



Military Families Outdoors

2024 Impact Report

Table of Contents

- 3 Executive Summary**
- 5 Impact Snapshot**
- 6 A Commitment to Military Families**
- 7 Programs & Initiatives**

“I breathed. They breathed. It was warm and – despite the midday crowds – quiet, peaceful, for maybe the first time since we’d been given orders to pack up and move. My husband visibly relaxed and looked around, excited again to take in this place.”

MFO Family*



Executive Summary

Military Families Outdoors (MFO) advances national security by strengthening the resilience and readiness of the All-Volunteer Force.

Healthy families mean resilient and retained service members. MFO creates stronger, more resilient and more connected families through low-cost, high-impact nature-based experiences that reduce stress, foster community, and encourage healthy lifestyles. These efforts provide upstream solutions to suicide prevention, mental health, and long term physical fitness. By promoting family readiness—a core element of force readiness—we are supporting the mission of the Department of Defense’s (DoD) strategic priorities and its core mission to train and equip service members to fight and win the nation’s wars.

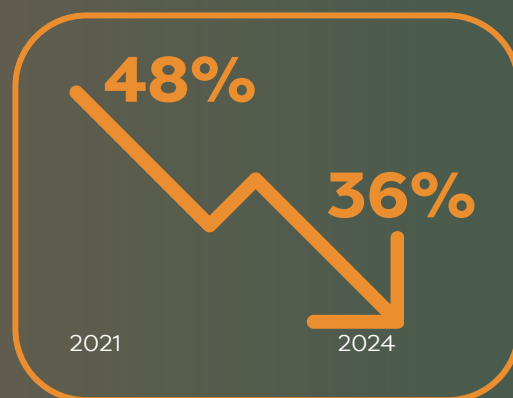
FINDINGS FROM BLUE STAR FAMILIES’ 2023 AND 2024 MILITARY FAMILY LIFESTYLE SURVEY SHOW THAT:

73%

of active-duty family respondents report high stress

63%

of active-duty service members cite family considerations as a key factor in their decision to continue military service



There was a significant drop in the percentage of military spouses who said they were satisfied with the military way of life between 2021-2024. If we can increase family satisfaction with the military lifestyle, then we can begin to reverse this trend and increase retention in the All Volunteer Force.



Executive Summary

MFO is committed to enhancing the health, well-being, and overall quality of life of active-duty military and their families by providing meaningful outdoor experiences. Through engaging programs in national parks, public lands, and waterways, MFO provides military families with the opportunity to experience the life-changing benefits of nature.



POPULATION

**Active-Duty Service Members (ADSM)
across all military Services
ADSM Families**

In its 2024 pilot year, MFO impacted over 9,000 participants, offering an array of outdoor experiences such as guided hikes, camping trips, environmental education programs, and water-based recreation. These activities promote stress reduction, community connection, physical well-being, and a lifelong connection to nature. These outcomes increase quality of life for military families and aid in the retention of service members in the All Volunteer Force. MFO is committed to making America healthy again.

MFO is administered by the Defense Health Agency (DHA) and the National Park Service (NPS), and led by Blue Star Families (BSF) in collaboration with leading outdoor organizations, including Wilderness Inquiry (WI), YMCA of the USA, and The Center for Health & Nature at Texas A&M University. These partnerships ensure high-quality, expert-led programming tailored to the needs of military-connected communities.

THE MFO PROGRAM SUCCESSFULLY PROMOTES:



ACCESS TO NATIONAL PARKS

Free annual America The Beautiful Military Pass to enter 430+ national parks, including over 100 sites with military history



HEALTH & WELLNESS

Outdoor activities reduce stress, increase cognitive skills, decrease anger & anxiety, promote sleep, and support physical fitness, and time in nature fosters spiritual well-being.



IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIFE

Shared outdoor experiences strengthen relationships, build community networks, and provide critical social support.



SERVICE & STEWARDSHIP

MFO encourages engagement in conservation and volunteer efforts, reinforcing values of stewardship, service, and connection to the outdoors.



