



Compounding Threats to the Common Defense

September 2023



609
Respondents

Poll conducted
September 13-20, 2023

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Blue Star Families

Blue Star Families is the nation's largest community-based organization supporting military-connected families. Its research-driven approach builds strong communities through innovative solutions.

Compounding Threats to the Common Defense: Implications of the Promotion Block and Government Shutdown on Long-Term Military Stability

September 2023

Executive Summary

“Political tactics that negatively affect military families as leverage for political power plays shows us all that we are just pawns to be used. Our military and families have and continue to sacrifice enough. No one should have the ability or power to use our military as leverage.”

Spouse of Field Grade Officer

Both the potential government shutdown and the ongoing block of hundreds of military officer nominations held up in the U.S. Senate have injected unnecessary uncertainty into the lives of military families — families that already navigate the uncertainty of deployments and frequent relocation as part of their service to the country. A potential government shutdown and loss of military pay threatens the financial stability of military families, as 1 in 3 have less than \$3,000 in savings — not enough for rent, groceries, or child care in most places. Despite the confirmations of several members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, hundreds of other promotions remain stalled, causing trickle-down impacts to thousands of military families, creating uncertainty not only about the future of their military careers, but also of relocation orders affecting where their families will live, work, or go to school.

Government Shutdown

The overwhelming majority of currently-serving respondents (84%) report they would be somewhat or greatly impacted by a government shutdown. Most families, and especially those in the enlisted ranks, are concerned about the loss or delay of pay, as many military families depend solely on the service member's income.

“We will not get paid. We will not be able to pay our mortgage. Why would we want to continue to serve in a military that is run by people that don't understand the basic needs of its soldiers and their families?”

Spouse of Field Grade Officer

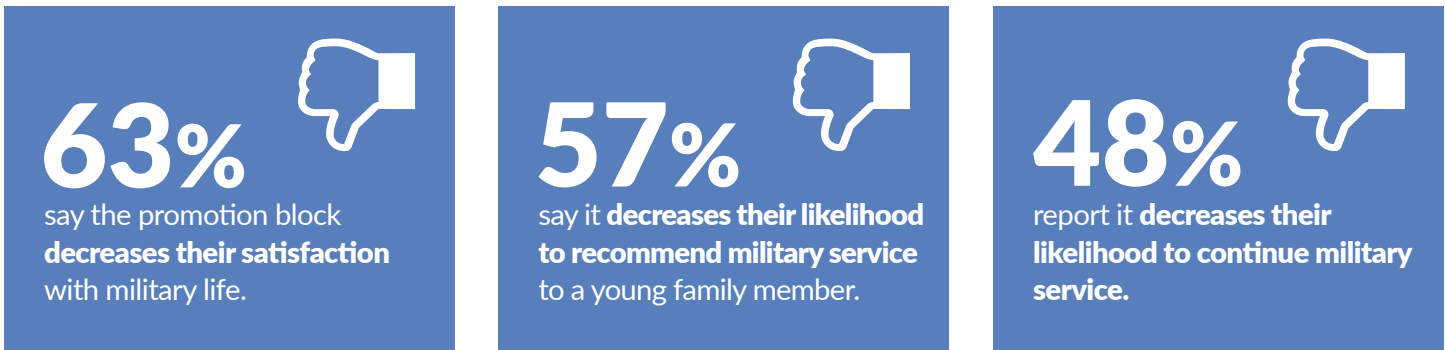
Promotion Block

The majority of currently-serving respondents (82%) are opposed to the promotion block; among those directly impacted, 97% are opposed. It also has impacts on satisfaction with military service, as well as both retention and recommendation of military service. In an open-ended question, nearly half (47%) expressed concerns about the politicalization of the military, and the military being used as a pawn in political games.

Implications

Both the potential government shutdown and the promotion block have caused military families to reconsider their perspective on military service, decreasing their willingness to recommend military service to others or even remain in military service themselves.

