

## **Written testimony to Personnel Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee by Blue Star Families**

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Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Gillibrand and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am Kathy Roth-Douquet and I am the CEO of Blue Star Families. Blue Star Families (BSF) strengthens military families and our nation by connecting communities and fostering leadership to millions of people. As the largest chapter--based nonprofit organization in the US, serving 1.5 million military family members annually, and with 35 chapters at home and overseas, BSF bridges the gap between our military family community and the general public. With strong ties to all branches of service, active duty, veterans, and their families, BSF is nationally recognized for its annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey. The largest of its kind, the survey provides both quantitative and qualitative data that reveals a snapshot of the current state of the service members and their families. Conducted annually, the Military Family Lifestyle Survey is used at all levels of government to help inform and educate those tasked with making policy decisions that impact service members and their families--who also serve.

### **The Importance of Healthy & Resilient Military Communities**

Military families are central to the security of our nation. Including military families as a level of analysis in defense considerations is not just the right thing to do--it's also the smart thing. Put another way, prioritizing quality of life for service members and their families' benefits recruitment, retention, overall readiness, and will be crucial to shaping successful future force planning initiatives.

Working to minimize the uncertainty and heightened lifestyle requirements that are associated with military service will also help our nation to achieve many current national priorities including:

stable defense personnel costs; improved recruitment, retention and readiness; and a sustainable All-Volunteer Force.

Research suggests that service members' top concern is for their family's well-being and family well-being is top consideration in whether a service member stays or leaves the force. While the military has adopted a number of reforms to support military families in the past few years, there is still much more to be done.

## Key Priorities for Military Families

Since 2009, Blue Star families has conducted the annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey which provides a comprehensive understanding of what it means to serve as a military family and is the blueprint for strengthening America by supporting military families. Each year, we emphasize two to three key areas of focus, based upon the current needs identified in that year's survey.

Our key priorities for the coming year are based on areas of need identified in our 2015 survey. We feel improvement in these areas also has the greatest potential to reduce the trend of increasing uncertainty with the military lifestyle that was a top trend in our 2015 survey.

The areas we will be focusing on are:

- the caregiver population--whether that care is to wounded warriors, military kids with special needs, an aging parent of an active duty service member, or an active duty service member struggling with depression or another mental health issue
- unemployed or underemployed military spouses-- military spouse unemployment sits around 25% and is a top obstacle to the financial security and successful retirement or transition planning for military families
- concerning rates of behavioral health issues among military spouses, for example a recent study found that 12 percent of military spouses screen positive for major depression and 17 percent screened positive for generalized anxiety, much greater than the rates in the general US population of around 6.7% and 3.1% respectively

## Military Caregivers

Our 2015 survey found that 32 percent of military family members identified themselves as a caregiver. A caregiver can be someone caring for an aging parent, a child with special needs, and/or a wounded military service member. While we recognize that caregiving can be fulfilling, it can be stressful, particularly if the caregiver lacks formal training, as was the case for 75 percent of caregivers who responded to our survey. Another challenge is difficulty finding an alternate caregiver to take over when they are unable to take on their caregiver duties -- 27 percent of caregivers found it very difficult and another 27 percent found it somewhat difficult.

Military-connected caregivers perform a number of roles, including health and health care assistance, case management, psychological support, and legal/financial roles.

While care provided by military-connected caregivers promotes faster recovery for wounded warriors and helps save millions of dollars in health care costs, much of the cost-savings are absorbed by the caregivers' social, legal, and economic costs, as well as costs associated with the health problems that they report from being a caregiver.

Research indicates that the majority of caregivers have reported that their own health has worsened due to caregiving, with the problems related to sleep, stress, pain, depression, and weight changes.

A big problem associated with these consequences is that military-connected caregivers often have very little, if any, time to prepare to become a caregiver AND few widely accessible and comprehensive training programs exist to help them prepare.

### **Military Spouse Employment**

Many companies have created initiatives to hire veterans due to raised awareness about the employment and mental health challenges facing military personnel after their service. While we applaud these efforts, many fail to address the military family as a whole, often omitting military spouses, a major component of the military family.

Military spouse employment remains a top concern for active duty military spouses. Forty percent of respondents to our 2015 annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey identified military spouse employment as a top obstacle to their family's financial security. Only 45 percent of active duty military spouses responded that they were employed full or part-time and of those who were not employed, 58 percent would like to be.

Military lifestyle factors have greatest impact on military spouses' ability and preference to work. Seventy-five percent of active duty military spouses reported being a military spouse had a negative impact on their ability to pursue a career. The top three factors impacting military spouse employment included service member's job demands, frequent moves, and family obligations.

It is important to note that military families with employed spouses reported greater financial security, better mental health, and higher satisfaction with the military lifestyle. Findings indicate that unemployment not only affects the financial security of military families, but their health as well. Sixty-eight percent of respondents who were not employed experienced stress from their current personal financial situation. Forty-five percent of unemployed military spouses reported symptoms of depression and seven percent had thought seriously about committing suicide.

To address these military spouse employment needs, we need to prioritize military spouse employment and education initiatives. Increase coordinated efforts among the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to promote high-quality, portable or work-from-home positions for military spouses and expand veteran hiring and training initiatives to include military spouses.

Another solution would be to explore the possibility reducing permanent changes of station for service members and their families. Many of the challenges associated with spouse employment would be mitigated with less frequent moves.

