



THE BACKBONE OF OUR MILITARY

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES FROM MODERN MILITARY SPOUSES



November 2018

United Service Organizations, Inc.

The USO strengthens America's military service members by keeping them connected to family, home and country, throughout their service to the nation. For over 77 years, the USO has been the nation's leading organization to serve the men and women in the U.S. military, and their families, throughout their time in uniform. From the moment they join, through their assignments and deployments, and as they transition back to their communities, the USO is always by their side.

Marvin Strategies

Marvin Strategies is a private consulting firm providing strategy and communications services with expertise in social innovation, veterans affairs, and civic engagement. The firm supports clients through messaging, project development, partner cultivation, narrative building, and public engagement. Marvin Strategies is certified by the Small Business Administration as a service-disabled veteran owned small business.

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“I was his girlfriend, and then I was his wife, and then I was the chief’s wife. I hate being associated as a military spouse.”

“I’m not the cookie cutter mold—Sunday dresses, pearls. If you look at the military spouse magazines, that’s who they highlight. They don’t highlight people like me.”

“The USO knows that military life is a fabric of military families. We come from all walks of life, all backgrounds. No military family is exactly alike – which is one of the many reasons why we – why YOU – are worth celebrating and supporting.”



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MILITARY SPOUSES occupy a unique place in the military community and in American culture. For some, they are the unsung heroes of national defense, while others see them as the victims of a structure that doesn't properly take their needs into account. Either way, they are crucially important to the future of the U.S. military.

That is why the USO commissioned a research project to examine the perceptions and experiences of military spouses as a way to better inform programs and service offerings meant to reach spouses.

Throughout the summer of 2018, a research team from Marvin Strategies, LLC employed human-centered design methodology—a problem-solving practice common to customer service organizations—to collect primary qualitative research through interviews with military spouses across the globe. Spouses were interviewed individually and in groups with the goal of discovering their preferences, motivations, behaviors, and challenges. The team also sought to gather insights on military spouses' sense of identity and their perceptions of supportive services. The research team met with spouses at or near military installations in the continental U.S., Hawai'i, and Japan.

The data collected has been synthesized and reported in this publication. The research team identified

three themes around shared needs across a markedly diverse military spouse population.

- Finding identity & sense of purpose
- Establishing trusted networks & support systems
- Possessing agency & the ability to plan

Within these themes, the research team uncovered ten key insights that highlight challenges and opportunities. The insights address military spouse stereotypes, mismatched expectations, maintaining friendships, building networks, finding employment, mental health needs, use of supportive services, frequent transitions, childcare needs, and making plans for life.

Drawing on the findings, the research team developed a series of programmatic recommendations for the USO that can be used to enhance existing services or build new platforms that cater to the military spouse community.

Military spouses are the backbone of the U.S. military community. Their well-being and ability to thrive not only impact the prosperity of military families, but also have profound effect on the strength of our national defense. It is imperative that their needs and challenges do not go unmet.★

THE SALUTE TO MILITARY SPOUSES

On **November 14, 2018**, to highlight the release of this research report and, more importantly, to celebrate our military spouses, the USO hosted The Salute to Military Spouses. With a room full of military spouses and community partners, we thanked them for all that they do to support our service members, and also dove deeper into what it means to be a part of the military spouse community.

Through the stories that were told that day, we listened, we laughed, we lamented, and we were incredibly inspired. We felt that those inspirational words were important to include alongside the very real challenges presented in this research report.

It is our hope that this entire report offers a thought-provoking perspective on the challenges of the modern military spouse, as well as conveys their resiliency and strength in overcoming those challenges.

GOALS & METHODS

During the summer of 2018, the USO contracted a research team to delve into a population that has historically been viewed as monolithic: “the military spouse.” Many programs and services have been designed for a narrow image of spouses, and while well intentioned, this limited approach leaves many spouses well outside the reach of what could be impactful supportive services.

This research effort intended to develop a deep and multi-dimensional view of military spouses who vary in gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geography, sexual orientation, family makeup, education, and more. Each possesses personal stories, experiences, and beliefs that influence his or her behavior and decision-making. All have needs, are faced with challenges, and hold preferences for their lives and the lives of their families. Through this research, organizations will be better able to communicate with, build programs around, and ultimately serve the military spouse community.

