



2010 Military Family Lifestyle Survey

Executive Summary

Sharing the Pride of Service



Foreword

September 22, 2010

For nearly four years, I have had the honor of traveling around the world to visit our Troops and our military Families. I have seen firsthand that the past nine years of war have been *incredibly* difficult on our military. Our Service members are stretched and stressed. The parents, spouses and children of these Troops are *also* feeling the strain. Yet, they are amazingly resilient—coming together in support of each other in the face of repeated deployments.

But, they could not continue to sacrifice day-in and day-out were it not for the unwavering support of the American people, Congress, and partnership with organizations like Blue Star Families that afford us a voice through surveys like this one and those we will conduct in the future. As you will see from the details inside, our military Families face significant challenges—many of which are only beginning to manifest themselves and will become more apparent as dwell time increases and Families have more time to fully integrate.

I encourage you to read this report and use the data to help continue the drumbeat of support for our military. It is also important—as we discuss the findings—that we work together to identify the true nature of the problems burdening our military Families, and act with urgency to make improvements. As a support network that has the ability to effect change, we must continue to keep our finger on the pulse of our military Families so that we can stay out in front of the challenges they face.

Thank you Blue Star Families and your partnering organizations for conducting this survey which will not only help shape the discussion but serve as a road map for the way ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sheila L. Casey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sheila Casey

Blue Star Mother and Army Spouse

Overview

The men and women who serve in the military and their families are an integral part of our national security. Military families are doing their part every day to support the military personnel serving this country. They are on their own front lines at home, sustaining themselves and those preparing for or returning from deployment, and reintegrating after combat. These families are the backbone of a strong and able United States military. Therefore, we must listen carefully to them and address the concerns of the military families that play a central role in supporting U.S. forces and ensuring readiness for current and future national security needs.

In May 2010, Blue Star Families conducted an online survey of 3,634 military family members. Blue Star Families' 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey was designed to reveal key trends in military family relationships, family life and careers by examining, among other things, feelings of stress, and levels of communication and engagement. The following results will help educate military family members, the general public, policy makers, and other organizations about what modern day military families are experiencing as we approach nearly a decade of continuous war.

Through an extensive series of questions that examined many different aspects of military family life, the 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey demonstrates that, on the whole, military families are experiencing high levels of stress but are coping. And while many military families are beginning to feel more support from their civilian counterparts than a year ago, there is still more work to be done to support military families and to bridge the gap between the military and civilian communities. Of note, military families identified several key areas of concern, including the current operational tempo, the effect of deployments on children, children's education, spousal employment, and financial issues. Blue Star Families' 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey also revealed interesting trends in how military families support each other and stay connected to the military community and to their service members.

For this survey, Blue Star Families was honored to have its partner organizations assist us: the American Red Cross, the United Service Organizations (USO), the Armed Forces YMCA, Military.com and Military Spouse Magazine, Association of the United States Army (AUSA), Be The Change, the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), the Military Spouse Corporate Career Network (MSCCN), Military Officer's Association of America (MOAA), National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS), Operation Homefront, the Reserve Officers Association (ROA), National Military Family Association (NMFA), the Veterans Innovation Center, and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Additionally, dozens of websites, blogs, military family advocates, and organizations promoted the survey through their memberships and networks. The wide distribution of this survey through our partners and others in the military community greatly contributed to the high level of response, and helped this survey reach a thoroughly representative sample of military personnel and their families.

Demographics

The 3,634 respondents represent a diverse cross section of military family members from all branches of services, ranks, and regions, both within the United States and overseas military installations.

Survey respondents were asked to identify their primary relationship with the military based on the service member through whom they receive Department of Defense dependent benefits, if applicable. Almost half of the survey's respondents had more than one immediate family member affiliated with the military and seventy-three percent were spouses. Fourteen percent of the respondents were service members, six percent were parents, and four percent were children of service members.

