

When we're strong, our country is strong.

Military families are important to America, which is one reason that many dozens of programs sponsored by the U.S. government, nongovernmental companies, and nonprofit agencies are in place to address these families' complex needs.

With the recent sequestration and looming budget cuts, we know changes will be made and that these changes will impact our families. Those are some of the reasons the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) developed a survey to:

- ★ Understand which programs military families like and depend on
- ★ Identify gaps between military family needs and resources offered

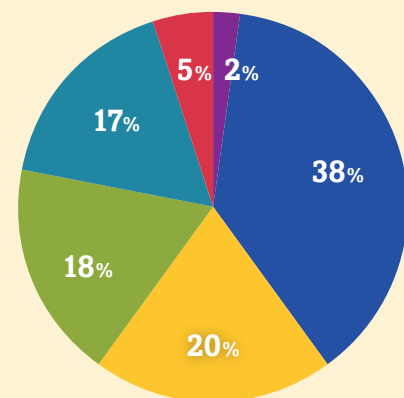
MFAN's Military Support Programming Survey was distinctive compared with other recent studies in that it analyzed support programs from the perspectives of military families.

Methodology

The MFAN survey was conducted in August 2014, drawing answers from 1,519 participants from nearly 300 locations around the world. Nearly 90 percent of the respondents were military spouses. The questions were almost completely open-ended in an effort to explore military families' support experiences from their own perspectives. The questions, which covered the gamut of military life from unemployment and wellness, to education and financial programming brought more than 17,000 unique responses.

1,519 participants
300 locations
90% military spouses
17,000 unique responses

Survey Responses: Military Branches



- ★ Army
- ★ Air Force
- ★ Navy
- ★ Marines
- ★ Coast Guard
- ★ Guard/Reserve

All service branches were represented and align with the overall distribution of servicemembers in the United States.

Results

Respondents said they felt positive about the quality of support programming when it was available. They said that it is inconsistent from location to location, and it can be very hard to access. Those who reported difficulties accessing programming said it was due to confusion about what is available, not knowing where to go to find information, and living away from a base or post with support facilities.

“The CDC on base has a year waitlist. This is ridiculous. No one can wait on a list for a year.”

— **Air Force spouse**

“...When I went to the career center and explained that I have a masters degree in x-field and an established career in a specific area, I was handed a blank generic resume form and told to go online and look for base jobs at the commissary.”

— **Air Force spouse**

“Ideally I’d like support for my MBA level career. I’m offended that the assumption is always that spouses are less educated than our active duty servicemembers.”

— **Navy spouse**

“I would rather our tax money go toward keeping the promises already made to active duty and retired servicemembers rather than expanding programs.”

— **Army spouse**

“Support is limited because it is always the first thing cut when politicians think they can save money. They reach into the pocket of servicemembers instead of their own.”

— **Army active duty member**

The resources people listed as being of most value to them were base amenities and healthcare. Participants said that when they do not find adequate support in any area of military life, they turned to nonprofit groups and relief associations. Therefore, nonprofit agencies rounded out the top three most valued support systems.

When asked where they could use more support, participants reported that they need it in four top areas: their family lives, healthcare, spouse employment, and pay and benefits. In their family lives, they said they need: more childcare, more support for deployed families, more family activities, and more fitness options for families. Specifically in the area of childcare, families said they need help so that spouses can look for work, attend school, go to medical appointments, or attend fitness activities. Families also asked for shorter waitlists at military-sponsored Child Development Centers.

Participants responded that healthcare was both a most valued resource, and a resource for which they need more support. According to their responses, they greatly value the ability to access healthcare, but finding care can be difficult and complicated. Families would like more support for the Exceptional Family Member Program, more mental health support for their families, and an increase in the quality of care available. Additionally, families said they need help understanding and navigating Tricare, as well as more access to healthcare providers and more options under the plan.

For the participants who said they need more spouse employment assistance, most of the responses were focused on finding general employment assistance. This category also included calls for help finding jobs overseas and help for educated, experienced spouses who want to maintain careers.

Within pay and benefits, participants provided a specific list of increases they would like to see. But the overarching message was for the military budget to be left alone, especially as it affects pay and benefits.

Most Valued Support Programming

Percentage of Total Respondents

Base Amenities	41%
Healthcare	32%
Support From Nonprofits	15%
Military, Welfare, and Recreation	15%
Family Support Services	12%

The survey also took a close look at specific areas of support, such as unemployment, wellness, education, financial readiness, and a variety of transition assistance. Participants detailed the kinds of assistance they receive, and where they go to find it, within each of these areas. The survey explored specific services military families often access, such as commissaries and exchanges; military treatment facilities; Morale, Welfare (Wellbeing) and Recreation; housing; childcare; and family support centers. Participants explained not only how and why they use those services, but also their perceptions of them. This highly detailed segment of the results provides a greater understanding of the inner workings of family support programs from a variety of aspects and how they work holistically.