Project Goals

GOAL

Provide services that will enhance the lives of military spouses.

OBJECTIVE

This project will provide organizations with insights into the perceptions and experiences of military spouses, opportunities to improve existing services, and build future programs for military spouses.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research interviews revolved around three primary areas of interest as a foundation for better understanding the perceptions and experiences of military life held by military spouses:

1. **Military Journeys:** What motivates and challenges spouses to enter and maintain the military lifestyle?
2. **Methods of Engagement:** How do military spouses find and utilize social groups, professional networks, and supportive services?
3. **Personal Identity:** What does it mean to be a military spouse?

Discovery Methods

The research team chose to apply discovery research methods consistent with human-centered design to begin to illuminate the needs, preferences, and challenges military spouses face on a daily basis and throughout their time in the military community.

What is Human-Centered Design?

Human-centered design is a discipline in which the needs, behaviors, and experiences of an organization’s customers or users drive product, service, or technology design processes. It is a practice used heavily across the private sector to build a strong understanding of users, generate ideas for new products and services, test concepts with real people, and ultimately deliver easy-to-use products and positive customer experiences.¹ The design process helps organizations revisit “old” challenges by reframing how it thinks about them. It can also serve to narrow down the many opportunities facing an organization and aid in prioritizing meaningful starting points for building strategies for an improved customer experience and business success. By implementing this process before developing solutions, an organization can save time, money, effort, and customer frustration by iteratively moving toward meaningful products and services rather than correcting

expensive guesswork later on. The design process itself is phased with specific activities to continuously understand and integrate the preferences of users throughout.

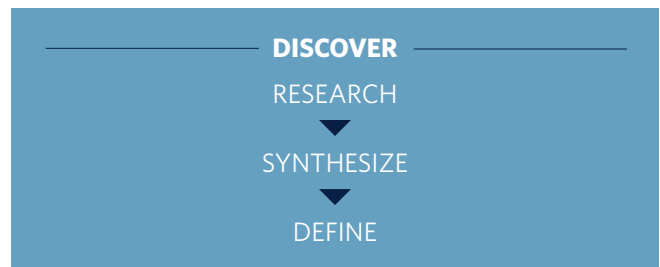
This report represents findings from discovery, the first phase of a human-centered design project.

Design discovery builds on practices from applied anthropology. It therefore has different methods and aims than other forms of information gathering, such as surveys or “big data.” Rather, human-centered designers gather “think data”—information that merges insights into human meaning with an understanding of the social context in which human lives occur.² Designers then synthesize the data—breaking a data aggregate into parts. The synthesis process combines elements from across the data pool in order to produce a coherent theme or finding. These synthesized findings allow designers to diagnose a set of common needs and to identify future pathways for design.³

THE DESIGN CYCLE

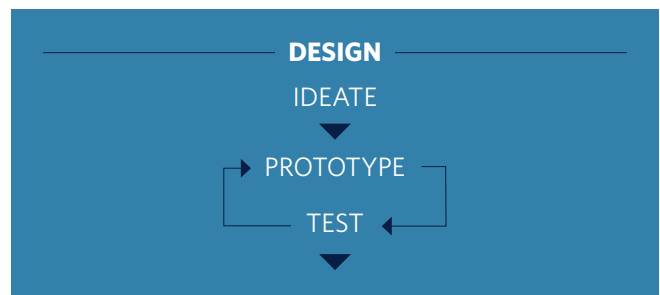
DISCOVER + DEFINE

Conduct user research and synthesize findings to define user needs and problem statement.



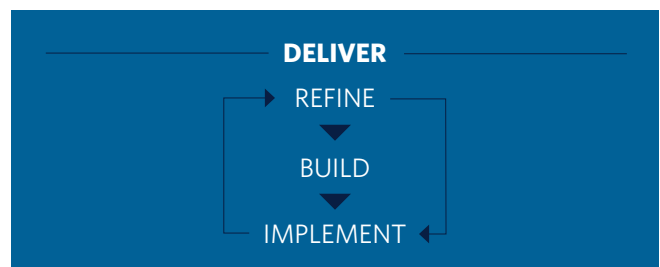
DESIGN + TEST

Potential solutions are generated, ideas are translated into prototypes and tested against users, then refined to prepare for implementation.



