

PRIPRAVLJENOST VOJAŠKIH DRUŽIN: PODPORN VLOGA VOJAŠKE SKUPNOSTI PRI KREPITVI ODPORNOSTI DRUŽIN IN NJIHOVE DOBROBITI

MILITARY FAMILY READINESS: THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING FAMILIAL RESILIENCE AND INCREASING FAMILY WELL-BEING THROUGH MILITARY COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES

Povzetek Zveza Nato zajema različno večnacionalno okolje in najrazličnejše sisteme socialne podpore, saj večina družin nima na voljo infrastrukturne podpore, ki so je vajene. Družinam ob napotitvi v Natovo bazo prilagajanje na vojaško življenje, raznovrstnost kultur in jezik države gostiteljice zato pomeni izziv. Podpora in storitve vojaške skupnosti so lahko za vojaške družine še posebno koristne, saj je med napotitvami, ločenim življenjem in selitvami potreba po taki podpori večja. Namen prispevka je pripraviti pregled literature in poudariti pomen podpore skupnosti, storitev ter državnih programov, ki spodbujajo odpornost družine med življenjem v tujini, in kako se lahko ti zaščitni ukrepi uporabljajo za vse družine oboroženih sil.

Ključne besede *Odpornost, dobrobit, vojaška družina, podpora skupnosti, centri za podporo družinam, podporni programi in storitve.*

Abstract NATO encompasses a diverse multinational environment and wide-ranging social support systems as most families do not have the normal infrastructure support they are used to. Assignment to a NATO base presents a challenge as families navigate military life, a diverse culture and language of the host nation. Military community support and services may be particularly beneficial for military families due to the increased need of such support during deployments, separations, and relocations. The goal of this article is to review the existing literature and highlight the importance of community support, services, and state programs that foster family resilience while stationed overseas; and how these protective measures may be applied to all the families of the armed forces.

Key words *Resilience, well-being, military family, community support, family support center, support services and programs.*

Introduction

Military families certainly play an important part in service members' mission readiness. Indeed, family readiness translates to mission readiness, as the well-being of families heavily influences the well-being of service members. Numerous studies have shown the demanding and challenging lifestyle the military imposes on members and their families (Burrell et al. 2006; Chandra et al. 2009, 2010; Chartrand 2008). Several studies also posit the importance of a vast support system to bolster resilience, well-being, and the readiness of service members' families, and thus the operational readiness of military activities (Chandra et al. 2010; Lester & Flake 2013; Segal, Lane & Fisher 2015). Despite vast research on the well-being of military families, little is known about the specific challenges that families endure while stationed overseas. Further, while there are well-documented studies and research that address the importance of social support for military family resilience and well-being, some do not reflect the current conditions of families living in a multinational environment or social democratic welfare regimes. Being assigned to a NATO base not only brings a host of challenges, but also highlights the importance of community support services and programs on the resilience and well-being of military families.

Military leadership and family support agencies in many overseas locations have proposed and, to some extent, developed measures to increase and widen military families' access to support services and programs. The measures implemented include streamlining the process for obtaining referrals from a military health provider, ensuring that patients see a healthcare provider in a timely manner. Time and access are critical factors with respect to mental health care, especially when dealing with military spouses and children in their host country. In addition, initiatives such as spouses' and youth sponsorship programs aimed at providing ongoing support once families have arrived and settled are vital in ensuring families adjust well in their host country of residence. These would be important steps in increasing access to services and broadening support programs for military spouses and children. According to Hayes (2014), adjusting well to overseas assignments depends largely on support programs that enhance military families' cultural knowledge of their host country. Spouses' and youth sponsorship programs that focus on supporting, preparing, and most importantly educating families to become knowledgeable community members are likely to help families adjust well in their environment. It is important to note, however, that collaborative efforts between host countries' healthcare providers, local citizens and the military must be amicable to ensure success, as well as to enhance community relations. One such measure that can be taken to ease and ensure access to community partners is the establishment of Letters of Agreement (LOA). LOAs are a formal means of implementing mutually agreed upon professional partnerships between the host nation and the military. By creating a formal partnership, service members and their families can better integrate with their host nation community and are ensured access to community support.

