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Department of Defense

Remove barriers to remote work for military spouses, especially those actively undergoing PCS moves.

From Spouse Employment

Employment flexibility is a key solution to military spouse unemployment, especially during relocation to a new duty station. Military spouses must juggle family responsibilities, the demands of their service members’ jobs, and their own employment. The Department of Defense (DOD) can lessen the burden by addressing three key areas for military spouses during the PCS process: child care, coordinated remote work request processes, and flexible hours.

The DOD can decrease some disruption to spouse employment during a PCS by reducing the wait time for child care after a relocation through continued prioritization of accessible, affordable, and flexible child care options for military families. Ensuring Child Development Center (CDC) availability through increased efforts to recruit, retain, and support child care providers can reduce child care waitlists. In particular, the Come Grow With Us initiative to recruit and retain child care professionals incentivizes career child care providers and supports recruiting new talent into the field, which is woefully understaffed. Additionally, existing pilot programs for flexible child care options — like the Child Care in Your Home Fee Assistance program — have burdensome and lengthy application processes. While it is important to ensure safety and maintain high standards of care, we urge the DOD to explore ways to streamline the application process to help families receive the child care they need more quickly. Lastly, despite changes to the prioritization model for active-duty families on child care waitlists in 2020, waitlists for child care are still extremely long, especially in places with a large gap between supply and demand. Increasing the supply of providers through attractive career paths, expedited hiring, and streamlined application processes can address this gap and open up more opportunities for spouses seeking employment.

The DOD has an even greater opportunity to model best practices for supporting the military spouses they employ, as the Joining Forces initiative has recommended. Where possible, the DOD should work with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to support requests for federal telework for military spouse employees whose service member has received relocation orders. While not possible for all federally employed military spouses, aligning these processes may reduce disruptions to both the spouse’s career and the agency. The DOD should further work with OPM and consider enhancing PCS leave policies and flexible scheduling for federally employed military spouses retaining their employment through a PCS. Providing the option to take non-vacation leave days or adjust scheduled work hours during a PCS move will help military spouses retain employment and balance responsibilities at home and at work.

Reinforce military families’ use of DOD-affiliated programs, including Military Family Life Consultants (MFLCs), chaplain programs, etc., by enhancing support for difficult conversations and reducing barriers to participation.

From Family Relationships

Strong military families are the backbone of the All-Volunteer Force. The DOD already supports the military family through extensive and widespread programs, including the Army’s Strong Bonds program and other Military Family...
Readiness System programs. However, there is opportunity to ensure these programs are accessible to families and address their greatest concerns.

Many of the existing programs already address communication, but supporting strong family relationships through programs that enhance skills in having difficult conversations may address the challenges of negotiating everyday stressors as a military family. Research indicates that good communication skills lead to positive relationship satisfaction, and how individuals communicate difficult conversations impacts their relationships. Because everyday stressors such as financial stress, spouse employment struggles, and limited child care availability may contribute to tension in military families, we recommend that the DOD continue to implement and bolster the usage of evidence-based practices to support families who need to engage in difficult conversations. Military OneSource’s resource, How to Successfully Communicate as a Couple, is a good place to start. Other civilian resources provide additional support, and DOD programs should continue to emphasize these resources and other support for families.

The DOD can enhance accessibility to their already robust programs by reducing barriers to participation. For example, aligning programming with work schedules and providing on-site child care will make these programs more accessible for dual-income households and families with young children. Additionally, ensuring that these programs are shared with military spouses early in their time connected to the service will help fill the gap for families that may be struggling to adjust to military life.

**Encourage and provide resources for both formal and informal mentorship programs — including PCS Sponsors — during relocation.**

As reported in Blue Star Families’ report, The Diverse Experiences of Military and Veteran Families of Color, service members and families of color cite formal and informal mentorship as important for navigating the service and the challenges associated with the military lifestyle. During the relocation process, mentorship and support are key factors in integrating into the new community, accessing needed resources, and enhancing the quality of life for the family. The DOD has an opportunity to strengthen an existing formal mentorship program: PCS Sponsorship. In addition to encouraging the assignment of Sponsors with similar backgrounds to the incoming service member and family, we recommend enhancing this program by assigning Sponsorship as an additional or collateral duty, which could then be assessed in evaluations, rewarding excellent Sponsors with advancement toward promotion.