More than eighty percent of the survey respondents were affiliated with active-duty military personnel, three percent were affiliated with the Reserve, another three percent with the Drilling Guard, Drilling Reserve or the Inactive Drilling Guard, and ten percent with retired military. Sixty-eight percent of respondents were affiliated with enlisted service personnel, and four percent of survey respondents reside in overseas military installations. Survey respondents

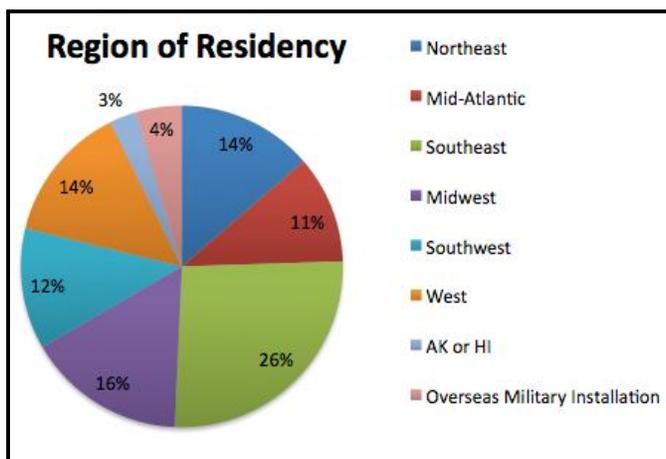
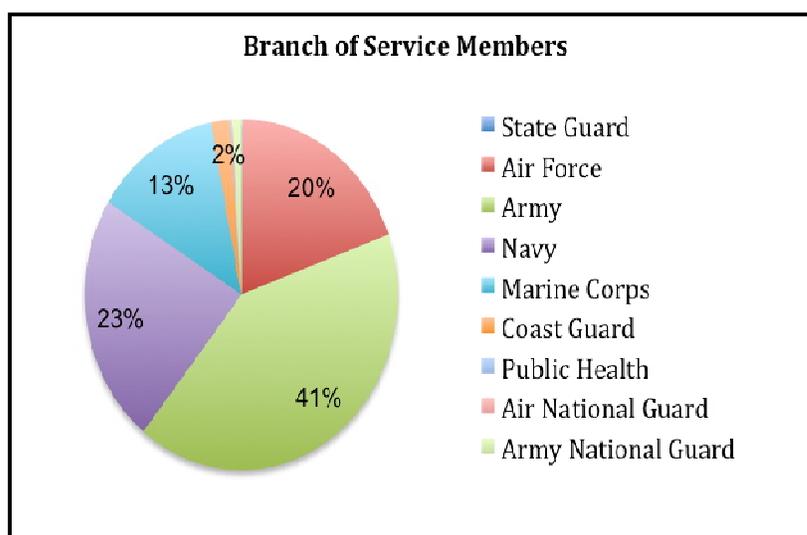
residing in the United States were fairly evenly distributed across the country.

Eighty-four percent of respondents were female, and sixty-seven percent of respondents had

minor children living at home with them.

Sixty-three percent of survey respondents were between the ages of 25 and 44.

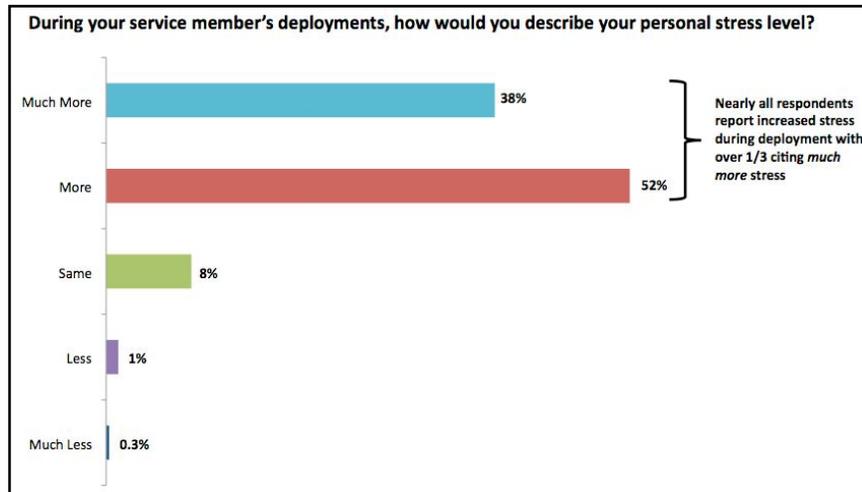
This demographic background sets the framework for the story of military families, a diverse group of individuals from all walks of life. Military families are drawn together by their commitment to service and the experiences they share of loving someone in the military.