Among currently-serving respondents:



The potential government shutdown could have immediate impacts on military personnel and their families, especially if they go without pay. The promotion block injects more uncertainty into an already uncertain military lifestyle, as relocations and promotions down the chain of command are held up. These issues remain in the forefront of military family conversations about recruitment and retention, and military families must remain in the forefront of the conversation about these issues. The military is an apolitical institution, and military families should not be caught in the crossfire of politics.

“I didn’t join the Army to become a political tool. It goes against our oath and creates unnecessary drama that makes serving unappealing.”

Active-Duty Field Grade Officer

Blue Star Families fielded a Pulse Check on the government shutdown and promotion block from September 13–20, 2023, reaching more than 600 respondents, including active-duty, National Guard, Reserve, and Veteran families. This poll is not generalizable to the currently-serving population due to convenience sampling methodology. Recruitment for the poll was targeted to military families who were impacted by the promotion block and potential government shutdown.

For more information on this survey, please contact survey@bluestarfam.org. For media inquiries, please contact media@bluestarfam.org.

Introduction

As of September 28, 2023, a shutdown of the federal government is pending, leaving military families uncertain if they will continue to be paid for their service, even as they continue to show up to work each day and complete their missions. The loss of their service member's pay has tremendous impacts on the family's financial well-being; 1 in 3 military families has less than \$3,000 in savings, not enough to cover rent, groceries, or child care for a month.¹



In addition, since February 2023, hundreds of military nominations have been held up in the U.S. Senate, including several of the most senior military leaders, the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Halting the most senior military promotions has had ripple effects throughout the entire military; as senior promotions are blocked, lower-ranking officers' promotions are also held up as the positions they would fill have not yet been vacated. This trickle-down effect leaves thousands of military families in a state of suspense, uncertain not only about the future of their military careers, but also of relocation orders affecting where their families will live, work, or go to school.

In July 2023, Blue Star Families conducted a Pulse Check on this promotion block, with over 1,100 respondents.² Members of all active-duty and National Guard branches reported the promotion block impacted them in some aspect, with 19% reporting negative impacts to their career. Additionally, impacts were felt by all officer family respondents; the negative impacts were not limited to the most senior ranks (O7 and above).

This subsequent Pulse Check expands on these findings by exploring the impacts the work and mission blockage is having on our military families' likelihood to recommend military service to a young family member, their likelihood to continue military service, and their satisfaction with military service, as well as the impact the government shutdown would have on our military families.

¹ Blue Star Families. Unpublished finding from 2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey.

² Blue Star Families. (2023). Pulse Check: Promotion Block. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/BSF_Pulse_Check_Jul23_Report.pdf

Key Findings

Impacts of a Government Shutdown

When asked about the potential government shutdown, 84% (n=330) of currently-serving respondents stated that they would be somewhat or greatly impacted by it.³ Additionally, 79% of Veteran family respondents would be somewhat or greatly impacted (n=105).

Respondents in all rank groupings overwhelmingly reported they would be somewhat or greatly impacted by a government shutdown. A qualitative analysis of open-ended responses indicated that military spouse employment and out-of-pocket housing expenses were top-of-mind for families looking ahead to the potential impacts of a government shutdown. The military spouse unemployment rate is currently 21% and has not significantly changed since 2015.⁴ In addition to this limitation to family income, families often spend several hundreds of dollars over their Basic Allowance for Housing each month.^{5,6}

“A government shutdown affects our ability to live. We live in a very high cost area [...] where we don’t receive COLA and where our utilities are double and triple the cost of other areas. We could only survive 2-3 months without having to ask family for help. I feel like our military and their families are used by politicians to make themselves look good, but we are always used as a bargaining chip. I honestly don’t know of any other profession that is manipulated like we are.”

