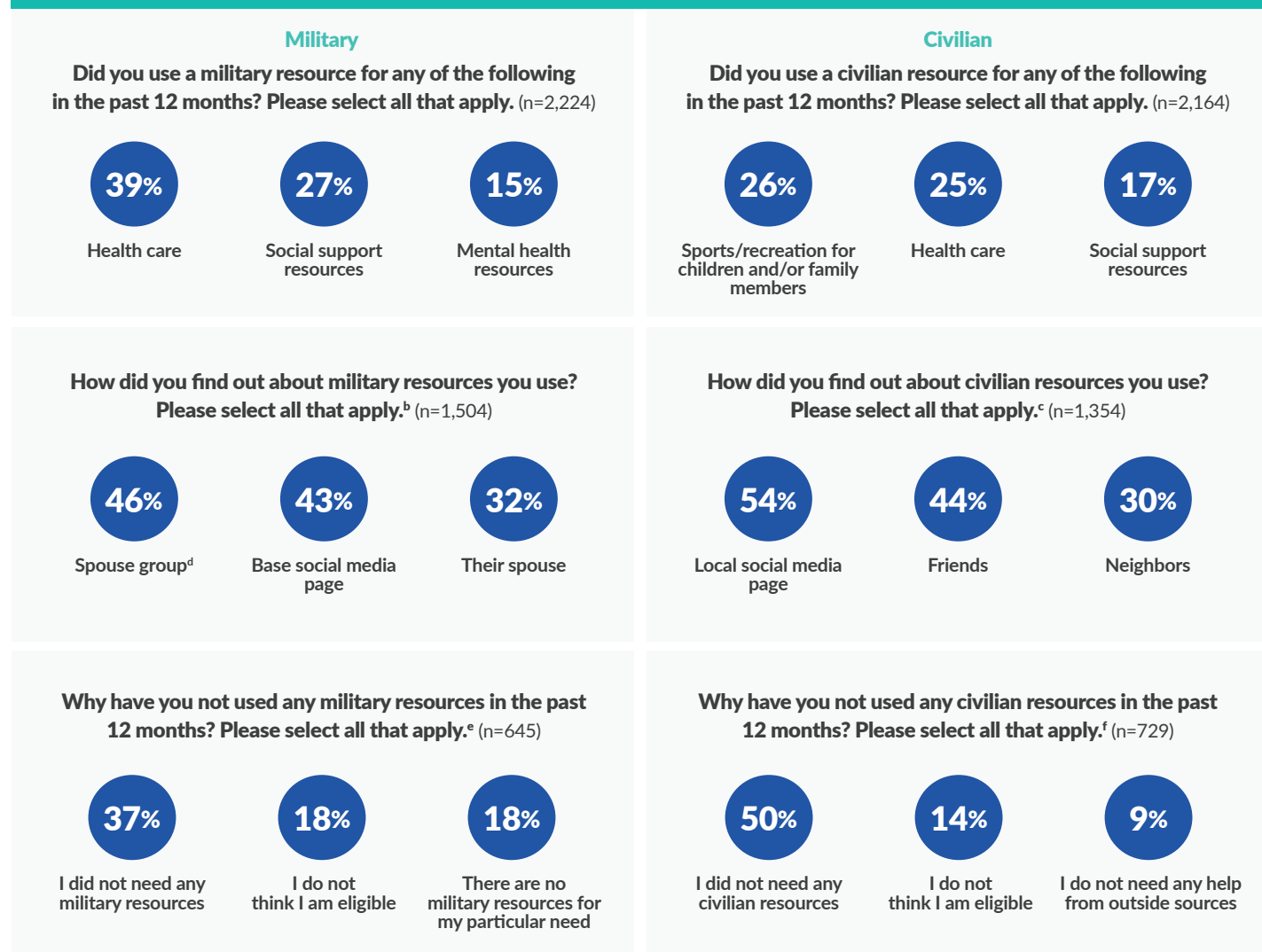
People build belonging through shared connections with others. Shared commonalities such as parenthood, schools, and community groups and organizations such as sports and recreation or places of worship help to create these shared experiences and possibly foster a sense of belonging even when there is a lack of shared military experience.<sup>2</sup> In this sample, utilizing civilian resources may help families build a sense of belonging to the community.

Of those active-duty family respondents who reported they had used a civilian resource in the past 12 months, **36%** “somewhat agree”, “agree”, or “strongly agree” with the statement **“I feel a sense of belonging to my local civilian community”** compared with **28%** of their peers who had not used any of the listed civilian resources.

Although a slightly greater proportion of active-duty family respondents reported using military resources (70% had used at least one military resource in the past 12 months and 65% had used at least one civilian resource in the past 12 months), many feel that their civilian community has sufficient or outstanding resources. However at least a quarter of active-duty family respondents note the following resources are inadequate<sup>a</sup> in their civilian community:

- 36% behavioral health resources
- 32% housing resources
- 27% community support resources
- 27% medical care resources

**Table 1: Use of Military and Civilian Resources**  
Active-duty family respondents



<sup>a</sup> Inadequate is defined as needs improvement to meet basic or minimal level of service.