Based on the analysis of participants' responses as a whole, through both descriptive and axial coding, MFAN advisors made the following broad recommendations.

Conclusions

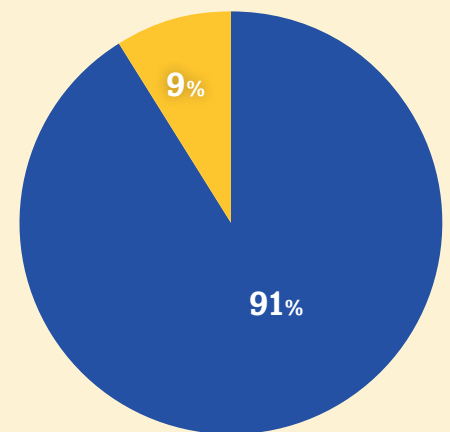
1.

Public-Private Partnerships *Investigate whether public-private partnerships with nonprofit agencies can more efficiently serve military families.* When asked what support programming military families like, 15 percent of respondents listed help they receive from nonprofit organizations. Throughout the survey results, participants noted difficulty accessing programming like emergency care, pediatric healthcare, childcare, respite care, military treatment facilities, and mental health for adults and children. Further research should be completed to evaluate the efficiencies and effectiveness of government programs to then establish if programs are a worthwhile investment for military agencies, both in terms of meeting family needs as well as contributing to military readiness.

2.

Commissaries *Avoid budget cuts to commissaries and sustain the budget. Commissaries are highly valued by military families.* About 75 percent of respondents live within 30 minutes of a commissary. Military families depend on the commissary for its cost savings and convenience — more than half visit the commissary on a weekly basis. When military families visit the commissary they are also likely to access other installation services. Revenues from these services fund Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) programming — another highly valued service. It is probable that if the commissaries are cut, military families will be less likely to shop at other installation stores, therefore directly impacting MWR funding.

Access to a Commissary and/or Exchange



★ Access ★ No access

Over 530 respondents said they use the commissary because of its convenience, low prices, and good selection.

3.

Childcare *Provide more opportunities for childcare for military families, and streamline existing childcare services to better serve families.* Military spouses stated that they need hourly childcare so that they can go to doctor’s appointments and job interviews, and participate in physical fitness activities. The Department of Defense (DoD) and the Coast Guard should improve tracking at Child Development Centers to create a streamlined system that captures wait times.

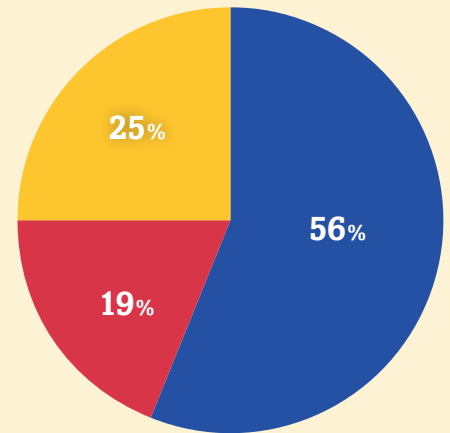
“Affordable, which on post care is not. I do not want to spend \$500 a month for it. I looked for other options in German daycare I pay 106 euro a month, which is about \$180 for full-time care, and she probably has a better chance of learning stuff.”

— Army spouse

4.

Healthcare *Review the currently existing healthcare system to ensure families have access to timely, quality care, both direct and purchased care within the Defense Health System.* Military families cited health care as a top concern. Most respondents described their healthcare at Military Treatment Facilities as adequate, but difficult to access. The DoD should examine access and quality of care as well as wait time, referrals, and access to specialists with military treatment facilities (direct care) and Tricare (purchased care).

Quality of Care



★ Excellent ★ Adequate ★ Poor

Almost 80 percent of respondents said they have access to healthcare but more than half of them said the quality of care was only adequate.

5.

Employment *Tailor employment support to the specific needs of military families.* Almost 20 percent of respondents called for additional employment assistance. Respondents said they needed to be able to access support that is specific to their personal circumstances, whether trying to get work overseas or after transition, or trying to continue a professional career through a series of moves. We recommend assessing the spousal and transition programs in place designed to meet employment needs and identify opportunities to improve programming to address unmet needs.

Acknowledgements

MFAN is grateful to the military families who completed the survey — your experiences and opinions matter. We will continue to share the information collected from the survey with other organizations and agencies that seek to serve our families, and your responses will help inform MFAN’s efforts in 2015.

The MFAN survey results have been shared with the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, which is conducting its own evaluation of servicemember compensation.

The Institute of Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University acted as a third-party reviewer at the completion of the research process.