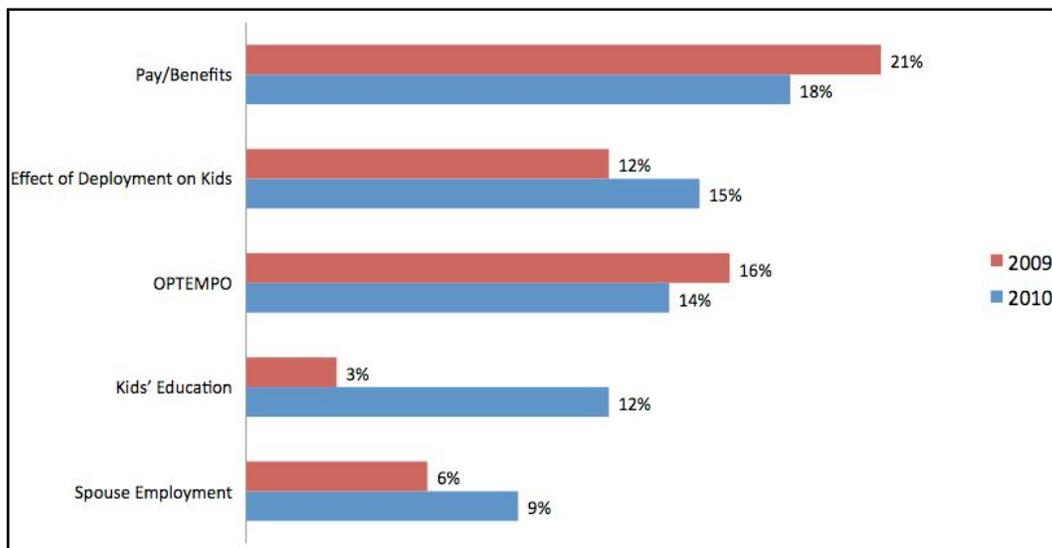
Major Survey Findings

After nearly a decade of war, it is understandable that military families are experiencing high levels of stress. In fact, nearly all respondents reported that their stress level increases during their service member's deployments.

But despite the fact that most feel more stress, nearly half indicate no problems with overall mental health. Even though deployment stress is widespread, reported mental health problems are limited.



The current operational tempo (OPTEMPO) was one of the top five issues facing military families today, according to respondents, following pay/benefits and the effects of deployments on children. The list rounds out with children's education and spouse employment.



As mentioned earlier, supporting military families is integral to our nation's military readiness and national security. And one of the promising findings of the survey is that military families are beginning to feel more support from the civilian community.

“The general public (i.e. civilians without close ties to the military) does not truly understand or appreciate the sacrifices made by service members and their families.”

In the 2009 survey, ninety-four percent of respondents either agreed completely or somewhat with the above statement. However, in the 2010 survey, though ninety-two percent of respondents said the same, there was a seven-point decline in respondents who agreed completely.

Since the 2009 survey was fielded, the challenges and sacrifices of military family life have receive wide spread attention, ranging from local community outreach to the federal government and the White House. The efforts of Congress and the White House, including First Lady Michelle Obama, to highlight the unique military family lifestyle and encourage the civilian community to reach out to families appears to have already had a measurable impact. This increased focus on military families and the resulting feeling of understanding from the civilian community is very encouraging.

Military families are keenly aware of the need for support, and often help each other and their local communities. Survey respondents demonstrated heavy participation in volunteerism and a reliance on online and social media for support and connection.

Highlighted Results

OPTEMPO

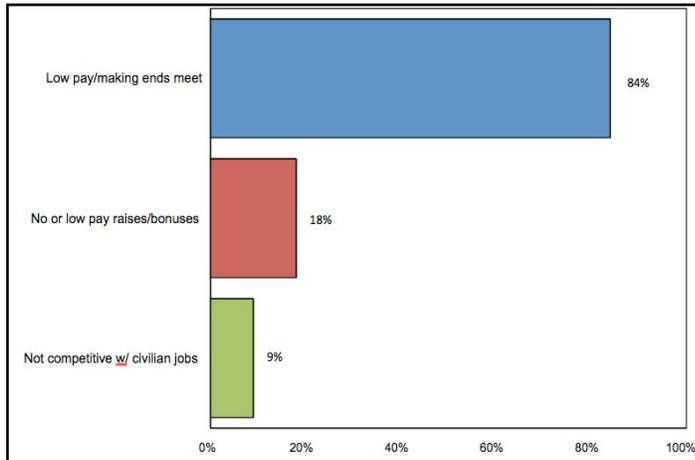
Twenty-six percent of respondents listed the OPTEMPO as one of their top three military life issues, and thirty-eight percent said that deployments are the most important issue facing military families today.