The DOD should expand formal support of grassroots mentorship and multidirectional mentorship programs. For example, the Army now formally supports the Female Mentoring Morale Program (FMMP), a grassroots mentorship program that began in 2019, when Col. Clydea Prichard-Brown attempted to find a way to support the many women who were asking her to be a mentor at Fort Lee. She received formal support from Army Combined Arms Support Command leadership and an executive board that included support from the G1 Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army. Now there are FMMP groups at many other Army bases, including Fort Leonard Wood, Fort Detrick, and Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany.
Rank-blind mentorship has proven effective among both service members and their spouses. The Navy has published a reverse mentoring guide as part of its push for inclusion. This approach not only allows more junior-ranking sailors to share their experience and expertise with higher-ranking sailors, but it also fosters feelings of ownership and enhances readiness for Navy personnel.\textsuperscript{27,28} The U.S. Special Operations Command Spouse Mentorship programs take a different approach to one-on-one reverse mentoring; they facilitate peer-to-peer, rank-blind mentoring.\textsuperscript{29,30,31} Evidence suggests expanding this and other aspects of the Preservation of the Force and Family program enhances retention and increases readiness.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Congress}

\textbf{Consider adding military spouses who lose a job due to a PCS and are actively seeking employment to a dedicated student loan deferment program.}

Congress has an opportunity to ensure that military spouses who hold student loans and are unemployed due to PCS orders are not penalized for a job loss that is not their fault. According to the 2021 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, military spouses who are unemployed search for employment for an average of 19 weeks.\textsuperscript{33} While the current federal unemployment student loan deferment program\textsuperscript{34} covers this time period, the program is restrictive for military spouses attempting to find employment that will maintain or advance their career and avoid paying accrued interest during the deferment period.

Borrowers are not eligible for unemployment deferment if they reject a job offer for a position for which they are overqualified.\textsuperscript{35} Requiring spouses to accept employment for which they are overqualified may keep them consistently underemployed, which is already a challenge for military spouses due to employment changes related to relocations. This is particularly salient for military spouses who have less control over where they move and may relocate to a new duty station with limited employment opportunities in their field. As reported in the Spouse Employment finding, the majority of employed active-duty spouse respondents are underemployed in some way, and in this year’s survey, 29% of employed active-duty spouses\textsuperscript{*} report they are overqualified for their current position. Because chronic underemployment is a consistent issue for military spouses and has long-term impacts on their cumulative earnings over their lifetime,\textsuperscript{36} and deeply and negatively affects financial, emotional, and social well-being of the individual, and has knock-on effects for the family and community,\textsuperscript{37} benefit programs to support military spouses must set conditions for long-term career success and avoid incentivizing underemployment.

Moreover, the existing unemployment program does not include a deferment of interest accrual during the deferment. Any unpaid interest that has accrued will be capitalized at the end of the deferment period, resulting in a greater total cost that the borrower must pay.\textsuperscript{38} Particularly for military spouses, many of whom are already under great financial stress during the PCS period,\textsuperscript{39} interest accrual and capitalization only harms the borrower. We recommend Congress consider creating an Active-Duty Military Spouse Unemployment Deferment program that improves upon the Unemployment Deferment program and supports military spouses who lose a job through no fault of their own. Spouses who are unemployed following a PCS move should be eligible for a six-month program.

\* Who are not also active-duty service members
that allows them to defer student loan payments and does not accrue interest. This program should build on the process for proving active-duty status used in the Military Service Deferment program to prove military status, by allowing an applying spouse to present their service member’s PCS orders and proof of their dependency status. The legislation for the Active Cancer Treatment program is a blueprint for the legislation required to create a new deferment program that prevents interest accrual.

Consider authorizing the Secretary of Defense to renegotiate or amend the contracts associated with the Military Housing Privatization Initiative.

In 1996, in response to a backlog of construction and repairs, Congress passed the Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI) to transfer ownership and operation of on-base housing to private companies, with the goal of improving housing quality for service members and their families. While more than 75,000 new homes have been built and 50,000 additional homes have undergone major renovations, lawmakers, the DOD, and consumers have remained concerned about the implementation of the initiative, despite legislative directives passed by Congress. For example, despite inclusion in the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, the Tenant Bill of Rights is not being fully implemented, according to a DOD report from 2022. Additional provisions — like the Tenant Bill of Rights — passed by Congress after the initial 50-year contracts were signed in 1996 are not enforceable through those agreements because each of the MHPI companies must voluntarily agree to any new provisions. This hinders efforts to implement legislative directives from Congress to improve housing quality and effectively perform oversight of the initiative.