DEVELOP + DELIVER

Architect and build new services or products in agile increments, releasing new user-facing changes in ways to continue to refine based on user feedback and testing. After launching a complete service or product, continuously monitor and refine to meet user satisfaction.



Discovery Fieldwork

For this project, the research team chose to conduct in-person group and individual interviews. Researchers met with military spouses at USO centers, coffee shops, libraries, and private offices. The research team conducted 30 hours of interviews with 52 active duty military spouses and one recently retired military spouse. The interviews included six group interviews with three to eight participants and 20 individual interviews. The team took four trips to nine unique locations in Southern California, Texas, Washington, Hawai'i, and Japan over the course of four months. The interviewed spouses were married to service members who serve in the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force at 13 distinct military installations (see map). The USO performed the majority of the outreach, employing the

power of field office employees and their local connections. In some cases, the research team employed their own professional and personal networks to round out the interview schedules.

Modern military spouses have become increasingly diverse in recent decades. Amongst the sample of 53 spouses interviewed for this report, spouses were male and female; gay and straight; from multiple ethnic backgrounds; employed, looking for work, and out of the workforce; aged from early twenties to mid-sixties; and with as many as six children. Some were born in foreign countries and spoke English as a second or third language.

More than 80 percent of interview subjects were between the ages of 30 and 49, and 15 percent were