1 UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF MILITARY LIFE

Military families face unique challenges that are unfamiliar to many civilian families. Perhaps the most notable stressors many military families endure are lengthy and repeated separations, disruptions to family schedules and routines, and uncertainty about the deployed service member's well-being. These stressors not only affect family functioning but also influence the at-home spouses' and children's psychosocial well-being (Burrell et al. 2006; Chartrand 2008; Lester & Flake 2013; Segal, Lane & Fisher 2015). One study found that during high deployment operations tempo, marital satisfaction in military couples significantly declined (Riviere et al. 2012), suggesting that constant and lengthy deployments may have put further strain on their relationships. At-home spouses carry all the household and child-rearing responsibilities when their husbands or wives are deployed, and the stress associated with these added responsibilities spills over into their marriage. In addition, many civilian spouses express increased difficulty in maintaining personal and emotional connections with their deployed spouses after being separated for months, and frustrations about the length of deployment spill over into their phone conversations (Henderson 2006; Meek et al. 2016). As a result, many of these spouses, both civilians and service members, become unhappy and dissatisfied with their marriages.

Other studies show that the impact of separations due to deployment is negatively related to at-home spouses' psychological and physical well-being (Burrell et al. 2006; Lester & Flake 2013; Segal, Lane & Fisher 2015). In addition, Burrell et al. (2006) posit that periodic separations adversely affect marital satisfaction in families stationed abroad. These separations, whether recurring, periodic, or lengthy, are stressful enough for at-home spouses, who must adjust familial roles and responsibilities, but can be stressful even for children, who must also adjust to parental absence. Military children with a deployed parent are more likely to experience increased psychosocial difficulties (Cederbaum et al. 2014; Chandra et al. 2010). In addition, these children are more likely to display higher levels of behavioral problems and exhibit increased symptomatic expressions of emotional or interpersonal maladjustments at school (Richardson et al. 2011). According to Lester et al. (2010), children can experience these psychosocial outcomes even during peacetime missions, as they adjust to parental absence and thus negotiate their changing household roles and responsibilities.

The deployment of a service member represents a challenge for both the deployed and the at-home parent. For the deployed parent, keeping up regular or frequent communications with families back home, especially with their children, can be a challenge due to mission requirements and operations tempo. For instance, some deployed parents may have difficulties staying connected with their family because of the deployment location, where any contact would compromise their safety (Petty 2009). As a result, some children may disengage and become less enthused as time goes on, with limited interaction or response from the deployed parent (Houston et al. 2013; Petty 2009). The at-home parent, therefore, plays a significant role in ensuring

that the deployed parent stays connected with the children. However, although service members and their families experience additional stressors uncommon in civilian families, such as recurring and periodic separations due to deployments, uncertainty of service members' well-being while deployed, and changing familial roles and responsibilities due to service member absence, military families are still resilient and can adjust well to military life.

2 THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Enhanced familial well-being and resilience to stress may be influenced by a host of factors. One significant factor that bolsters familial well-being and influences resilience in military families is community support services and programs. One study of a civilian population showed that community support plays a significant factor in buffering the manifestation of psychosocial problems in children (Wills & Shinar 2000). For instance, military support organizations, such as the U.S. Air Force's Airman and Family Readiness Center¹, provide outstanding core military support services to service members and their families stationed both stateside and overseas. The focus is to build and sustain mental, social, physical, and spiritual resilience for both the individual service member and their family. These services are available to service members at U.S. Air Force military installations within the continental United States and also abroad. The U.S. Armed Forces is determined, through programs and services, to do whatever it takes to ensure that service members and their families become some of the most resilient families. According to Conforte et al (2017), perceived military community support was linked to fewer child and parent psychosocial symptoms. In other words, the presence and thus availability of military community support, whether participation occurs or not, enhances child and parent psychosocial functioning. Simply knowing that military support and services are available and accessible gives families a sense of ease and comfort from the stresses of military life. These support services and programs are vital in the adjustment and thus success of military family functioning; they provide a variety of family programs designed to address the needs of families.