<sup>b</sup> Only asked of respondents who indicated they had used a military resource.

<sup>c</sup> Only asked of respondents who indicated they had used a civilian resource.

<sup>d</sup> This could refer to a formal command spouse group and/or an informal spouse group.

<sup>e</sup> Only asked of respondents who indicated they had not used a military resource.

<sup>f</sup> Only asked of respondents who indicated they had not used a civilian resource.

### Knowledge of Resources

In the 2020 MFLS, the most commonly mentioned barrier for those who reported they had an unmet need was a lack of knowledge on how to access the resources therefore understanding how families discover resources may help address this barrier.<sup>3</sup> In this year's survey, when active-duty family respondents who reported using military or civilian resources were asked how they found out about those resources, the most common answers were social media and people they know (e.g., spouse groups and their own service members for military resources and friends and neighbors for civilian resources).

### Military and Civilian Online Social Networks

Nearly all active-duty family respondents (90%) report they are a member of a military-connected online social network compared to about three-quarters (73%) who report they are a member of a civilian online social network community. Of those who belong to a military-connected online social network, 80% access that online network at least once per week compared to nearly 70% who belong to and access the civilian online social network community at least once per week.

The top reasons active-duty family respondents are a member of a civilian-connected online social network are to stay informed about community news and events (47%) and to gather information about resources in the local community (20%). Those who are a member of a military-connected online social network use their network

to gather information about resources in the local community (28%), stay informed about military news and events (27%), and to build a social network (friends, clubs, etc.) (15%). Only 7% of active-duty family respondents who are a part of a civilian local online community report they are a member of a civilian online social network community to build their social network which, along with respondents' reported use of military versus civilian resources, suggests active-duty family respondents may prefer



to seek support among their military-connected peers and networks. Similar to staying connected and informed, as noted above, active-duty family respondents report that social media is one of the top ways they find both civilian and military resources.

### Military Sponsors

In addition to social media, active-duty family respondents indicate that spouse groups, friends, and neighbors are all top ways they find both military and civilian resources. Additionally, for many military families who PCS to a new community, one of their first points of contact is with their military sponsor.<sup>8</sup> Forty-three percent of active-duty

<sup>8</sup> To learn more about military sponsorship, visit <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/relationships/support-community/military-sponsorship-during-a-pcs>.

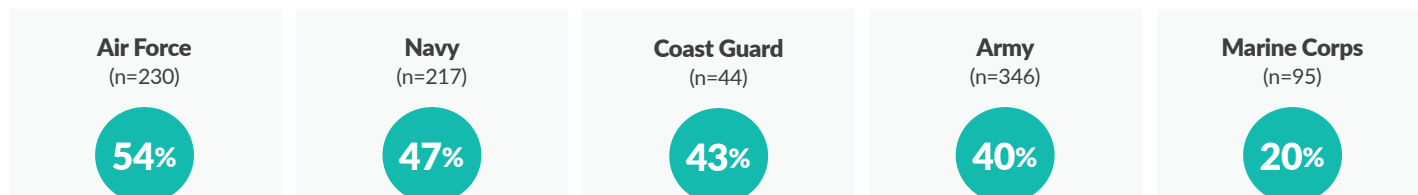


family respondents who PCSed in the 12 months preceding survey fielding report they did have a military sponsor for their most recent move.

Among active-duty respondents who PCSed in the 12 months preceding survey fielding, the proportion of those who had a sponsor assignment also differed by branch.<sup>h</sup>

### Figure 1: Proportion Who Had a Military Sponsor for Most Recent PCS

Active-duty family respondents who PCSed in the 12 months prior to survey fielding



Question Text: Did you or your service member have a military sponsor for your most recent PCS?

Of active-duty family respondents who PCSed in the 12 months prior to survey fielding but did not have a sponsor or did not know if they had a sponsor, approximately a third (30%) reported having a sponsor for any of their PCS moves in the past five years. Those respondents who reported a sponsor for any of their moves in the past five years were asked about their satisfaction with their sponsor, considering various introductions, such as the “introduction to your new command” or “introduction to the new duty station/post.” About half (49%) reported they were satisfied or extremely satisfied with their introduction to their new command and 44% were satisfied or extremely satisfied with their introduction to the new duty station/post. However, a smaller proportion was satisfied or extremely satisfied with their introduction to available housing options (32%), to the surrounding civilian community (27%), and connecting spouses to the existing military spouse groups (24%).

## National Guard and Reserve Families

### Sense of Belonging and Resources

Sixty percent of National Guard family respondents (and 54% of Reserve family respondents) state they “somewhat agree”, “agree”, or “strongly agree” with the statement “I feel a sense of belonging to my local **civilian** community” compared to only 33% of their active-duty peers. About two-thirds of National Guard (67%, n=163) and Reserve (62%, n=125) family respondents have used a civilian resource in the past 12 months; however, National Guard family respondents were the only group where mental health resources rose to the top three civilian resources used. Comparatively, only about half of National Guard and Reserve family respondents noted they had used military resources in the past 12 months compared to 70% of their active-duty peers.

