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2023 CFI Closed-Door Session Summary Report

Blue Star Families' Campaign for Inclusion reflects values of welcoming and belonging at the heart of our work. Using our theory of change (listen, share, partner, and act), we empower stakeholders to implement best practices that help diverse military families feel welcomed and included on their journey.

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Purpose and Background

Due to growing concerns following the murder of George Floyd, Blue Star Families established the Campaign for Inclusion (previously called the Racial Equity Initiative) in 2020. A critical piece of this effort is research, which began with a groundbreaking survey in 2021 that created an intentional space to listen to military families of color.

In 2022, Blue Star Families released the results of that survey, called Blue Star Families' Social Impact Research 2021: The Diverse Experiences of Military & Veteran Families of Color report. This comprehensive report described the varied experiences of currently-serving and Veteran families of color. While several findings pointed to positive economic, educational, and health benefits of serving in the military, another point was also clear: military and Veteran families of color were experiencing racially and ethnically motivated discrimination across the country, across the lifespan, and in both military and civilian communities, and these experiences could impact their military career decisions. Results showed that active-duty family respondents of color made decisions about military life based on perceptions of racism and fear for their family's safety in communities, potentially impacting their military career.

To gain further understanding of how these experiences impact military families, communities, and military readiness, and how to set the conditions for families to feel a sense of belonging, a series of questions was embedded in the 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey to explore this area further. Data collected in that survey effort provided the basis for the 2023 Report: Building Bridges to Belonging for Military Families of Color, which had three aims:

- To explore the extent to which exposure to racially/ethnically motivated discriminatory behaviors impact belonging, willingness to recommend local civilian communities, and willingness to recommend military service.
- To highlight community climate attributes that contribute to and/or undermine military families' sense of belonging to and willingness to recommend local civilian communities.
- To offer action-oriented solutions to local community and installation leaders to help increase defense community cohesion.

In May 2023, following the release of that second report in the series — Building Bridges to Belonging for Military Families of Color — Blue Star Families convened a closed-door



session of key community, government, and military stakeholders to highlight existing best practices and identify creative solutions that would address challenges to building a diverse All-Volunteer Force and increase military-civilian community engagement and build belonging for military families. This convening, founded on two years of Blue Star Families' Campaign for Inclusion research, ignited robust discussion across government, military, nonprofit, corporate, and philanthropic partners, turning the data into action. This report is a summary of the key takeaways from these sessions.

The convening abided by the Chatham House Rules, creating a trusted environment to understand and resolve these complex problems. The guiding spirit was to share the information, think creatively, and build solutions together, without attribution to the source. The result was a rare blend of national, regional, and grassroots efforts working toward the ultimate goal of creating conditions through which various sectors can better serve the interests and needs of diverse military members, Veterans, and their families.

This document is organized to summarize the convening, presenting:

1. summary descriptions of the overarching themes from the convening sessions,
2. a non-attributional accounting of the breakout conversations (per session),
3. a summary of initiatives that are currently happening (per session), and
4. recommendations for future initiatives (per session).



Campaign for Inclusion

Vision

To create an environment where diverse military- and Veteran-connected families feel welcome and included in the communities where they live and serve.

Mission

To advocate for the unique community needs of diverse military- and Veteran-connected families in an effort to enhance military readiness and retention. We listen to experiences, share our findings, and partner with others to act and empower change.

Guiding Principles and Methods

1. We use our best-in-class survey methodology to listen to the experiences of diverse military- and Veteran-connected families.
2. We share our findings with community, military, and DOD leaders to empower change.
3. We partner with other military and Veteran service organizations to create a force multiplier around areas of need.
4. We act to create our own programs that improve the experiences of diverse military- and Veteran-connected families that have sacrificed so much for our country.



Closed-Door Session Key Takeaways

1. **Relationships are the key.** Whether you are recruiting or trying to feel a sense of belonging, it is important to establish and build positive relationships between community and military officials along with community organizations that provide resources to members of the community. Conversations between installation and community representatives should happen on a quarterly basis, at minimum, to discuss mutual issues and concerns.
2. While not every military-connected family lives within the civilian community, nearly 70% do and all military connected families contribute to the economic success of the community in one form or another. It is imperative that we **strategically highlight the success stories** and show the value proposition that the military adds to our communities.
3. While data and more research is greatly needed, we must come together to implement impactful community solutions that are the result of military and local leaders coming together to learn and listen from each other. The single narrative approach no longer works and we must demand action and accountability.
4. Representation matters. We need military and community leaders that are as diverse as the population that they serve.
5. Military and community members, no matter their own identity, must be empowered to **have difficult conversations about racism and discrimination.** Everyone must feel included and have a sense of belonging to their community, no matter what form of adversity faces them. We need leaders and community individuals to stand up and be **allies for inclusion.**



Closed-Door Session 1: Building a Diverse All-Volunteer Military

The first session discussed the topic of *recruitment* and how to build and sustain a diverse all-volunteer military. Participants were asked several key questions as detailed below with a summary of the ideas.