Technology, resources, and collaborative efforts from the host community also aid in the development and maintenance of programs and services offered to military families. The first service program most families utilize when changing their duty station is the Relocation Assistance Program. The impetus of the program is to ease the personal and family stressors associated with relocation by helping families throughout all phases of the moving process. In addition, service members are paired with a fellow military sponsor currently assigned to the base to help them with in-processing the installation and navigating their new host community. Family support centers also host Newcomer's Orientations that welcome the entire family, wherein

¹ *Airman and Family Readiness Centers is a U.S. Air Force organization that provides programs and services in 15 core areas of family life to nearly 1.7 million air personnel and their families around the globe.*

detailed information about arrival procedures, housing, healthcare, child care, spouse employment, education, volunteer opportunities, moving with a family member with special needs, and other critical base information are disseminated. Programs and services in these situations support and foster the development of social networks, which increase families' resilience.

Another significant service and program provided by family support centers is Deployment Assistance. This program provides support services to assist service members, civilians, and their families to meet the challenges and stresses associated with all the stages of the deployment cycle. Service delivery of these deployment-related programs is aimed to provide service members and their families with the necessary tools and resources they need to help cope with mission demands and family responsibilities. Borah and Fina (2017) suggest that resources and social support connections that have an understanding of the nuances of military cultural experience are provided with a unique perspective in helping military families. This is an important factor in helping reduce the stress of the military life-cycle. In other words, service providers with specialization in military families not only assist in strengthening unit cohesion, enhancing morale, and bolstering familial resilience, but also support operational and family readiness, which are integral to the military life-cycle. Successes are measured by levels of retention, early-return-of-dependents (ERDs) for those stationed overseas, and overall well-being for both the service member and their family. Additionally, the well-being of the service member is measured during periodic feedback sessions with their supervisors. Overall familial well-being is also assessed by the service member's First Sergeant and unit Key Spouses. These positions/roles provide necessary familial support while the service member is deployed or abroad on training by staying engaged with the at-home spouse and children.

While most programs and services may appear to appeal only to families with problems, they are first and foremost designed for the prevention of problems. For instance, programs such as Personal and Work Life are designed to increase effectiveness in daily living, promote the individual's potential, and to impart coping skills for managing major life stressors, resulting in an enhanced quality of life and resilience for service members and their families. Community support services and programs aimed at addressing issues such as interpersonal communication, relationship enhancement, positive parenting, and time management not only support family functioning but may also improve the overall well-being of service members and their families. Offering support to families dealing with long-distance familial interactions due to deployments or other military-related separations may strengthen their relationship, as couples learn communication and relationship-building skills. These educational activities are offered in group and individual settings, and are often collaborated with mental health professionals, military family life counselors, social workers, and other helping agents. Targeted intervention and prevention modalities aimed at assisting families to reduce parental stress and increase marital quality and satisfaction may facilitate the healthy development of all children, which in

turn enhances familial well-being and resilience. To start service members and their families on the right path, many of these preventative programs are mandatory at their first duty station. Boberiene and Hornback (2014) suggest that policies which bolster family and community social support programs aimed at reducing parenting stress and improving family relationships can have a propitious effect on the well-being of children. In addition, conducting community assessments, devising customized action plans, offering skills development, and providing referrals to agencies both on- and off-base not only widens the accessibility of resources, but also broadens the options that are suitable for the specific needs of service members and their families.