Impact Snapshot

The Year 1 Evaluation Report for Military Families Outdoors (MFO) from the Center for Health and Nature at Texas A&M found that participants were highly satisfied with the program, reporting:¹



**stronger
family bonds**



**improved
mental health**

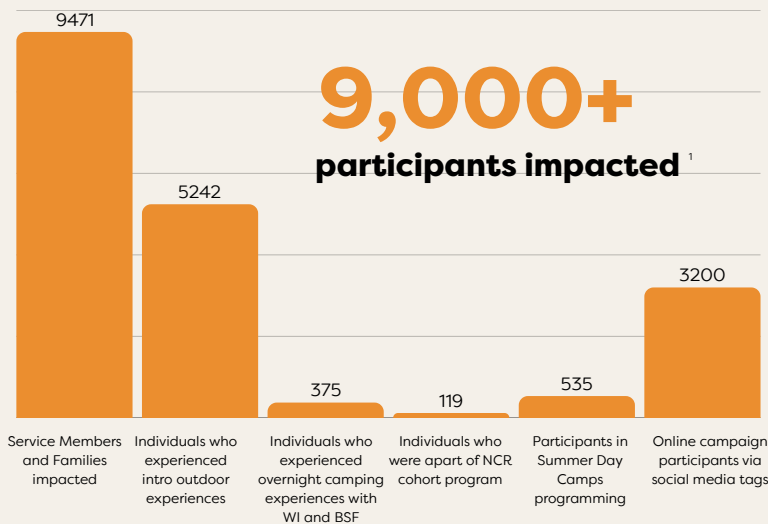


**more social
connections**



**increased access
to outdoor
experiences**

● MFO Participation



“ **These events are priceless for us. It's such a wonderful way to help welcome families during a sometimes difficult transition.**

MFO Family¹

WILDERNESS INQUIRY'S POST-TRIP SURVEY SHOWED:³

92%

of participants reported a greater sense of physical well-being

93%

of participants felt more connected to themselves, their family, and/or the military community, AND more confident in their ability to access the outdoors independently and/or with their family

BLUE STAR FAMILIES' POST-PROGRAM OUTDOOR SURVEY REINFORCED THESE FINDINGS:²

98%

of participants agreed they feel a sense of belonging in nature

98%

agreed they gained a better understanding of how parks & outdoors support physical and mental health & well-being



2.1

and the program created a more connected community, increasing quality of life with military families—participants making an average of 2.1 new social connections as a result of their outdoor engagement



¹MFO Year 1 Evaluation Report
²Blue Star Families' post-program outdoor survey
³Wilderness Inquiry's post-trip survey

A Commitment to Military Families

We aim to solidify Military Families Outdoors as an upstream solution for the health and well-being of military families, addressing key health factors that impact quality of life. By increasing opportunities to enjoy nature-based experiences, we proactively support spiritual, mental and physical health, strengthen family resilience, and foster a sense of belonging. These are all critical factors in sustaining the All-Volunteer Force and ensuring long-term well-being and physical health—both during and beyond military service.

Health & Wellness

Outdoor recreation improves mental health, reduces stress, and fosters physical well-being.

Sustaining the All-Volunteer Force (AVF)

Stronger, healthier military families lead to higher service member retention and mission readiness.

Long-Term Impact

Encourages lifelong outdoor engagement, promoting continued health and wellness beyond military service.

Family Resiliency

Shared experiences in nature strengthen family bonds, build confidence, and enhance coping mechanisms.

Community Connection

Creates opportunities for military families to engage with local communities, reducing isolation and fostering belonging.



Programs & Initiatives

Military Families Outdoors provides a continuum of nature-based, health-promoting experiences in national parks, public lands, and waterways.



INVITE
Expanding Awareness & Engagement



INTRODUCE
First Steps into Nature



ENGAGE
Deep Outdoor Immersion



EMPOWER
Building a Lasting
Outdoor Lifestyle



Locations

In 2024, MFO held programs designed to help military families experience the outdoors--whether exploring National Parks or discovering ways to have backyard adventures--families learned new ways to get outside together!¹



33
PUBLIC LANDS
VISTED

43
NATIONAL PARK
SITES VISTED

With 20+
new
locations
added for
2025!