What initiatives do you currently have underway that might address concerns with building a diverse all-volunteer military? Are there any that you consider to be your highest priority?

Intentional Community Engagements on Installations and in Community

- The mayor has a coffee hour to discuss concerns and initiatives about the city. We have made an effort to welcome recruiters to the events to learn more about the community.
- We developed a fun series of events that shares the history of diverse previous service members to encourage diverse service members to enlist and have a sense of belonging in their communities.
- We had an event where we brought in [local] principals, counselors, and teachers to the base and gave them a tour and briefing. The goal was to expose them to base life (they would see the base from a distance, but never went inside), and getting them to understand what we had to offer on the base.

Using Data to Inform Decisions

- We are currently working on updating DEI policies. Also bringing on new data software that can analyze DEI data that will bring the data in the hands of decision-makers more quickly.

What initiatives would you like to see to address the concern of building a diverse all-volunteer military?

Changing the Narrative

The military has a branding issue often amplified by the spotlight on military issues. We need to strategically highlight the success stories and show the value proposition to our communities.



- As a recruiter, one of my biggest challenges was educating the parents about the perceived dangers of the military. It can be more dangerous for an individual to be at school than to be in the military. Parents are naturally selfish and want their children to be close. Many children think they can't leave their home and have to stay to take care of their parents or grandparents.
- Dispel misconceptions about the nature of military service.
- Change the conversation/narrative about the benefits of service to highlight the multidimensional value proposition that military service provides. Different communities value different things in service – determine the value proposition for different communities.
- There's a branding challenge. Bad news travels fast. How do we have **more "feel good" pieces** about the military?
- While there are military recruitment campaigns that show diversity of service members, there is no spine behind the campaign. They have to show a real commitment to DEI.

Transparency

- During the recruiting process, recruiters should explain the full history of the military and why this history is important.
- Oversight is needed for the JROTC program and is needed specifically for the Black and brown communities.
- Exit interviews for military service members.
- I've been told that the military wasn't a place for LGBTQ+. How are we creating a safe space for them to report bad experiences, share good ones, and advocate for future recruitment?

Representation

- Creating a platform for military families to have diverse service members in leadership positions within their careers.
- People need to put themselves on the leaderboard. Having people of color in leadership positions is important.

Partnership

- Partnerships between the communities and recruiters (some don't have access to school or a lot of restrictions).



- The military should continue to work with school systems and develop a program similar in nature to the [Citizens for a Better City](#), which works with students to liaison with government officials in an effort to recruit for the government.

Strategically Diversifying Recruitment

- Recruit from the private sector.
- There should be a strategic plan to identify diverse population pools to recruit from.

Addressing Behavioral Health Challenges

- Dealing with changes in behavioral health waivers
 - Young service members are hiding behavioral health issues due to fear about eligibility for certain roles. As these waivers shift, opportunities open for those who have a history of behavioral health issues. This is even more important for military kids since their records are open (e.g., if you had a history of ADHD and you were medicated – could be a barrier in the future). We have to make sure people are getting the help they need.
 - It's become easier to get waivers if it is proven that your performance would not be impacted by certain medical conditions (e.g., bipolar, ADHD with stimulants, etc.)

Closed-Door Session 2: Building Bridges to Belonging in Communities

The second closed-door session discussed community belonging and how to create conditions in which members can feel belonging. Participants were posed several questions as detailed below with a summary of the conversation. However, the topic of belongingness sparked conversations of both safety and support networks – indicating that some basic conditions must be met before belonging can be achieved. Additionally, one group identified key components that contributed to their sense of belonging in their community: appreciation, recognition, inclusion, acceptance, engagement, advocacy, empowerment, love, and healing.

What initiatives do you currently have underway that might address building bridges to belonging in a community? Are there any that you consider to be your highest priority?



Building Appreciation and Understanding by Retaining Veterans in the Community After Military Service

- Retention of military/Vets after service: A program to retain service members to stay in certain cities by allowing them to interact in their communities to gain the network needed to get their foot in the door for their future career after the military. We are establishing a relationship with all branch components in our city. The mayor is changing how diversity is approached in the city. Our office reflects the diversity we advocate for in our city – community perception.
- Putting money toward data surrounding Veteran issues. We want to know what's keeping Veterans in the community.