We urge Congress to consider authorizing amendments and renegotiation of the contracts associated with MHPI, a recommendation spearheaded by Armed Forces Housing Advocates. Amending the contracts to provide better oversight, improved regulation, and stronger consumer protections could not only address concerns about the quality of on-base privatized housing but also alleviate the financial pressure of out-of-pocket housing costs on military families by providing a high-quality alternative to using the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) to obtain housing in the civilian market.

Amend the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) to be a more robust program that can increase food security for thousands of military families.

Congress has the opportunity to ensure that the BNA better serve military families who are experiencing or are at risk of food insecurity. Four specific recommendations would increase efficacy and ensure the BNA helps those who need it.

1. Remove BAH from income calculation: Congress should instruct the services to exclude BAH and other allowances when calculating gross annual income for potentially eligible service members and their families. Currently, many military families are not eligible for the allowance because BAH is considered income.
Military families are at a disadvantage relative to their civilian peers when it comes to using BNA and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) because of the inclusion of BAH as income. For example, housing support received through the Housing Choice Voucher Program is not counted as income when determining eligibility for SNAP benefits. We encourage Congress to exclude BAH from eligibility calculations for BNA and all other federal nutrition assistance programs.

2. Update the eligibility threshold: The current eligibility threshold — a gross family income of less than 130% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines — and the soon-to-be-implemented threshold of 150% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines do not reach the majority of families experiencing food insecurity. In January 2023, following the first round of considerations for eligibility, the Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Space Force combined found only 85 service members who may have been eligible. Given that the DOD found 30% of enlisted spouses in ranks E5-E6, 16% of enlisted spouses in ranks E7-E9, and 5% of officer spouses reported experiencing food insecurity in the past year, it is clear that the problem of food insecurity is not limited to lower-income junior enlisted ranks, though it is highest in that population. We urge Congress to increase the mandatory threshold to at least 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines as a first step to ensuring those who need this support can receive it — the services will be legally able to set the threshold to 200% but have not indicated that they will do so. In the long term, we encourage Congress to consider income and expenses when determining eligibility for nutrition assistance. Expenses, such as out-of-pocket housing costs, relocation costs, and student loans, are among the top contributors to financial stress for active-duty family respondents who report financial stress (see Financial Security finding).

3. Streamline the application process: Congress should prescribe a streamlined application process for BNA using insight from the DOD and military families who are/or have been food insecure. Reducing the barriers to access will help ensure that military families who need the program are not prevented from joining due to burdensome requirements. The ease of application to the one-time student debt relief program announced in 2022 may serve as an example for simplifying the application process.

4. Engage in oversight and ensure efficacy: Ensuring that our service members and their families have access to the nutrition they need is a national security imperative, and Congress has a key role in providing oversight and reporting on the implementation and efficacy of this program.

Increase readiness and reduce cost for National Guard members by providing year-round no-fee health care coverage.

From Health Care & Disordered Eating

Despite the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the National Guard has maintained a high operational tempo: overseas deployments, long-term domestic missions, emergency activations following national disasters or civil unrest, and more. Approximately 60,000 National Guardsmen (Army and Air National Guard) are not covered by an employer, Medicaid, or other private insurance plans when they are not federally activated. The lack of year-round health care leads to reduced readiness: in 2022, Gen. Daniel Hokanson,
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Chief of the National Guard Bureau, revealed that about 10% of the National Guard does not meet the health requirements needed to deploy at any given time.61

We support the recommendation put forward by the National Guard Bureau,62 members of Congress,63,64 and nonprofit military and National Guard service organizations;65,66,67 to provide year-round, no-fee health insurance to National Guardsmen. Until this solution can be achieved, we encourage Congress to extend the TRICARE coverage grace period after deactivation to ensure continuity of care. These solutions will not only reduce health care costs for National Guardsmen but will improve readiness for the National Guard.

**Commission a report on how military family policies affect recruitment, retention, and likelihood to recommend service.**

From Recommending Military Service

The United States has a vested interest in understanding how military family policy affects the overall strength of the All-Volunteer Force. We urge Congress to commission a report on how the DOD’s military family policies affect recruitment and retention, specifically in relation to whether military-connected families will remain in military service or recommend military service to others.