INVITE

Expanding Awareness & Engagement



to Nature

Key Programs & Initiatives:

★ **Military Spouse Writing Contest**

A contest that invited military spouses to share their personal stories through essays and creative writing, celebrating unique voices and lived experiences, with the winner getting an expense-paid trip to a National Park.

★ **Conducted Digital Outreach & Activation**

Launched the MFO Website, held the “Great Outdoors” Social Media Contest, deployed a Communications Toolkit to be used across webpages, newsletters, and social media. Other highlights included sharing outdoor stories of military families through social media and blogs and providing outdoor tools and resources.

★ **Hosted a Mingle & Chat in the Blue Star Families Neighborhood**

Led a webinar that shared expert tips with Military families on how to spend their holidays outdoors.

Military Families Outdoors ensures that military families are aware of and have access to nature-based health resources and programs. Through targeted communications and outreach efforts, MFO successfully introduced thousands of families to the opportunities that the outdoors offers.



3,200
individuals
participated
in online
campaigns¹

“I never knew this park existed! This program gave us confidence to explore on our own.”¹

MFO Family

INTRODUCE First Steps into Nature

MFO provides short-dose outdoor experiences from day trips and drop-in events that introduce military families to the benefits of nature in an accessible and welcoming way.

535

individuals
participated in
Summer Day Camps
programming¹

32

outdoor
recreation
programs
launched¹

5,242

individuals
participated in
introductory outdoor
experiences¹



“The Topsail event kicked off something with our family, and now we're finally getting back into the 'nature' mindset that used to be so important to us before we had kids. It was an absolute joy to see my 6-year-old become so enthralled with the natural world at the beach, and it gave me a better appreciation for what we've got during our time here.”¹

Key Programs & Initiatives:



Canoemobile

A traveling outdoor classroom that brings canoes to urban waterways, engaging families in hands-on education experiences.



Near-Nature Experiences

Outdoor activities including canoeing, nature walks, and conservation education.



Summer Day Camp/Ranger Week

A summer day camp experience that gives military children a chance to build confidence, make friends, and explore the outdoors.



ness & Engagement

ps into Nature

ENGAGE Deep Outdoor Immersion

ing a Lasting

le

Beyond introductory experiences, MFO offers multi-day, overnight, and cohort-based outdoor programs that help families form deeper connections with nature and each other.

Key Programs & Initiatives:

- ★ **Extended Trip Adventures**
Wilderness Inquiry-led multi-day immersive adventures that take participants deep into natural settings to foster connection, and confidence through exploration.
- ★ **Full-Spectrum Cohort Model**
Designed to encourage sustained participation and bonding among military families.

375

individuals participated in overnight camping experiences ¹

119

individuals participated in the full-spectrum cohort model, surpassing program goals ¹



“This no-pressure environment allowed the kids to thrive and try new things, making the entire experience truly magical. We loved it so much that we were already looking into setting up our own trip while waiting at the airport!” ¹

MFO Family



A majority of MFO participants reported feeling "empowered to explore nature independently." Families demonstrated continued engagement, with many returning to the same parks and recommending experiences to others.¹

EMPOWER **Building a Lasting Outdoor Lifestyle**

MFO aims to create lifelong outdoor enthusiasts by helping military families incorporate nature into their daily lives.

I think we all saw ourselves as more resilient. The trip had a lot of weather changes including thunder and lightning storms, high winds, and cold nights, but we all enjoyed ourselves and even the kids said they couldn't wait to get back out camping and canoeing again soon.¹

MFO Family



Key Programs & Initiatives:

- ★ **Nature-Based Wellness Curriculum**
Developed curriculum for wellness centers to be piloted in 2025.
- ★ **Preparation for Independent Outdoor Exploration**
Equipped military families with skills to continue exploring nature independently.
- ★ **Volunteerism & Conservation**
Encouraged families to give back through environmental stewardship activities.



Explore.



Connect.



Recharge.



★ Military Families Outdoors ★

Adventure Starts Here

✦ militaryfamiliesoutdoors.org