Messaging Support Across the Community

- Our Superintendent put out a message to schools talking about military families and [[Blue Star Welcome Week](#)].

Addressing Issues that Arise

- Sometimes the community is ready but the military is not there yet. For example, the school district had a DOJ investigation that revealed a lot of discrimination in the largest school district for people of color. The state hired military child education specialists and military family life consultants, who only serve active-duty kids and not Reserve or retired. However, due to the previous environment of discrimination, this resulted in eight military families requesting early release or relocation because of the discrimination.

What initiatives would you like to see to address belongingness in a community?

Learn from the Past

- “We need to learn about our past to change our future otherwise; we are bound to commit the same past mistakes.” Being in certain environments, “I was taught to hold my head down while growing up in the South as a form of survival.”



Start by Listening

- Bringing hard conversations at the community level. Town halls and listening sessions for both military and community. Hearing first hand narrative.
- [Roadmap](#): Have different listening sessions on topics like affordable housing with all agencies (state/federal/local). Include issues on bimonthly meeting sessions to address issues. Give them briefs and information and task them with returning with solutions. Connect with military affairs councils, or Veteran and Military Affairs Councils at state levels.

Joint Engagement Between the Installation and the Community

- Base leaders should work with the community to create solutions. Engage Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, because the military installation in the community provides an economic incentive.
- Changing the Charter to make it possible for people to serve on boards and commissions who aren't qualified to vote, such as military family members who maintain voting registration elsewhere. Intentionally include the community.
- Having welcoming events such as tours, giving out checklists to connect members with diverse organizations, which can be done virtually so they don't physically have to go to the location.
- Creating a cultural book – where are the salons specializing in black hair, where to find food, art, churches, etc., that they would like. It shows that this base sees you and is putting those things up front.
 - Army Installation Management Command (IMCOM) has created an app called "Digital Garrison." Resources like barbershops and salons, food, art, churches can be included in this app.
 - It's a win-win because restaurants that come to those events get exposure.

Identifying and Measuring Civil-Military Integration in a Community

- Military and Veteran discounts at local businesses are one way to signal appreciation. Starbucks family stores are another example.
- Veteran-friendly employers
- How is wearing the uniform seen in the community?
- Are there Veteran-affiliated organizations in the community?
- Are there "good neighbor" events between the installation and the community?
- Where are the recruiters going? Where are they welcomed?
- How many police interactions are there in the community?
- How are chaplains integrated into the community? How do chaplains help service members integrate into the community?



Allyship and Mentorship

- Need white male senior military leaders to say they support and stand firmly behind DEI.
- There needs to be a concerted effort to gain the trust of the diverse populations as an ally so we do not continue to leave people out of the community.
- Data found that if discrimination occurs on or off base, who is it reported to? We must have allyship to create a safe space for those with adverse experiences to speak about it.
- Mentorship and cross generational sponsorship — Veterans serving as mentors to new recruits and families.
- Guidance on how to have conversations about the confederate flag and other racist symbols.

Accountability

- The USAF has a "[Support of Military Families Scorecard](#)" with the scores of red, yellow, green largely measuring metrics related to public education and spousal license reciprocity. The Civil Rights Data Collection, available at <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/> has useful reporting tools/data.
 - "What gets watched, gets worked."
 - "What gets rewarded, gets repeated."

Promising Practices and Programs

- Association of Defense Communities' [One Military, One Community Initiative](#) collected data through surveys and listening sessions.
- Enhancing the Bridge Strong Program [a Blue Star Families localized outreach program piloted by McCormick Foundation Chicagoland DEPLOY Fellow Jerilyn Lim-Leonard, to build bridges between military and Veteran families and service members and the communities they serve to protect through a year-round sponsorship opportunity].



Additional Conversations: Military Spouse Employment

While the closed-door session was centered around recruitment and sense of belonging, military spousal employment was an issue that was discussed in many groups. Below articulates the summary of those conversations.

- Military spousal employment has not changed significantly over the past 20 years, so how do we change this? How do we collect this information?
 - Message the benefits of Military Spouse Employees to employers:
Employers need to learn more about our tenacity and wanting to be part of something better.
- Advocate for policy change with states to adopt private sector employment preference for military spouses. This must have the involvement of the community, however, for sustainability because commanders/leaders will change.
- Some companies are ensuring that their military-connected employees can keep their jobs when they move. More companies can model that.
- [\[National\] Military Spouse Network](#) has been amazing, the tech field has a huge potential for transitioning members and spouses.