Proximity to base/installation impacted the use of military resources: among currently-serving family respondents<sup>i</sup> the proportion of those who have not used any military resources in the last 12 months goes up the

<sup>h</sup> Space Force was not included due to small sample size.

<sup>i</sup> Currently-serving family respondents include active-duty service member, active-duty spouse, National Guard service member, National Guard spouse, Reserve service member, and Reserve spouse respondents.

further respondents live from a military base/installation. Since National Guard and Reserve families typically live farther from base than their active-duty peers, (63% of National Guard and 56% of Reserve family respondents live more than 30 minutes from an installation, compared to just 22% of active-duty family respondents) this underscores why they are less likely to have used military resources in the past 12 months.

### GI Bill Benefit Use<sup>j</sup>

Less than half of National Guard family respondents (42%, n=184) and Reserve family respondents (40% n=136) reported they or anyone in their family have **not** used GI Bill benefits. A larger portion of active-duty families (68%, n= 2403) reported they had **not** used their GI Bill benefits. However, for National Guard and Reserve family respondents, over 1 in 10 stated their children have used GI Bill benefits (11% and 14%, respectively). Reserve family respondents who had used GI Bill benefits<sup>k</sup> had a higher recommend service mean score (6.16 vs. 5.89)<sup>l</sup> than those who did not; however there was no discernable difference in the recommend service mean score for National Guard family respondents on whether or not they would recommend service based on GI Bill usage. National Guard, Reserve, and active-duty family respondents who reported they had not used GI Bill benefits and had not planned to use or transfer those benefits were asked why they had not used or planned to use the benefits. The top reasons for not using GI Bill benefits reported by National Guard family and Reserve family respondents included they did not know how to use the benefits or if they were eligible, and that they had difficulties in transferring benefits to eligible dependents.<sup>m</sup>

### “Can you please share with us why you do not plan on using your/your spouse’s GI Bill Benefits?”

**“I do not believe I had enough time to earn it.”**

National Guard Service Member

**“We did not know that I could [use the GI Bill] when I went back to school.”**

Spouse of Reserve Service Member

### Implications

Access to and use of resources are important for the well-being of our military families. Active-duty family respondents access both military and civilian resources at similar rates and for similar reasons. However, among respondents, there appears to be a higher rate of usage of military resources and a propensity to seek out others within their military community for information and networking. This has implications for who families turn to when they need help (see Support Circles finding for more information). Those who do use civilian resources typically live within the civilian community and report a higher sense of belonging to their civilian community perhaps due to a sense of shared experience with their civilian neighbors and peers.

<sup>j</sup> Eligibility for the GI Bill is based on many factors including discharge status, time and length of service, time since separation from service, etc. GI Bill And Other Education Benefit Eligibility | Veterans Affairs (va.gov).

<sup>k</sup> Respondents were asked “Has anyone in your family used GI Bill benefits?” and they could select multiple answers or a single answer for themselves, their spouses, and their children to indicate any GI Bill usage.

<sup>l</sup> Respondents were asked to rate “How likely are you to recommend that a young family member (child, niece, nephew, etc.) join the military?” on a scale of 0 to 10 (see Recommending Service finding for more information).

<sup>m</sup> Based on the survey question, it is unclear if the benefit was their own or their spouse’s GI Bill benefit.

### Limitations

Many of the responses for the National Guard and Reserve portions of this finding include very small sample sizes. In addition, those who access the Blue Star Families annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey may have a greater knowledge and use of resources. Survey respondents may be more likely to use social media to find resources since the survey is made available on social media platforms and websites.

Although questions were asked about the GI Bill, not everyone who serves/has served is eligible to receive those benefits. In addition, survey questions about social networking could have influenced responses and the propensity for using online military resources and military community for networking.

### Recommendations

#### For the Department of Defense

- **Encourage and provide resources for both formal and informal mentorship programs — including PCS Sponsors — during relocation.\***
  - Consider opportunities for better aligning sponsors with the families they're supporting with factors like family structure (i.e., children or no children), common experiences, and other identifiers.
  - Consider expanding affinity-based mentorship programs, particularly for underrepresented and vulnerable groups like women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ family members.

#### For States/Localities

- Improve information sharing about resources for military families moving to your locality.
- Make off-hour access to resources accessible and prioritize including military families.
- Create a dedicated Military Spouse Liaison position within the state agency that oversees Veterans and military affairs to advocate, conduct outreach, and address key challenges to military spouses by working with federal, state, and local governments, military installations, and the private sector.

\*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

### Endnotes

- 1 Trail, T. E., Sims, C. S., and Tankard, M. (2019) *Today's Army Spouse Survey: How Army Families Address Life's Challenges*. RAND Corporation, RR-3224-A, 2019. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3224.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3224.html)
- 2 Garcia, J., Vargas, N., Clark, J. L., Magaña Álvarez, M., Nelons, D. A., & Parker, R. G. (2020). Social isolation and connectedness as determinants of well-being: Global evidence mapping focused on LGBTQ youth. *Global public health*, 15(4), 497–519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2019.1682028>
- 3 Blue Star Families. (2021). 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. <https://bluestarfam.org/research/mfls-survey-results-2020/#findings>