



Military Service: A Family Affair

We often take the service provided by our Military for granted expected that people will commit to protecting us without much effort on our part. However, a great amount of sacrifice occurs by both the persons serving in the military, primarily men, and their families; wife (or husband), children, parents and siblings. To appreciate their sacrifice for our safety and security we need to understand our military system and our responsibilities to support the men, women and families who serve for us.

History : For most of the US history we have had Military “conscription” commonly known as the “draft” where all men of a given age bracket were required to report for military duty. This “ready” service group provided the necessary man power for fighting any declared war/conflict (WWI, WWII, Korean Conflict, Viet Nam Conflict.) and to maintain peace around the world. It also drove the terms of service including, lengthen of overall service, lengthen of deployment and tours of deployment.

Current: In 1973 Congress passed an “all volunteer” military service provision which eliminated a mandatory military service term except in emergency situations. This “all volunteer” military changed the structure of service terms and deployment. The impact on Military personal and their families has been significant. However, most people interacting with Military families, have no awareness nor insight into the changes and their impact on the daily lives of Military families.

Change: Without a regular influx of new “recruits” (draftees) the ongoing requirements and duties to ensure that all military branches are adequately prepared and executing their assignments falls on a limited, designated number of military personnel. Consequently, the system requires these military personnel to commit to longer service terms, longer deployment assignments and more frequent deployment assignments. Where deployment lengthens were 6 months and tours were limited to two during the “draft” period we now, commonly, see deployment lengthens of 12-24 months and 3-4 tour cycles.

In addition, a greater percentage of the military personal are young, married men and women who have also begun families. The longer service terms, deployment lengthens and frequency has a lasting impact on these families and on the development of their children. These changes have also increased the number of families living in local communities as opposed to military bases.

Current research supports the need for strong positive father-child relationships, even when children and fathers are separated. Both children, with Fathers serving in the military, and the Fathers need support during extended deployment periods and when fathers return home.

These significant changes cause us to raise several questions:

1) What are the needs of Military Families, especially during deployment periods?

We suggest that Military Families have the following needs:

- **Understanding:** While no one else can truly understand what Military families experience a more general understanding and empathy regarding the fact that there are challenges and changes that impact their family dynamics is possible.
- **Listening:** Family members need others to listen to them when they need to talk out the challenges, fears, struggles and decisions that impact their lives. There is not always a need to “fix” the situation but just to be attentive and supportive while the family finds the best solutions for themselves.
- **Inclusion:** Families need to be included in events and activities. They need to feel welcomed by others in their community; school, neighbor, Church, city. This includes a pro-active “searching out” and “reaching” out by others.
- **Practical help:** Families need help with day to day activities such as chores round the house, carpooling with children, child care, nights “out”, holiday support/invitations, social activities, youth activities, etc.
- **Spiritual Support:** Prayers are always helpful but often a more personal spiritual support by Faith leaders provides the family members with a greater sense of security and peace which can strengthen faith.
- **Recognition:** Families making personal sacrifices for our security need recognition for their efforts. From a simple “thank you” to more formal events acknowledgement is an important aspect of support.

2) What is the responsibility of the communities, in which these families reside, in providing a supportive safety net for Military personnel, their spouses and children before, during, and after military service and deployment tours?

We offer these suggestions to be considered by the various entities in all communities, (neighborhoods, Churches, Schools, Cities, service organizations, youth programs, etc)

- **Develop appropriate methods of identifying Military families** in the various community venues; schools, Churches, youth groups, employment settings, service organizations,
- **Establish methods of communication;** “reaching” out to families offering support and identifying needs
- **Setup support systems** for designated needs through appropriate venues; home repairs, Carpooling, child care, social events (adult and family), holiday support
- **Identify local support systems** and offer assistance through already established groups/resources; Blue Star Mothers, American Legion Posts, Military Branch Family Support offices. written materials
- **Spiritual Support:** Through local Faith organizations and Interfaith associations provide support through prayer, counseling, support groups, (youth, teen ,adult, family) etc

- **Enhance communication with deployed family members** for the family members and by the community utilizing technology options (skype, videos, facebook), calling cards, letters, “care” packages, etc
- **Recognition/appreciation:** Offer opportunities for recognition and appreciation through a personal thanks you/encouragement as well as designated events. These can be aligned with specific recognition periods such as the National Month of the Military Child (April)

When communities raise their awareness of the changes in our military system and the impact it has on Military personal and their families then creative and effective methods of support can be developed. Effective support systems strengthen the Military families, the community and our nation.

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The Stephan Center is a non- profit organization offering information, education and resources regarding all types of life losses. For more information visit their website at:
www.thestephancenter.org