Spouse of Field Grade Officer

Currently-serving respondents (n=324) across all rank groupings (Junior Enlisted to General Officers) indicate they would be somewhat or greatly impacted by a government shutdown. However, a greater proportion of enlisted family respondents indicated a government shutdown would greatly impact their family than officer family respondents (63% versus 46%).

Expected Impacted of a Government Shutdown, by Rank

	Enlisted (n=124)	Officer (n=178)
Greatly Impacted	63%	46%
Somewhat Impacted	20%	38%
Have No Impact	7%	9%
Unsure	10%	7%

³ “If a government shutdown were to occur, to what extent would that impact your family?” Answer options: Greatly Impact, Somewhat Impact, Have No Impact, Unsure.

⁴ Department of Defense (2022). 2021 DOD Survey of Active Duty Spouses: The Military Spouse at a Glance. Office of People Analytics. <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Presentations/2021-active-duty-spouse-overview-briefing.pdf>

⁵ Blue Star Families (2023). 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf

⁶ Blue Star Families. (2022). Pulse Check: Relocation and Housing. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/BSF_PulseCheck_Report_Sep2022.pdf

In open-ended responses, pay was by far the most common concern for families in the event of a government shutdown. Many families rely solely on the service member's income, as military spouses face many barriers to employment. Some respondents reported concerns of homelessness or increasing food insecurity.

“A shut down would put strain on buying food for our families. This is already a significant problem.”

Spouse of Field Grade Officer

“If there was no pay we would be homeless.”

Spouse of Mid-Level Enlisted Service Member

“We already live paycheck to paycheck, if we lost half our income it would make it hard to not drown in bills.”

Spouse of Junior Enlisted Service Member

Another emerging theme was a perception that a lack of pay during a government shutdown would be a reflection of the government's lack of commitment to military families. The uncertainty caused by government shutdowns, especially from respondents who had already experienced more than one shutdown, was cited as a reason families were not recommending service or were considering leaving military service.

Impacts of the Promotion Block

More than a quarter of currently-serving family respondents (27%, n=331) reported they were impacted by the promotion block. Consistent with the previous Pulse Check,⁷ impacts were reported in each branch, and in both the active and Reserve components. Those impacted were located at duty stations all across the country, and were registered to vote in 27 states. The largest proportions were registered in Florida (17%), Virginia (14%), and Texas (11%).

While the majority of respondents are opposed to the promotion block, individuals who are impacted are overwhelmingly opposed.⁸

82% of currently-serving families oppose the promotion block.



⁷ Blue Star Families. (2023). Pulse Check: Promotion Block. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/BSF_Pulse_Check_Jul23_Report.pdf

⁸ “Do you support or oppose the promotion block?” Answer Options: Strongly Support, Somewhat Support, Somewhat Oppose, Strongly Oppose, I Have No Opinion.

A majority of all respondents (75%, n=464), including Veterans and spouses of Veterans somewhat or strongly oppose the promotion block. Among currently-serving families, this proportion jumps to 82% (n=328), while 9% strongly or somewhat support the block and another 9% report no opinion. Among currently-serving respondents who were directly impacted by the hold (n=328), 97% somewhat or strongly opposed, but even those who were not directly impacted reported overwhelming opposition (74%).

A majority of currently-serving respondents (63%, n=329) report that the promotion block somewhat or greatly **decreases their satisfaction with military service**.⁹ For those who are impacted by the promotion block, that number dramatically increases to 87% (n=87) somewhat or greatly decreases their satisfaction with service.