Another important service program aimed at enhancing relationships is PREP (Prevention and Relationship Education Program), which utilizes a cognitive-behavioral marital therapeutic modality and communication-oriented relational enhancement technique geared toward helping couples maintain high levels of functioning and preventing marital problems from developing. This evidence-based and theory-driven program may facilitate effective marital functioning, such as enhanced communication, improved problem-solving skills, and emboldened positive connections and expectations. Married couples under stress, in general, tend to see their relationships more negatively (Karney, Story & Bradbury 2005), and the quality of their interpersonal connections tends to suffer more (Burrell et al. 2006) than couples whose marriages are relatively free of stress. Couples who had a greater chance of adjusting well to separations and were more likely to stay together, were couples who felt a strong sense of commitment and were highly satisfied with their marriage prior to the deployment (Rosen et al. 1995). Therefore, community support programs aimed at relationship enhancement may have propitious effects on the marital well-being of military marriages. Community support services and programs should be readily available and accessible to military couples not only pre- or post-deployment but also throughout the military life-cycle. Ensuring that these support programs are not only readily available but also accessible in a timely manner is a key factor in marital well-being.

3 RESILIENCE AND WELL-BEING IN FAMILIES STATIONED OVERSEAS

Despite some adverse effects of deployment on the well-being of military families, the psychological and physical well-being of at-home spouses, and the relational health of military marriages (Burrell et al. 2006) after the service member returned home, military families, on average, prevail over the hardships and resume to pre-deployment functioning (Meadows & Karney 2016). In other words, most families who experience deployment demonstrate a sense of resilience and can overcome the stresses endured during separations. Another mitigating factor that separates couples with experience of deploying multiple times from those who are experiencing their first deployment is having the knowledge of what to expect. In the same way, mothers experiencing their second pregnancy and child rearing benefit from the knowledge they have gained from already having had their first child. While not all military families fare similarly in regard to the effects of deployment, those who adapt well

to deployment may possess specific personal attributes, skills, and competencies, including access to resources that characterize families to be more resilient.

Hayes (2014) posits that support programs, which enhances military families' cultural knowledge of their host country, helps families adjust and adapt to their environment, which in turn bolsters their resilience. Such programs are mandatory for service members who are deploying; however, military families can also benefit from these classes to help build resilience and understanding during separation. In addition, the availability and accessibility of childcare off-base, such as those provided in social welfare state programs in many European countries, may also help families acculturate and adjust to the climate of their host country. The cross-cultural interaction of military children with local children may positively enhance their experience of living overseas. To help ensure that military children integrate with local children, policies and directives, such as Letters of Agreement, should be established with the surrounding community. To further enhance community relations, local support facilities should also become familiar with the unique factors that affect military families. Military families with a strong sense of community and military support (Conforte et al. 2017; Hayes 2014), especially from their host country, are likely to adjust well to military life and enhance family functioning.

The most common characteristics of the community support services and programs mentioned above are their preventive nature and emphasis on self-determination, to include mental, social, spiritual, and physical resilience. Military families stationed overseas, especially those assigned to a multinational base or geographically separated units, and at times isolated units, do not have the typical infrastructure support associated with larger U.S. bases around the globe or stateside installations. Military community support services and programs such as those described above, including those presented in social welfare state programs in many European countries, may provide a protective barrier to the adverse effects deployments impose on military life. Communities with a strong support for and greater understanding of military culture may help to mitigate the stress of military life (Conforte et al. 2017), especially for those living abroad. In addition, the tight-knit social network that develops from families experiencing similar issues, such as overseas residency and periodic and, at times, lengthy separations, mitigates the stress endured under the demands of military life. Expanding this military social network into the surrounding community can also have the same positive influence. Through collaborative community initiatives, established by the already present military support services, military families can increase resilience through community involvement, off-base school programs and taking advantage of off-base support systems. Wang et al. (2015) suggests that positive social support is correlated with an increased sense of community among military spouses, which in turn leads to elevated feelings of psychological well-being. It is important to assess not only the well-being of the at-home spouse but also their social support network because of the crucial role at-home spouses play as the conduit between the deployed service member and their child.