Finally, the frequent moves and geographic separation from extended family members also makes the need for childcare especially acute within military families. Childcare is a major challenge for working spouses, those seeking work, and even spouses not in the labor market whose spouses, due to aspects of the military lifestyle like unpredictable work hours, frequent absences, and deployments, are often unable to equitably share in childcare responsibilities. Increasing access to affordable, flexible, and high quality childcare will remain a top challenge and presents a substantial opportunity to provide additional military family support.

### **Behavioral Health Issues**

The unique demands of military service result in exceptional issues and challenges for service members and their families. The top stressors for both active duty and their spouses included employment/work stress; deployments, financial and relocation issues. In addition, 52 percent of military spouses found isolation from family and friends to be a key stressor.

Mental health of our active military and veterans has been of national concern. It is also an issue for our military spouses with seven percent of active duty spouses indicating they had seriously thought about committing suicide during their time associated with the military. Though services are available to active military and their families, 17 percent of respondent did not use a program or benefit because they had concerns about confidentiality of treatment.

In addition, Eaton, et al found that military spouses have similar rates of mental health problems to the soldiers themselves and often display greater symptoms of depression and anxiety following separation from their spouse due to deployment.<sup>1</sup> Their study found that 12 percent of military spouses screen positive for major depression and 17 percent screened positive for generalized anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned previously, military spouse unemployment raises stress levels for military spouses and their service member. We also found that mental health was a factors with

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<sup>1</sup> Eaton, et al. Prevalence of Mental Health Problems, Treatment Need, and Barriers to Care among Primary Care-Seeking Spouses of Military Service Members Involved in Iraq and Afghanistan Deployments. *Military Medicine*. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Eaton, et al. Prevalence of Mental Health Problems, Treatment Need, and Barriers to Care among Primary Care-Seeking Spouses of Military Service Members Involved in Iraq and Afghanistan Deployments. *Military Medicine*. 2008.

caregivers. Forty-four percent of caregivers responded that they found caregiving somewhat stressful while 16 percent found it extremely stressful.

### **Conclusion**

Blue Star Families believes that military families are assets to both our national defense and local communities. They are central to the health and capability of the All-Volunteer Force and are good neighbors actively engaged in making their civilian communities great places to live. Service members may be employed by their respective services—but they work for all Americans. Thus the responsibility for supporting military families is certainly a duty of the Department of Defense; however, a healthy nation also shares in this responsibility.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

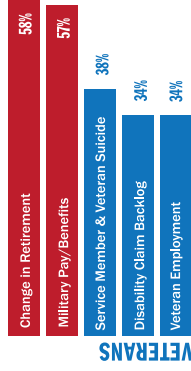
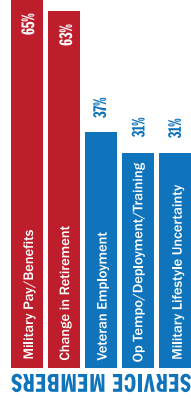
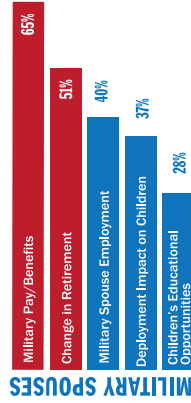


2015 MILITARY FAMILY LIFESTYLE SURVEY

TOP 5 ISSUES

RANKED AS MOST CONCERNING

- > MILITARY PAY AND RETIREMENT BENEFIT CHANGES ARE THE TOP TWO CONCERNS FOR ALL RESPONDENTS
- > SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT, MILITARY SUICIDE & VETERAN EMPLOYMENT ROUND OUT THE TOP 5 ISSUES OVERALL FROM ALL SURVEY RESPONDENTS



06,291 RESPONDENTS INCLUDING MILITARY SPOUSES SERVICE MEMBERS & VETERANS

MILITARY FAMILIES ARE ASSETS TO NATIONAL DEFENSE AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES. THEY ARE CENTRAL TO THE HEALTH AND CAPABILITY OF THE ALL-VOLUNTEER FORCE AND ARE GOOD ALL-VOLUNTEER FORCE AND ARE GOOD NEIGHBORS ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN MAKING THEIR CIVILIAN COMMUNITIES GREAT PLACES TO LIVE.

BLUE STAR FAMILIES ANNUAL MILITARY FAMILY LIFESTYLE SURVEY PROVIDES A COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANS TO SERVE AS A MILITARY FAMILY AND IS A BLUEPRINT FOR STRENGTHENING AMERICA BY SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES.



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SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT



TOP CHALLENGES TO EMPLOYMENT

- 52% Poor Job Market/Alignment
- 36% Service Member's Job/Work Obligations

45% have a full- or part-time job

58% are not working would like to be employed outside the home

75% reported being a military spouse had a negative impact on their ability to pursue a career

FINANCIAL READINESS



TOP 3 OBSTACLES TO FINANCIAL SECURITY

- 42% Uncertainty in Military Life
- 40% Spouse Employment
- 39% Benefits Uncertainty/Changes

14% of active duty do not regularly contribute to a retirement account

60% of post-9/11 Service members feel financially secure

78% are paying more than BAH for housing; 22% of those are paying \$400 or more

TRANSITION



described their overall transition from active duty to veteran as "difficult" or "very difficult"

28%

of veterans had some form of TAP & 57% agreed that it prepared them to successfully transition from active duty to civilian life

43%

feel the military has prepared me to be a leader in the civilian workplace and community

87%

feel pride from accomplishments during military service

97%