Military family policies, many of which have been addressed in this report, deeply affect the experiences of military families and, therefore, the likelihood of recommending service to younger family members. To date, Congress and the DOD have not systematically investigated how the various military family policies impact readiness, retention, and recruitment, or to an individual’s likelihood to recommend service. While the DOD does track whether spouses support their service member remaining in military service,68 and that support from a spouse is a key influence in service member retention,69 it is not clear how the programs and policies that directly affect families’ lives impact that support. We propose Congress commission a report of the myriad military family policies that affect quality of life and address the following areas of concern:

- Financial readiness,70,71,72,73,74,75 and its impact on retention and likelihood to recommend service, with particular attention to allowances, spouse employment, and child care.
- Social support services76,77,78 and their influence on family and force readiness and likelihood to recommend service, with attention to the gaps filled by civilian support services.
- Children’s education79 and the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)80 and their effects on retention, likelihood of recommending service, and recruitment.
- Education (e.g., the GI Bill81) and health care (e.g., TRICARE82,83 and VA health care84) benefit programs and how they influence retention, recruitment, and likelihood to recommend service.
- Recent changes to the retirement benefits system85,86 and their impact on retention of recent recruits and long-term service.
- Experiences of discrimination, harassment,87 and military sexual trauma (MST)88 on retention and likelihood to recommend service, and on perceptions of potential recruits.
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- Explore retention through the lens of how families determine when the benefits (fiscal and otherwise) are outweighed by costs (fiscal and otherwise).

The services have long recognized and continuously acknowledged the importance of the family for our service members.89,90,91 The ability to sustain the All-Volunteer Force through the current recruiting crisis relies on having good data on where the services can improve to ensure readiness, resilience, and lethality.

States and Localities

Appoint a Compact Commissioner in a timely fashion and designate a point of contact embedded within each state's Department of Education.

From Military Children's Education

The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children is a key tool for ensuring that military children in public schools are not treated differently from their peers simply due to their military-connected status. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have committed to supporting military children by implementing the Interstate Compact's provisions.

One of the primary commitments is that member states, through their appointing authority, designate a Compact Commissioner who represents their state and coordinates efforts with the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (MIC3).92 When state Commissioners are not appointed, states may find it more difficult to fulfill the statutory requirements associated with the Compact, including submitting annual reports to the state legislature, timeliness in engaging with military families, and leading the statutorily required state council.93 In the 15 years since the statute was first passed, 19 states have, at some point, failed to have an appointed Commissioner. While several states have had a designee to fill in and perform the Commissioner's responsibilities, many have not.94 For example, in 2019, the most recent year for which MIC3 has published data, eight Commissioner positions were vacant.95 Timely appointment of the Compact Commissioner is essential to supporting military families and educators in the states.96

Compact Commissioners also benefit from the assistance and support of a subject matter expert in children's education. A designated point of contact embedded within each state's Department of Education lends institutional support and demonstrates a commitment to serving military children and families. Such an addition to a state's Compact structure would benefit the state Commissioners who are not part of their states' Department of Education; they made up more than 60% of the Commissioners in 2019.97

Address housing barriers and align zoning and other land-use policies to increase affordable housing.

From Housing & Relocation

While Congress and the DOD can oversee on-base military housing, 70% or more of military families live in civilian communities,98,99 which means that states and localities have a role to play in addressing the housing affordability and accessibility crisis for our military families. Implementing proven policies incentivizing affordable housing in
neighborhoods and areas where military families want to live is key to alleviating the financial stress that out-of-pocket housing costs have put on military families in recent years.\textsuperscript{100,101,102} We encourage states and localities to consider two policies that have seen success when implemented:\textsuperscript{103}

1. Reduced or eliminated parking requirements: Many zoning laws require a minimum number of off-street parking spaces for new residential buildings.\textsuperscript{104} Most of these requirements overestimate the number of spaces required: a 2005 study of six New England towns found that zoning laws overestimated parking spaces required by more than 2 1/2 times peak use.\textsuperscript{105} Moreover, adding a single parking space for a unit can cost $50,000 for builders — with higher costs in more expensive cities.\textsuperscript{106,107,108} Dozens of cities have reduced or eliminated parking requirements, and research suggests that this has lowered barriers to building new affordable homes and revitalizing existing neighborhoods through renovations.\textsuperscript{109} In 2017, Buffalo became the first major city in the United States to completely remove parking requirements, which has helped trigger a boom in construction and city growth.\textsuperscript{110}