Personal and Work Life Programs, such as the non-medical counseling provided by military family life counselors, which are offered at family support centers, may impart protective barriers and preventative measures that may also mitigate the challenges and difficulties associated with military life. Addressing life skill issues and providing educational activities that deal with topics such as conflict resolution, problem-solving and emotion-based coping skills and strategies, relationship/marriage enrichment, parent-child relational enhancement including deployment stress, reintegration, relocation adjustment, and separation may help empower each member of the family, thus leading to enhanced familial well-being and resilience. These psycho-educational programs are particularly beneficial for families stationed overseas because of the limited access to the typical support structure associated with stateside bases and larger U.S. installations. Literature on military families also suggests that parents, both at-home and deployed, who maintain and increase their expressions of love not only help their children cope with difficult situations but can improve their children's well-being (Cozza et al. 2018; Hall 2008; Sogomonyan & Cooper 2010). Cozza et al. (2018) states that healthy interpersonal connections develop when children's parents and other caregivers are caring, reliable, and present in their lives.

According to Flake et al. (2009), the community environment in which the military child is immersed, significantly affects his or her psychosocial functioning. Community support, beyond or within the military context, may help mitigate some of the stresses endured from having a parent deployed. The ability to recognize and provide proper support and assistance will not only alleviate the stresses endured due to separation, but will also provide early warning signs of the onset of negative child well-being outcomes. It is therefore vital that youth mental health care and support are part of military community services and programs. The social support systems framework can be propitious in terms of strengthening military families' informal network of support, which can enhance family functioning and increase resilience. Successes are assessed based on the level of early-return-of-dependents (ERDs) for those stationed abroad, the rate of retention, and the overall well-being of both the service member and their family. Additionally, child well-being can be assessed through parent-teacher interaction, allowing the at-home spouse to understand how their child or children are faring and coping when away from home.

Conclusion The current sociopolitical climate and the increasing demands of military life have intensified the burden and stress imposed on many military families. As the stresses of military life weigh heavily on the lives of service members, their children, and families, it is vital that their sacrifices are recognized and their needs are addressed and supported. Military children and families play an important role in service members' mission readiness. Indeed, family readiness translates to mission readiness, as the well-being of service members is tightly linked to the well-being of their families. As much as service members sacrifice their lives and patriotically serve their country, their children and families serve too and sacrifice much of their lives.

Mitigating the effects of deployment and sustaining a viable military force are indeed some of the most common issues that confront military leaders today. Nevertheless, it is important that policy and program development should be less about problem-centered labeling and more about promoting and supporting communities' and families' resilience during separations, whether recurring, periodic, or lengthy. Particular attention needs to be given to sustaining healthy marital and familial relationships within all aspects of the deployment cycle, as well as promoting familial resilience. Future endeavors of program services, community support, and policy development should focus on preventive measures and psycho-educational resources that military families can use to cope with challenges and manage symptoms before the onset of negative child and familial well-being outcomes. A host of collaborative community-based support resources and services could lessen and mitigate stress before it progresses into serious mental health issues.

Efforts to promote, support, and develop family resilience during separations are vital in fostering enhanced familial well-being and facilitating healthy outcomes. Military personnel should collaborate with community leaders to implement programs and services that help to identify early signs of negative psychosocial behavioral outcomes in children, at-home caregivers (spouses), and non-family member caregivers. Establishing long-term community-led support programs will only enhance familial well-being, bolster resilience and build upon host-nation partnerships. Targeting the onset of the psychosocial behavioral and emotional distress before they escalate into serious mental health issues is paramount in mitigating problems and supporting enhanced family functioning. Similarly, periodic assessments and evaluations must be made to ensure the effectiveness of community support programs and services. In doing so, these programs can be codified into policy that can be initiated in the surrounding military installations. In addition, information gathered from such assessments, when shared, may eliminate shortfalls among partner agencies and promote synergistic practices. Above all, military community support and services are integral in building familial resilience and increasing family well-being, thus bolstering military family readiness.

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