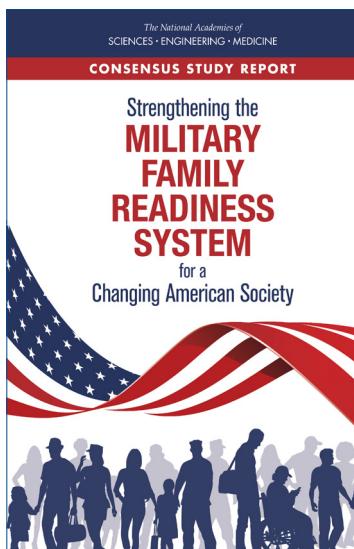




July 2019

Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society



Supporting the well-being of military families is foundational to ensuring the readiness of military personnel. In an effort to make sure its efforts to support military families are addressing their needs in a rapidly changing society, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) asked the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to study the challenges and opportunities facing military families and what is known about effective strategies for supporting the functioning and well-being of these families.

The National Academies' report, *Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society*, finds that the DoD and military service branches have many programs and policies to support the well-being of military families, but they need to employ a more coordinated and comprehensive approach to matching the needs of individual families to available programs. The report also concludes that due to the widespread changes in societal norms and family structures that have occurred in recent years, greater attention needs to be given to the diversity of family structures that exist today.

BETTER COORDINATION OF SERVICES NEEDED, ALONG WITH MORE DATA ON FAMILIES

The National Academies' study committee identified two particular areas in which DoD could strengthen its Military Family Readiness System (MFRS) to better serve military families and Service members.

DoD's MFRS would benefit from greater coordination. The wide array of social supports offered by the MFRS are provided at various levels within the military—the DoD level, the service branch level, and, in many cases, the installation or military base level. However, it is unclear to what extent the service providers at the various levels of the military are aware of one another or coordinate the provision of services with one another. While the current MFRS provides many valuable services for military families, it is siloed, resulting in a diffusion of labor and responsibility and, in some instances, fragmented service delivery. The system lacks a comprehensive, coordinated framework to support individual and population well-being, resilience, and readiness among military families. Addressing this weakness could improve the quality of services provided, encourage innovation, and support effective response capabilities.

More data are needed on the changing nature of military families. The diversity and complexity of families have increased in the United States over the last few decades, and these shifts have multiple implications for DoD. The DoD's existing data on military families are insufficient for understanding the degree to which societal shifts in family structure are reflected in the military community. Data are lacking on long-term nonmarital partners, parents, ex-spouses and ex-partners, and others who play a significant role in the care of military children and Service members. As a result, current military statistics may mislead policy makers and program managers, potentially resulting in some types of families being underserved by the MFRS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommends that the DoD enable military family support providers and consumers to access effective, evidence-based and evidence-informed programs, resources, and services to strengthen families. DoD should strengthen the MFRS so that it:

- provides a comprehensive, coordinated continuum of support across providers, locations, and changing benefit eligibility;
- facilitates adaptive and timely approaches to stepped-care delivery;
- draws upon effective evidence-based or evidence-informed approaches;
- integrates routine screening and assessment tools in the delivery of family support programs;
- builds and employs a robust data infrastructure, including both implementation and outcome data, that supports a continuous quality improvement system; and
- coordinates referrals and care across military and nonmilitary resources, institutions, and communities.

Additional steps DoD should take to improve its efforts to support family well-being include

- developing and implementing standardized, military-specific definitions of “family well-being,” “family readiness,” and “family resilience” in order to allow information for comparison across the military services, datasets, and studies;
- taking immediate steps to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity of today’s military families and their needs, well-being, and readiness to support Service members;
- reviewing its current policies, programs, services, resources, and practices for supporting military families—according to how Service members define families—to ensure that they recognize the wide diversity of today’s military families and address the special circumstances and transitions of military life (e.g., entering military service, moving to new duty stations, deploying);
- developing, adopting, and sustaining a dynamic learning system as part of its MFRS, so that its policies, programs, practices, and services are informed by a continuous quality improvement process;
- more fully identifying, analyzing, and integrating existing data to track child risk and adversity over time, while also ensuring the privacy of individual family member information;
- providing guidance for military leaders and service providers on how to readily and reliably access and utilize information about the surrounding civilian communities in which their personnel are located;
- building its capacity to support Service members and families by promoting better civilian understanding of the strengths and needs of military-connected individuals;
- investigating innovations in big data and predictive analytics to improve the accessibility, engagement, personalization, and effectiveness of policies, programs, practices, and services for military families; and
- continually assessing the availability and effectiveness of specialized family-centered policies, programs, services, resources, and practices to support the evolving and unexpected needs of families facing exceptionally high stressors.

In addition, to facilitate the continuation of policies across political administrations and changes of DoD leadership, the report recommends that the DoD update and promulgate its existing instruction that operationalizes the importance of military family well-being by incorporating the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report.

For More Information . . . This Consensus Study Report Policy Brief was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families based on the Consensus Study Report, *Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society* (2019). The study was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nas.edu/MilitaryFamilies>.

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