

Understanding the Challenges and Meeting the Needs of Military and Veteran Families

by Elizabeth C. Coppola, M.A., Christine E. McCall, B.A., Keisha Bailey, B.A., Brittany P. Mihalec-Adkins, M.S.Ed., and Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The longest war in U.S. history has presented many challenges for military and veteran families (MVF). Political discourse regarding these challenges rarely acknowledges the strengths they've demonstrated, despite their capacity for resilience. Individual and family diversity has been increasing in the military, which requires adjustments in programs and policies to meet the needs of these diverse populations. Collaboration between governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, researchers, and practitioners can develop a coordinated system of care that is well positioned to accommodate the needs of MVF.

Understanding the Challenges and Meeting the Needs of MVF

Our nation's leaders are concerned with family readiness because it has implications for military effectiveness.³ The current conflict has spurred multiple initiatives to support MVF. This brief describes challenges for families posed by the post-9/11 conflict and gives examples of efforts by three presidential administrations to support MVF, with an emphasis on the diversity of policy actions by multiple branches of the government.

Consequences of the Post-9/11

Conflict: More than 2.77 million service members have completed 5.4 million deployments since 2001, with 40%

deployed more than once.⁵ Over half had family responsibilities to spouses or children. The post-9/11 conflict is unique in its reliance on volunteers rather than draftees,^{2,3} a military that is roughly 30% smaller than it was 30 years ago,¹ and the large role of the Reserve Component (RC)^{2,3} who live and work most of the time as civilians, leaving their jobs and communities for military deployments that can last more than a year. They may live far from resources and supports that are available on military installations.² Further, compared to earlier conflicts, post-9/11 deployments have been longer and more likely to be repeated.¹

Policy dilemmas

One dilemma arises from efforts to draw attention to the consequences of

wartime deployments for MVF, where it is tempting to emphasize vulnerabilities even though most families display resilience. For example, although it is true that rates of PTSD diagnoses may be as high as 20% among service members deployed for Afghanistan and Iraq, it is also true that 75% have not received such diagnoses.²

A second policy dilemma concerns which individuals and families should have access to resources provided through the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Veterans Affairs (VA). Historically, these resources, such as health care, housing assistance, and child-care subsidies, have been largely restricted to individuals with legal or blood relationships to service members. Multiple studies have shown

TALKING POINTS

- Relative to veterans of earlier conflicts, post-9/11 service members and veterans experienced longer and more frequent deployments.
- Post-9/11 deployments have heavily relied on members of the reserve component (National Guard and the Reserves), many of whom live in civilian communities removed from military installations and their associated resources.
- Although many families have displayed resilience in relation to deployment, a substantial minority has experienced wounds or injuries, mental health challenges, and other difficulties.
- Researchers and practitioners have multiple options for influencing the policies, programs, and practices that affect military and veteran families.

that DoD's pro-marriage policies have reduced racial disparities in patterns of marriage and divorce, and have reduced rates of cohabitation, relative to marriage, among service members.²

A final policy dilemma is that governmental and nongovernmental organizations need to work together effectively if families are to be well served, given that most military families now live, work, and receive education and medical care in civilian communities. One notable

difficulty in this area is the persistent challenge of facilitating the transfer of occupational licenses and certifications from state to state.^{23,3} Another is in the child welfare system, where civilian care providers are expected to report suspected cases of child maltreatment to both military and civilian officials, but only about 20% do so.³⁹

Looking Ahead

Policy challenges related to military families will continue to emerge in the

coming years as a result of ongoing changes on several fronts.

- **The changing nature of military conflicts.** The next large conflict could be at sea or in cyberspace. Shifts in the nature of conflict mean policies (and science) usually lag behind needs, often creating challenges for families in crisis.
- **The changing nature of the armed forces.** Since 1973, the U.S. Armed Forces have been composed exclusively of volunteers, meaning the DOD must compete with other employers for its recruits. Because the military is an “up or out” system, a very high percentage of service members are younger than 25 years of age. An influx of new young people creates a constant pressure to rapidly retool policies, programs, and practices to serve each new generation. Additionally, over the last 30 years, members of the reserve, women, and members of sexual minority groups have become more prominent.
- **The changing nature of families.** Family forms are always shifting. A nuanced understanding of the challenges and needs of diverse MVP is essential for promoting their well-being. Family-focused scholars and practitioners need to remain alert to the evolving challenges and opportunities of military service and be prepared to conduct research, review policy options and actions, and be vocal about gaps.

Please see the full brief for a complete list of references. References also are available upon request.

Please see the full brief for more information about the authors. www.nccfr.org

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND SCHOLARS

- **Challenge biases and stereotypes.** Partly because such a small percentage of the population serves in the military, misconceptions are common. Correcting them will improve cultural competence.
- **Study the evidence.** Hundreds of studies of military families have been conducted during the current conflict in both the United States and overseas, greatly expanding the evidence base about military service and intimate relationships, parenting, LGBT service members, and other topics.
- **Be inclusive.** Many studies already include military-connected participants—not only service members, partners, or children but also siblings, parents, and others—but investigators may not know it. Paying attention to military family connections and their implications for research findings will help to grow a meaningful evidence base.
- **Promote collaboration and coordination to benefit families.** Better collaborations are needed between state regulatory agencies and professional occupational boards to address employment challenges, and coordination of reporting practices between state and military child welfare agencies about child maltreatment.
- **Monitor the changing nature of the military, conflicts, and families.** Those working with families can be helpful by being forward-looking and thoughtful about emerging needs of MVP and their policy implications. For example, which existing programs, policies and practices would need to be changed—and how—to accommodate current and future transgender service members?
- **Pursue creative strategies to have an impact on policies related to MVP.** The convenings, campaigns, study committees, compacts, and other strategies used by federal and state leaders in recent years are all examples of actions that can help to influence policies, programs and practices.^{2,3,23-25}



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National Council on Family Relations

661 LaSalle Street, Suite 200

St. Paul, MN 55114

Toll free: 888-781-9331 | Fax: 763-781-9348

info@ncfr.org | www.ncfr.org

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Elaine A. Anderson, Policy Brief Editor