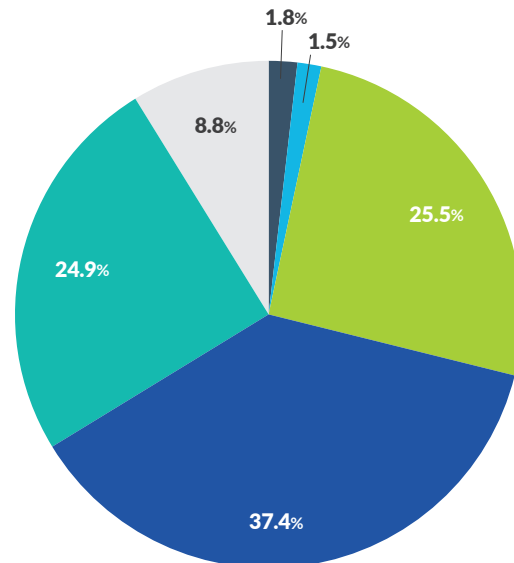
The majority of currently-serving respondents (57%, n=325) report the promotion block **decreases their likelihood to recommend service to a young family member**, while 34% say it will have no effect on their recommendation of service. For those that are impacted by the promotion block this dramatically increases to 77%.¹⁰

Nearly half of all currently-serving family respondents (48%, n=327) say the promotion block somewhat or greatly decreases the likelihood that their family will continue service, and more than three-quarters (77%) of those affected report it **decreases their likelihood to remain in military service**.¹¹ One-third of all currently-serving family respondents (33%) report it has no effect and 14% reported it does not apply.

Impact of Promotion Block on Satisfaction with Military Service

Currently-serving family respondents (n=329)

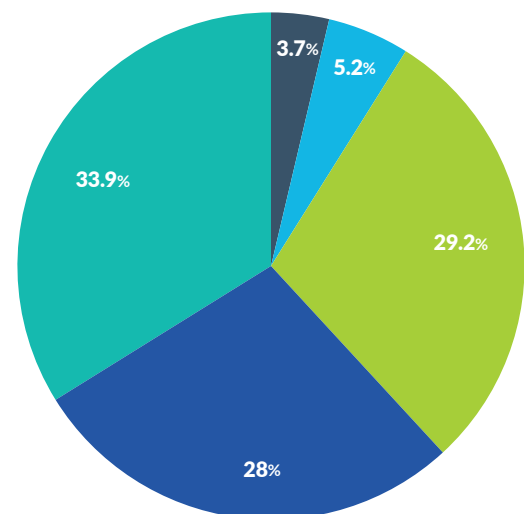
Greatly Increases Somewhat Increases Somewhat Decreases
Greatly Decreases Has No Effect Does Not Apply



Impact of Promotion Block on Likelihood to Recommend Service

Currently-serving family respondents (n=325)

Greatly Increases Somewhat Increases Somewhat Decreases
Greatly Decreases Has No Effect



⁹ "What effect does the promotion block have on your satisfaction with military service?" Answer options: Greatly Increases, Somewhat Increases, Somewhat Decreases, Greatly Decreases.

¹⁰ "What effect does the promotion block have on your likelihood to recommend military service to a young family member (child, niece or nephew, etc.)?" Answer Options: Greatly Increases, Somewhat Increases, Somewhat Decreases, Greatly Decreases, Has No Effect.

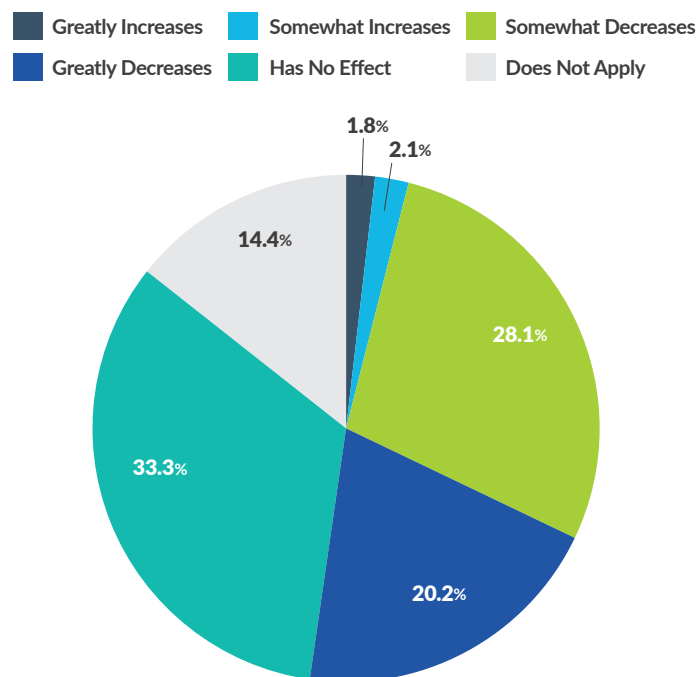
¹¹ "What effect does the promotion block have on your likelihood to continue your family's military service?" Answer Options: Greatly Increases, Somewhat Increases, Somewhat Decreases, Greatly Decreases, Has No Effect, Does Not Apply.