2. Improved approval processes to enhance speed and predictability: Zoning laws emerged to support public health and improve public safety.\textsuperscript{111} Unfortunately, these laws have become unwieldy and deter speedy construction by increasing unnecessary bureaucracy, artificially inflating home prices, and reinforcing housing inequality.\textsuperscript{112,113} We recommend localities consider implementing by-right development policies, which removes discretionary decision-making from the approval process by implementing “uniform, codified, and consistent zoning and development regulation.”\textsuperscript{114}

In addition to improving the zoning process, we encourage states and localities to reform zoning laws allowing for more multifamily units. Although there are many and varied reasons why residents push back against widespread zoning reform — including displacement concerns, lowered property values, increased rents, and lower quality of life\textsuperscript{115} — such reforms will help address the at least 3.8 million housing unit gap\textsuperscript{116} many experts estimate. Military families are affected by this gap because of the extreme lack of housing in some high-population areas around military bases. For example, JointBase Lewis-McChord near Tacoma, Washington, is facing a worsening housing crisis because of the predicted increase in military personnel who will be stationed there in the coming decades\textsuperscript{117} and a gap in civilian housing across the Puget Sound region.\textsuperscript{118} Military families need states to consider reforming zoning laws to allow for more multifamily units in areas where they are looking for housing, particularly in neighborhoods with quality school districts and access to community resources.

Most importantly, we encourage state and local lawmakers to enact zoning reform and remove other barriers simultaneously. This alignment maximizes opportunities for building while eliminating or reducing barriers, which combine to incentivize new construction and renovations. Minneapolis, Minnesota, offers an example of how aligned reform and barrier removal can result in a housing boom that increases affordable housing. In 2018, Minneapolis introduced Minneapolis 2040,\textsuperscript{119} a comprehensive city plan with many goals, including affordable and accessible housing. Following the plan’s implementation in 2020 and the introduction of 22 policies related to their housing goal — including removing parking requirements, increasing the number of multifamily units, and pursuing innovative housing types and strategies\textsuperscript{120} — the city is producing six times more “deeply affordable”\textsuperscript{8} housing.

\textsuperscript{8} “Deeply affordable housing” refers to housing that costs less than 30% of the annual median income for a given community.
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units$^{121}$ than during the period 2011 to 2018.$^{122}$ Although the city saw setbacks following the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic,$^{123}$ city officials remain optimistic about the increased growth of affordable housing units.$^{124}$

**Maintain expanded eligibility and affordability from post-pandemic levels to ensure child care continues to be accessible for low-income families.**

*From Child Care Spotlight*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many states acknowledged the deep impact that the crisis had on the child care industry for both families and providers. Maintaining state solutions to the child care crisis introduced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic — including greater funding, pilot programs, and child care credits — will be an important step to ensuring access to quality and affordable child care moving forward. In addition to the social benefits of quality child care for children, families, and communities, women from marginalized communities — particularly low-income women, women without college degrees, and Black and Latina women — see a disproportionate improvement in their economic outcomes throughout their lifetimes when they have access to affordable child care.$^{125}$ States have an opportunity to step in to support all families with affordable child care, which would go far in making them military friendly.

For example, in April 2022, New Mexico became the first state to make child care free for nearly every family in the state.$^{126}$ Families making up to 400%$^{127}$ of the Federal Poverty Guideline (nearly double the state’s median income) do not have to pay co-pays as part of the Child Care Assistance program.$^{128}$ New Mexico is a model for states across the nation due to this program as well as a state constitutional provision that made New Mexico the first state in the nation to enshrine child care as a protected right.$^{129}$

Louisiana stepped up to fill a gap for its families following the end of an expanded federal program. In 2021, the federal government temporarily expanded the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) to better serve low-income families by making the credit fully refundable. This expansion expired at the end of 2021, meaning that Americans with the lowest incomes were back to paying more than four times the benchmark rate of 7% of income issued by the Department of Health and Human Services.$^{130}$ Louisiana implemented a fully refundable child care credit to households eligible for the federal law. This child care credit helps low-income families afford child care and encourages high-quality child care by increasing the benefits to more than $5,000 per year at providers with the highest ratings.$^{131}$ Research shows that a 10% increase in CDCTC increases annual child care participation by 4-5% among eligible households.$^{132}$ This combined with the fact that only 0.2% of the lowest-income American families used the CDCTC in 2018$^{133}$ suggests that making low-income families eligible through full tax refundability would have a large impact on child care use. Such an increase could result in long-term positive economic outcomes for low-income households,$^{134}$ improved child care across the state,$^{135}$ and more positive impacts associated with affordable child care.