Of all the respondents who were spouses, eighty-two percent reported that their spouse had been deployed during their marriage. Since September 11, 2001, seventy-two percent reported that their spouse had been away from home for more than twenty-five months, with twenty-three percent saying their spouse had been away from home for more then forty-eight months.

Since 9/11, about how many months has your service member been...



Pay/Benefits



Forty-one percent of respondents listed pay/benefits as one of their top three military family life issues, with eighteen percent listing it as the number one issue.

Additionally, in response to open-ended questions later on in study, of respondents who mentioned pay/benefits, eighty-four percent said that they were having trouble making ends meets, or that they felt their service members' military pay was low.

Spouse Employment

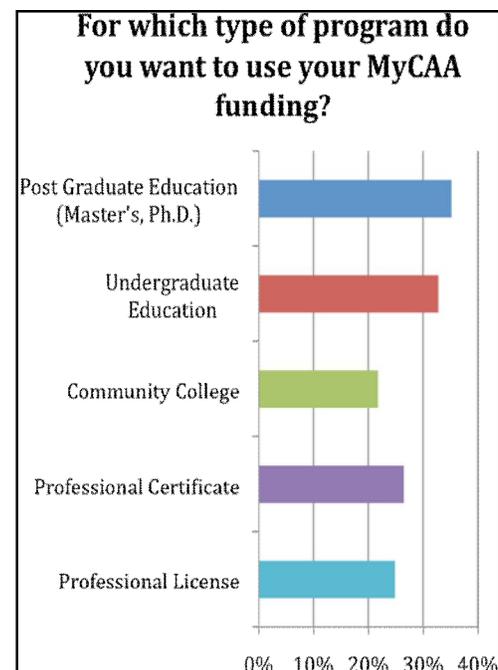
Forty-nine percent of spouses felt that being a military spouse had a negative impact on their ability to pursue a career, while only eight percent felt that it had had a positive impact. Military moves, including those overseas and to remote bases, have negatively impacted spouse careers according to almost fifty-three percent of respondents.

Of the sixty-one percent of spouses not employed outside the home, forty-eight percent wanted to be employed, and only twenty-six percent did not. Childcare challenges and timing of deployments/PCS were cited as the most popular reasons for not working.

Of those spouses whose careers have been negatively impacted by active-duty military activities, more than thirteen percent believe they have experienced some type of discrimination due to their status as a military spouse. Frequently this discrimination was experienced as an unwillingness to hire a military spouse due to potential employers' anticipating a military move. In contrast, spouses with successful careers or businesses have typically identified employers or business opportunities that enable 'virtual' work (often with employers who agreed to allow work from home and/or remote locations).

MyCAA

Fifty-five percent of respondents would like to use the program My Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) in the future. Among those spouses seeking to use MyCAA in the future, attending a community college was the least preferred choice. In contrast, more than



half (across all ranks) indicated a desire for help with bachelors or graduate degrees. However, on October 25, 2010, the new guidelines of the MyCAA program will limit spouses' degree programs to Associates Degrees along with professional licenses and certificates.

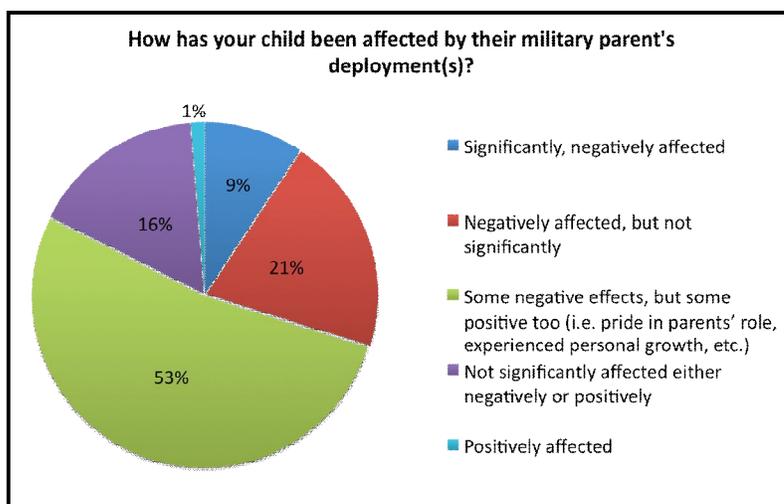
Military Children

Concerns about military children centered around two main issues – the effects of deployment and the effects of mobility on their educational progress.

Effects of Deployments on Children

Thirty-three percent of those that responded to the question, “Do you feel that you have the resources to deal with the impact of deployment on your children?” reported that they had sought counseling for themselves or at least one child to help deal with negative emotional impacts of deployment.

While military spouses feel that they are capable of caring for military children during deployment and the absence of the military parent, most still feel that more assistance and resources are needed to help children manage the stresses of a deployment.



Children's Education

Highlighted Quote

"The education system in all the states we have lived in or moved to...have different curriculum, which means my children miss out on some aspects of their education and sometimes they repeat things that were taught in one state the following year in a new state."

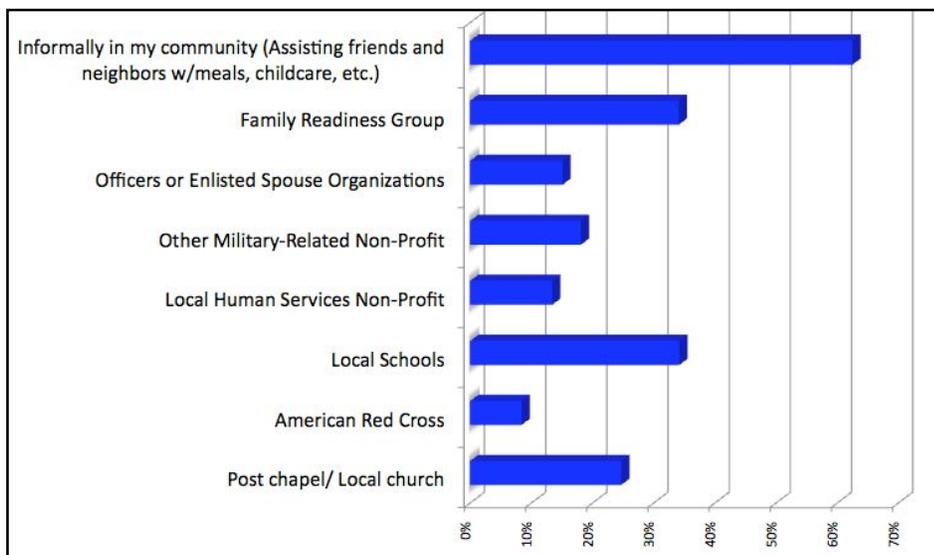
Twenty-six percent of respondents listed children's education as one of their top three concerns. Between frequent moves and service member time away from home, many parents worry about their children getting a good education. A full thirty-four percent are “least or not confident” that their children's school is responsive to the unique military family life.

Based on the survey, most spouses are confident that they can make decisions regarding their child's future, education and extracurricular school activities during the absence of a military parent, yet still seventy-one percent indicated that they would like more support for their children during a deployment.

Volunteerism

Military family members are connected to the bigger picture of community and giving. Survey participants report a sixty-eight percent volunteer rate in the past year. For comparison purposes, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service, their research indicated that in 2009 the national volunteer rate was just under twenty-seven percent, the highest since 2005.

68% of respondents had volunteered in the past year!



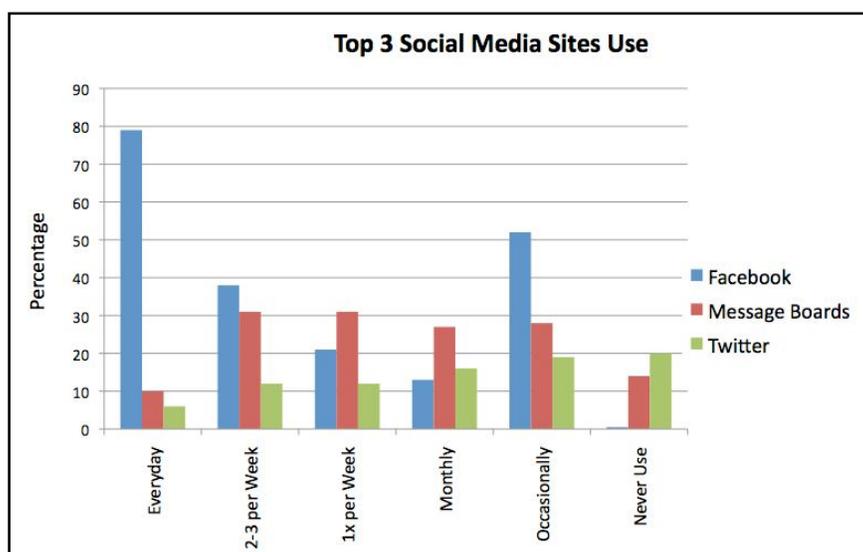
Of note, the majority of volunteerism was through informal efforts, such as assisting friends and neighbors with meals, childcare, or similar activities. This type of informal support is clearly an important area for military families, and one that the civilian community can easily participate in.

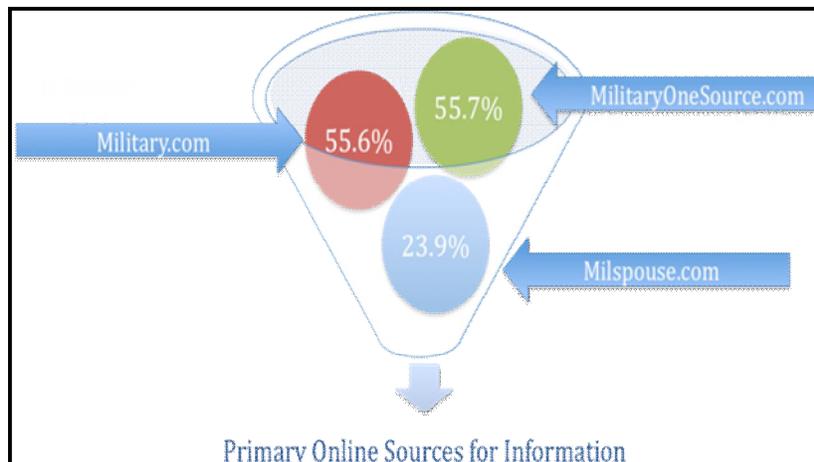
Additionally, although the majority of volunteers carve out under ten hours in any grouping in donating time, nine percent of the respondents who declared hours are putting in over thirty hours per month or the equivalent of a part-time job.

Social Media

As with the civilian community, social media use is prevalent throughout military families, with nearly ninety percent of respondents reporting some type of use. Of those who use social media, eighty-eight percent do so at least once a week.

Military families rely heavily on social and online media during deployments, with eighty-nine percent using email to communicate with their service member.





For news media, MilitaryOneSource.com, Military.com, and Military Spouse Magazine (Milspouse.com) are the top three preferred, regularly visited online information locations across all respondents. These three represent the primary online sites military family members go to for information about the military.

Conclusion

Military service penetrates what is generally considered the private sphere of family to an extent unmatched by civilian employment. Both the military and the family have been described as “greedy institutions” and there is an emerging area of research dedicated to uncovering the intersection of these two predominant influences in the lives of our service members.

Understandably, concern about family issues has become increasingly central for the Department of Defense and our civilian leadership as a result of the increased reliance on the military since September 11, 2001. This reliance necessitates new approaches to maintain and increase the appeal of military service to current and new service members, as well as their families, in order to help sustain our military readiness.

While military families have the same life experiences common to many families, including balancing work and family, parenting issues (including childcare and education concerns), and maintaining healthy relationships, they also have unique stressors relating to the requirements of their service member’s employment. Many factors of military family life, including frequent separation and the subsequent reintegration process and increased frequency of relocation, produce stressors that need to be addressed in order to maintain satisfaction within both the military and family environments.

Though there are continuous efforts being made to streamline and transform military family support and readiness programs to promote more effective coordination and implementation, there are still gaps that need to be addressed. Because dynamics continue to change, there will always be a need for a continual process of education and preparedness. We are all charged with maintaining a focus on preparing our military families and equipping them with the best knowledge and skills we can to assure their success.

We hope this report prompts more dialogue about the experiences of military families during this increased operational tempo for our nation’s service members, and by extension, their families. We need policies that adapt to the changing needs of our military families and a

strengthening of the networks, both military and civilian, which support them in order to make the military lifestyle not only sustainable, but also desirable.

The full survey results will be available on Blue Star Families' website (www.bluestarfam.org) in October, 2010.

Additional qualitative information from the survey is available upon request.

Comments or Inquiries may be directed to Blue Star Families Director of Research and Policy:

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