



Blue Star Families
Department of Research and Policy

**Testimony for the Senate Armed Services Committee
April 13, 2011**

Thank you, Senator Webb, Senator Graham, and members of the subcommittee for inviting us here to speak to you today.

Blue Star Families is a non-profit of military families from all services and all ranks, including National Guard and Reserve, as well as veterans and civilians who strongly support us, with a mission of strengthening military families. We support one another through the unique challenges of military service and ask the larger civilian population to help connect military families regardless of rank, branch of service or physical location, and empower military family members to create the best personal and family life possible for themselves.

We currently have over 50 chapters nationwide and are adding more regularly. Our online and social media activity is equally important, we have thousands of new members joining on-line weekly. We have had 1,000 percent growth in our second year. Through outreach and involvement with national and local organizations, civilian communities and government entities, Blue Star Families works hand in hand to share the pride of service, promote healthier families, aid in our military readiness, and contribute to our country's strength.

We appreciate the opportunity to speak to the Senate Armed Services Committee Personnel Subcommittee on the topic of benefits. Our annual Military Family Lifestyles Survey has consistently shown that **pay and benefits**, the current **operational tempo**, the **effects of deployments on children**, **spouse employment**, and **children's education are the top concerns among military families**.

Some highlights from our survey concerning benefits:

- Health Care is both an area of high concern and high satisfaction. Almost thirty-nine percent of respondents said they were extremely/very satisfied with the quality of military health care. However, twenty-four percent said they were extremely/very dissatisfied. Forty-two percent said they were extremely/very satisfied with access to military health care, while twenty-two percent said they were extremely/very dissatisfied with it.

And, while a majority of respondents (fifty-two percent) were extremely/very satisfied with Tricare, eighteen percent were extremely/very dissatisfied.

- That Military Healthcare Access & Quality have relatively high extremely/very satisfied ratings YET rank 2nd and 3rd as areas in need of improvement (Mental Health Services, with forty-four percent, was the area chosen as most in need of improvement) and have solid dissatisfied percentages suggests widely varying quality across regions, services, individual installations, etc.
- When asked which services they were most satisfied with, the top choice (with fifty percent) was the commissary and exchange benefit, Tricare insurance and Chaplain services tied for second (with forty percent), and Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Schools came in third (36 percent). Base Housing came in a close fourth (with thirty-five percent).
- As more and more discussion centers around the post 9/11 GI Bill, our membership has continued to voice their support for the option of transferability. Yet many members of Congress, including members of this panel, have advocated for abolishing transferability, either directly or through the 'back door' of requiring DoD to pay for transferred benefits – a requirement DoD has already stated it can't meet. It is unfair to ask those families who have sacrificed the most for the current conflicts to give up a key benefit that is intended to reward service members for their dedication. It also ignores the modern reality that entire families are sacrificing their full potential to serve their country – and that a transferred benefit is still a benefit to the soldier, since the soldier's income is often paying for the spouse's or child's education.

What I would really like to highlight in with you today, however, is a bit different - it is how we can better help military families - provide benefits - outside of DoD or government funding, but with government cooperation, through public-private partnerships. The government is often the largest barrier to this, and perhaps this is an area where you can help.

Military families do serve, do suffer burdens during this long war. But we also believe that government can't solve all ills. Groups like ours play a role, but to play it effectively we need to be able to engage cooperatively with the DoD.

Our organization was started to provide the spouse and family members on the ground the ability to identify and be part of solving the problems they saw in their communities. We listen to our members, ourselves, our annual surveys, and we use our position as military family members to ask for help. We seek to work with

government when possible to make our programs better, more effective, and more coordinated with government programs. For instance, last year we asked museums across the country to make themselves free for military families over the summer. Over 900 museums signed on, and 300,000 troops and family members took part last summer. We couldn't have done it without the assistance of Rocco Landesman and the NEA, or the First Lady's support. This program cost the government and military families nothing, and has been tremendously popular. This year our goal is to sign up 1,500 museums and have 500,000 family members take part. NMFA's Operation Purple Camps are another example of this.

Sometimes, however, the cooperation has not been smooth, for instance, with our Books on Bases program. We know from experience that many young military kids have no books at home, maybe because of frequent moves or deployment pressures. A RAND survey showed that base libraries are underfunded. My own at Parris Island seems to have had its heyday 40 years ago. But I don't want the DoD to solve that problem. I want them doing other things. So we at BSF have gone to book publishers and to the non-profit KIDS and have gotten donations of free new children's books that our chapters can bring to give away to their kids, and to base and community schools and libraries, over 65,000 to date. The only problem is, because of differing expectations and requirements for non-profits to operate on different military installations, some installations won't permit it. So, even though our chapters include spouses from their installation, even though we are not raising money or receiving a benefit, we are only giving away books - solving a problem, we can't have an event. We have given away books at Quantico, Little Creek, Camp Lejeune and others, but we can't get on Camp Pendleton.

As another example, recently we got involved with the issue of suicide prevention. Our surveys show that many families prefer to get their information from popular culture, rather than from official channels. We also know from our members that depression and thoughts of suicide are a problem not just for troops, but among families themselves. So working with DoD and VA experts on the substance, we got the help of the entertainment industry and went to Sundance and the Oscars and got celebrities to film PSAs of support to help promote the DoD/VA approved help line. This did not cost the government anything and we are making it available to anyone who wants to use it for free. Many will use it, but we have also heard from some that the legal counsel forbids it as something that endorses a private program. Well, we have no program, we are just using the power of the popular culture to highlight the DOD/VA program. There is no competition here - this is the kind of thing we could do a better job with.

This matters because there are tight budgets, and the DoD can't do it all. Nor should it. When it comes to government budget priorities, my first concern personally is getting my husband properly trained and equipped. Let's use the

private and the nonprofit sectors intelligently and responsibly to help us meet some of these needs. Sometimes the non-governmental players have access or expertise or can act more quickly. If NGO programs prove less effective or needs shift, NGO programs are easier to end than a government program.

I know many people in government are trying. When many of us here got together last year, including some of your staff at the SASC, at White Oak to discuss 'joining forces for Military families' across public and private sectors, we heard over and over from non-profits that DoD stovepipes and inability to work with the nonprofit sector caused concern. Doug Wilson was one of the co-hosts of that conference, as was Rob Gordon. They are both at the DoD now and trying to enhance cooperation, but it's difficult for everyone.

Most BSF programs succeed because they leverage the power of public and private entities working together to support families. Public-private partnerships are key to BSF's philosophy. Military families serve and sacrifice because we parents, spouses, and children love our service member, and love our country, not because we love the Pentagon. In fact, many families prefer not to interact with 'official channels.' So it is right and fitting that the responsibility for helping families falls not only to the Pentagon or the individual Services, but to the larger society as well.

As one respondent said in our survey, "The most important issue I feel is community support of the service members and their families. There are many families, more than most people realize, that need that support to know they aren't in this war alone. Many do not seek support or help because of lack of availability, pride, or any number of reasons. Community groups, businesses, and local governments could work together to keep a focus on their local military families and provide special programs that might be outside of traditional Department of Defense programs. It makes such a big difference to know others, besides just our military community, care that our loved ones are deploying over and over again and want to be part of what we are going through."

We'd like to ask for your support and leadership in helping us break through some of the stovepipes and bureaucracy at the DoD and elsewhere in government that prevent groups such as ours and the others who testify here to today from sharing the responsibility of supporting America's military families.

Thank you for your time and for your concern for service members and their families.