These and other state programs are examples of how states can step into this crisis and help support children, families, and providers. Ensuring the funding and resources that emerged and expanded during the COVID-19
pandemic remain accessible to families will be a huge step in rebuilding our nation’s child care industry, which can, in turn, improve military families’ well-being by reducing barriers to spouse employment, relieving financial stressors, and supporting healthy childhood development.

**Communities and Providers**

*Create support groups for military family members and other community members that include psychoeducation, mental health first aid, lethal means restriction, gatekeeper training, and other specific and evidence-informed actions to support a person in crisis.*

**From Support Circles**

Informal support for military family members and other community members is key for supporting community mental health and helping to prevent service member, Veteran, and military family suicide. Communities are deeply affected by suicides: research indicates that the interwoven complexities of grief, emotional devastation, and other impacts are widespread. Peer prevention is a promising evidence-based approach to suicide prevention that can be expanded to better serve communities around service members, Veterans, and family members.

While professional, accessible clinical support is central to suicide prevention, preparing individual community members — including fellow service members, Veterans, family, friends, and neighbors — to support those struggling with suicidal thoughts will help fill a gap in care for those who need it most. The 2022 report from the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee has an extensive list of social and community-based recommendations to help prevent suicide. Building from these recommendations and others, we urge communities to develop coordinating programming to providing basic education and training on mental health, suicide risks, and specific interventions, prevention, and crisis response. Specifically, we recommend these programs include the following:

- Basic education on mental health and suicide risk
- Mental Health First Aid
- Training on safe storage of lethal means during crises
- Gatekeeper training, which includes asking directly about suicidal thoughts or plans
- Crisis response plans
- Other evidence-informed practices that reduce the likelihood of an attempted suicide

Engaging and empowering trusted loved ones — who are closest to those at risk and already have the desire but lack the knowledge to support — is an upstream solution to the mental health crisis gripping our nation’s Veteran and military communities. Blue Star Families’ Support Circles is the first federally funded program that puts this recommendation into action and offers a blueprint for expanding this type of program to communities across the country.
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**Actively recruit military families to participate in existing social and community programs to increase their connectedness and sense of belonging to the community.**

*From Children's Mental Health*

Social connections, including connections with others in the community, are critical factors in supporting children's resilience. In this year's sample, a greater proportion of active-duty military families who used civilian resources during the year prior report feeling a sense of belonging to the civilian community (see Military Family Resource Access finding). Previous Blue Star Families' research has also shown that a sense of belonging to the civilian community is associated with greater resilience.

To support military children's mental health, we encourage civilian communities and providers to create environments that support military children by actively recruiting military families and reducing the barriers to their participation in community resources, such as sports and recreation programs. Communities can do that by enacting changes that will help all residents — reducing costs, recruiting trained coaches, investing in public recreational spaces, enhancing options for casual play, and addressing disparities faced by children with disabilities and children of color — and changes that will specifically benefit military families, like working with installations to recruit military children and exploring options to provide transportation.

Communities can also help the whole family feel welcome by modeling best practices for military family inclusion. For example, holding parent-teacher organization and other volunteer opportunities after traditional work hours and providing on-site child care will help address barriers. Community leaders can also continue to work closely with the support organizations and programs that already exist on base to be a force multiplier and align efforts.

Moreover, we encourage communities to explore formally coordinating with installation recreational programs — like youth sports leagues — to integrate them and build strong civil-military connections for families and children. In this year's survey, more than a quarter (26%) of active-duty family respondents reported they used civilian resources for sports/recreation for children and/or family members in the past 12 months. Engaging with installation support offices, military service nonprofit organizations, and other community partners will help strengthen bonds across the fence line and build communities of mutual support.
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