When currently-serving families were asked, in an open-ended question, how their family had been impacted by the promotion block, several themes arose. The top three themes included: 54% (n=41) did not get promoted or had their career stall, 34% (n=26) reported their pay and finances were disrupted, and 28% (n=21) had issues with PCSes and relocations. Other themes included an emotional toll and impacts on mental health and well-being, effects on their children, and issues regarding leadership.

Additionally, respondents were asked to share their thoughts on the effects of the promotion block on their likelihood to stay in military service or recommending military service to others. The most common theme, from almost half of respondents (47%, n=85), was that the military was being politicized or used as a pawn. More than a quarter expressed sentiments about how the promotion block would impact retention (27%, n=49), and 17% (n=30) expressed that the promotion block indicated that the government doesn't support the military. Other responses noted the impacts of this promotion block on families' financial security, as well as on their recommendation of military service and the threat to national security.

Impact of Promotion Block on Likelihood to Continue Military Service

Currently-serving family respondents (n=327)



"If the machine doesn't support our troops and their safety by ensuring continuity of leadership, then why should my family put it all on the line? Why bother when we could get out and both be working in jobs with far higher salaries and desirable work hours."

Spouse of Field Grade Officer

"The military continues to be used as a political pawn and we feel the negative impacts and another example of policies being forcibly injected into the military which is meant to remain apolitical to ensure unity of mission to protect the United States."

Spouse of Field Grade Officer

Implications

Military families have seen the uncertainty that comes with threatened government shutdowns multiple times over the past few years, and grow weary of repeated threats to their financial stability. While “economic stability” is a key reason military families do recommend service to others, that stability is threatened by each potential shutdown. With “poor military leadership,” “challenges for families,” and financial sacrifice” as reasons that active-duty family respondents are unlikely to recommend military services according to 2022 MFLS, the military cannot afford another government shutdown to hinder their recruitment.

“My husband is the only working parent, we will have no income. It is looking better and better to get out and join the private sector!”

Spouse of Field Grade Officer

Furthermore, the harmful promotion block should be stopped. The cascading effect of this block affects the lives of thousands of individual service members and their families and harms the morale of the entire force. The consequences of this policy are far-reaching and directly impact the morale, readiness, and retention of those who defend our freedoms and families. In short, it greatly undermines our national security.

Respondents and Methodology

This survey, fielded between September 13 and 20, 2023, captured a convenience sample of 609 respondents who most commonly identified as an active-duty spouse (58%), Veteran/retired service member (16%), active-duty service member (11%), and spouse of a Veteran (7%). This report, however, focuses on the experiences of currently-serving family respondents, and so “respondents” refers to respondents who identified as an active-duty, National Guard, or Reserve service member or spouse.

Among currently-serving family respondents (n=331), 41% were affiliated with the Army, 26% with the Air Force, 18% with the Navy, 6% with Marine Corps, 5% with the Coast Guard, and 3% with the Space Force. Among currently-serving family respondents, 4% reported ranks of E1-E4, 29% were E5-E7, 7% were E8-E9, 8% were O1-O3, 49% were O4 and above, and 3% were Warrant Officers.

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¹² https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf