



**Military Family  
Advisory Network**

**STATEMENT**

**Quality of Life Panel  
MSO Roundtable**

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**House Armed Services Committee  
July 26, 2023**



The Honorable Don Bacon  
2104 Rayburn HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

July 26, 2023

The Honorable Chrissy Houlahan  
1727 Longworth HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

Chairman Bacon, Ranking Member Houlahan, and distinguished members of the Panel:

The Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) is a national nonprofit with a mission to understand and amplify the needs of military-connected families and inspire data-informed change. Over the last 10 years, MFAN has invested countless hours into listening to the families we serve, whether it is through our peer-led advisory board or the scientific research we conduct. The experiences of military families and the data we collect drive our strategic efforts, our evaluation of the impact we have on the lives we touch, and—like with privatized military housing in 2019 or food insecurity more recently—allow MFAN to set the agenda.

We applaud the House Armed Services Committee for developing the Quality of Life Panel and are honored to be the voice of so many military families.

As we honor the 50th anniversary of the all-volunteer force, we celebrate the fact that every Soldier, Marine, Sailor, Airman, Guardian, Coast Guardsman, and National Guard and Reserves member in the military today is a volunteer, which has produced the finest fighting force in the world. We also pay great respect to the families who serve beside them. Military service provides immense opportunities for all who serve and is also a microcosm of our broader population. And while many thrive, unfortunately, some struggle. MFAN is committed to bringing the experiences—positive and negative—of all families forward and working collaboratively to support those in need.

Based on the initial focus areas of the panel, MFAN offers the following macro and micro recommendations for consideration.

## OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. **Strengthen public-private partnerships**

With nearly three-quarters of military families living outside the gate, there is a greater need for engaging the community and private organizations in the holistic support of military families. The well-being of service members and their loved ones is not simply a military issue, it's an American issue. To truly understand and effectively respond to the health and well-being needs of actively serving military families requires a concerted effort that spans public, private, and nonprofit entities. We must bridge the military-civilian divide and welcome diverse perspectives into the strategy to enhance military family quality of life while also introducing civilians to the value of military service.

### 2. **Expand third-party evaluation of current quality-of-life programs**

The Department of Defense (DoD) has launched multiple review boards, including the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC), which released a comprehensive report earlier this year. MFAN recommends a similar approach to evaluating well-being programs. An impartial evaluator not only strengthens accountability and oversight but identifies avenues to improve existing programs, removes political leanings and biases, and promotes future sustainability. Ultimately, an independent evaluation would achieve optimal outcomes for military families by ensuring the design and implementation of quality-of-life policies and programs reach their intended recipients.

### 3. **Identify ways to tie family support in critical areas to performance evaluation**

With the end goal of offering a more tailored connection between military families and the support services they require, those tasked with implementing and administering these programs should be evaluated against the delivery of services around child care, spouse support, etc. Standardizing performance evaluation across involved parties would streamline efforts, increase transparency, and promote interagency collaboration.

## TOPIC-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

### CHILD CARE

Access to child care is a persisting issue across the nation. While our country works to right-size care for all Americans, we also recommend ensuring care aligns with family needs. According to MFAN data, military families are looking for better access to drop-in care, before- and after-school. Nearly half (46.5%) of MFAN's actively serving family respondents reported missing a healthcare appointment due to lack of child care.<sup>1</sup>

Recommendation: Knowing that a recent move creates a moment of acute vulnerability for military families, help create peace of mind by allowing families to sign up for Child Development Centers before moving and explore nationwide efforts to support school enrollment waivers so that military families can enroll their children in schools before obtaining a physical address.

### SPOUSE SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Over the last decade, significant investments have been made to curb military spouse unemployment, but the data has remained consistent at approximately 21 percent unemployed.<sup>2</sup>

Like their civilian counterparts, military families increasingly look to rely upon dual incomes. However, the military lifestyle can make that goal difficult to achieve and maintain. On average, military families move every two and a half years, resulting in spouses struggling to find options for work that are portable or allow them to build a sustainable long-term career. Spouse under- and unemployment can also create second- and third-order effects, like leading families to the point of food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

Military spouses make significant sacrifices in support of military service. In recent years, there has been substantial discussion regarding the volunteer roles that military spouses are expected to assume. These roles, in many cases, are mission-critical and have a direct tie to readiness. These responsibilities also require time which can detract from working hours.

Recommendation: A full review of these roles and a study to quantify the value of the vital volunteer efforts military spouses provide.

Additionally, the recent Executive Order to Strengthen Economic Opportunity for Military and Veteran Spouses, Caregivers, and Survivors signed by the President lays the groundwork to expand employment opportunities and career stability in the federal sector. But more can be done to ensure that the federal government is an employer of choice for military families.

Recommendation: Strengthen federal employment opportunities and support for military spouses, including through increasing authorities for remote work, administrative leave, and other flexibilities to ensure career stability for military spouse federal employees.

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<sup>1</sup> Military Family Advisory Network, 2022. 2021 Military Family Support Programming Survey.

<https://www.mfan.org/research-reports/2021-military-family-support-programming-survey-results-2/>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defense, 2023. 2021 Active Duty Spouse Survey.

<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Presentations/2021-active-duty-spouse-overview-briefing.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Military Family Advisory Network, 2022. Causal Factors of Military and Veteran Food Insecurity.

<https://www.mfan.org/research-reports/causal-factors-of-military-and-veteran-family-food-insecurity/>

## **COMPENSATION**

According to MFAN research, 22.4 percent of currently serving military families had less than \$500 in emergency savings.<sup>4</sup> It has become clear that while many are thriving, some families are living on the brink of a financial emergency. Military compensation must be reviewed holistically: it is not just about comparable careers and level of education, nuances of frequent moves and military spouse unemployment must be factored in.

Recommendation: Proactively engage military service organizations in the Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC). Often, families feel more comfortable sharing their candid experiences with outside parties. By engaging external stakeholders, the QRMC can be more inclusive and impactful.

## **HOUSING**

Per MFAN's 2021 Military Family Support Programming Survey, 44.9 percent of currently serving families are experiencing a severe housing cost burden, meaning that they spend more than 50 percent of their combined household income on housing expenses.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) first reported in 2018 that DoD's mechanism for setting Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) rates was flawed.<sup>6</sup> We are pleased that DoD is reviewing its formula for BAH calculation and look forward to seeing the results.

Recommendation: A full restoration of the BAH. Military families are spending beyond DoD's intended 95 percent of their housing and utility expenses. While DoD does have the authority to unilaterally restore BAH to the full 100 percent, the required funding must be appropriated.

## **ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE**

Military family health care would be greatly improved by increasing the availability of health care appointments. MFAN research suggests that this would, in turn, improve both provider accessibility and possibly reduce wait times.

Access to mental health care, in particular, has plateaued over the years. In MFAN's 2021 survey, respondents were least satisfied with their ability to access mental health care appointments, the same top complaint in each survey conducted since 2017.<sup>7</sup>

Addressing this issue requires a close look at the reimbursement rates to ensure that community-based providers are appropriately compensated for their time, in a way that is commensurate with the civilian community. This will be critical, especially as Military Treatment Facilities evaluate where and how they provide care for the full family.

Recommendation: Conduct a holistic review of capacity around community health care providers. We also encourage DoD to work with high-quality, evidence-based providers like Cohen Clinics and Home Base to provide support for military family members when and where appropriate care does not exist.

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<sup>4</sup> Military Family Advisory Network, 2022. 2021 Military Family Support Programming Survey.

<https://www.mfan.org/research-reports/2021-military-family-support-programming-survey-results-2/>

<sup>5</sup> Military Family Advisory Network, 2022. 2021 Military Family Support Programming Survey.

<https://www.mfan.org/research-reports/2021-military-family-support-programming-survey-results-2/>

<sup>6</sup> Government Accountability Office, 2018. Military Housing Privatization: DOD Should Take Steps to Improve Monitoring, Reporting, and Risk Assessment. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-218>

<sup>7</sup> Military Family Advisory Network, 2022. 2021 Military Family Support Programming Survey.

<https://www.mfan.org/research-reports/2021-military-family-support-programming-survey-results-2/>

## CONCLUSION

Over the next year, MFAN will continue to study these areas through our Military Family Support Programming Survey. Additionally, thanks to the support of partners who are invested in this community like Oracle, Tyson Foods, Wells Fargo, CVS Health, and Wounded Warrior Project, our organization will deploy a cohesive, responsive program that ensures families have the support they need—delivered with dignity—and meets families where they are. We believe in not just identifying challenges but also offering solutions.

Progress has been made through DoD's Taking Care of Our People initiative. This panel has the opportunity to strengthen existing efforts and ensure appropriate benefits, programs, and services are allocated where the need is greatest. MFAN stands ready to inform the group so that efforts can be guided by data and lived experiences, and critically evaluated so that precious resources are used effectively.

On behalf of the thousands of service members, veterans, and families we serve, MFAN expresses our gratitude to each of the Committee members for their leadership and proactivity. We look forward to expanding upon our shared commitment to supporting the well-being of those in uniformed service and the family members who are the force behind the Force.

Yours in service,



Shannon Rzasadin  
President & Executive Director

### CC:

Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL), Chairman, House Armed Services Committee  
Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA), Ranking Member, House Armed Services Committee  
Rep. Jim Banks (R-IN), Chairman, Military Personnel Subcommittee  
Rep. Andy Kim (D-NJ), Ranking Member, Military Personnel Subcommittee

### Quality of Life Panel Members:

Rep. Mark Alford (R-MO)  
Rep. Don Davis (D-NC)  
Rep. Veronica Escobar (D-TX)  
Rep. Sara Jacobs (D-CA)  
Rep. Jen Kiggans (R-VA)  
Rep. Morgan Luttrell (R-TX)  
Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC)  
Rep. James Moylan (R-GU)  
Rep. Marilyn Strickland (D-WA)