RESEARCH LOCATIONS

Camp Pendleton, California

Naval Base San Diego, California

Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, California

Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, California

Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington

Joint Base San Antonio-Sam Houston, Texas

Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, Texas

Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, Texas

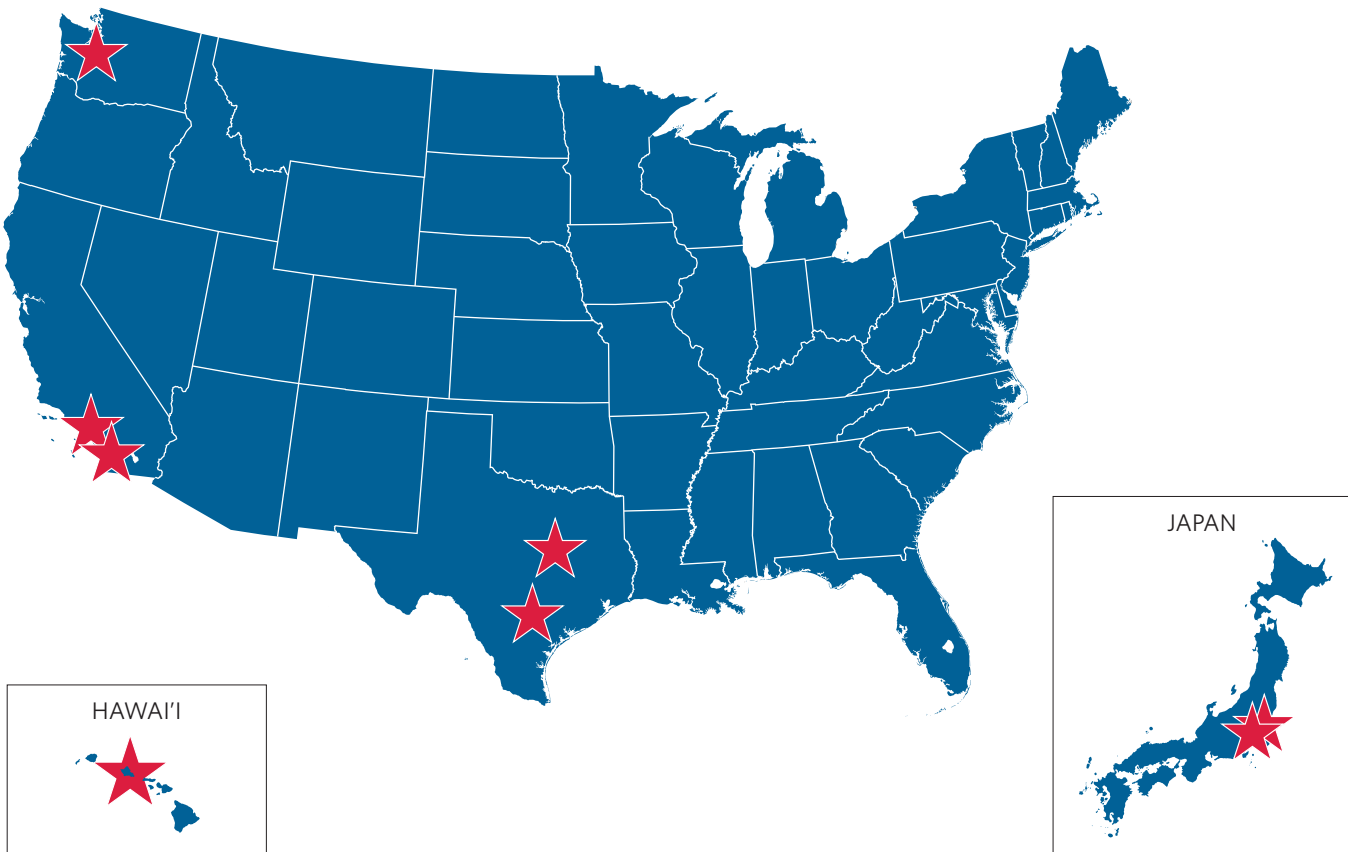
Fort Hood, Texas

Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawai'i

Marine Corps Base Hawai'i

Yokota Air Base, Japan

Naval Air Facility Atsugi, Japan

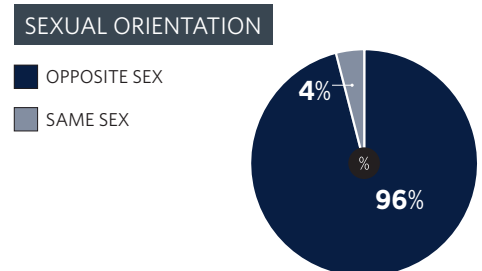
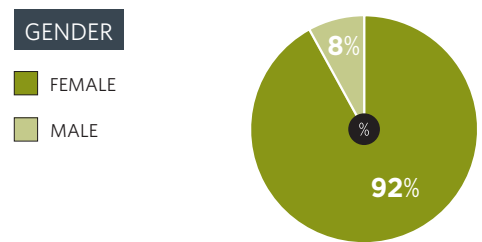
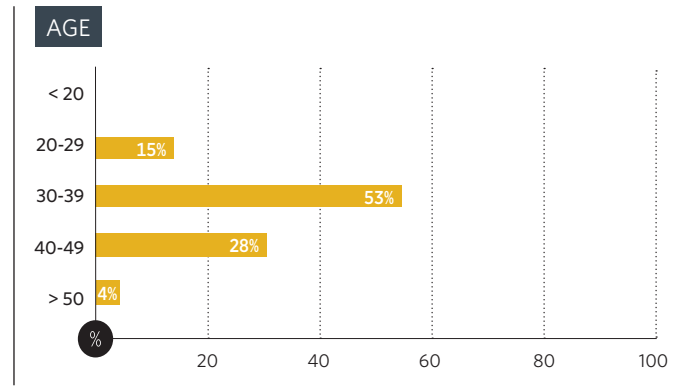
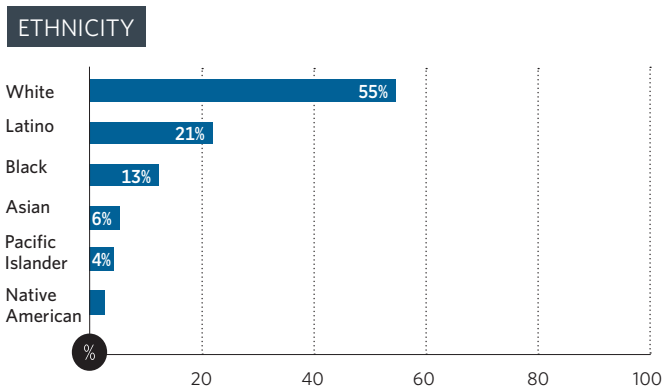


younger than 30. The vast majority were female (92 percent) and identified as heterosexual (96 percent). Approximately eight in ten had children; of those, the average number of children was 2.6. More than half of families with children had two. About half of spouses interviewed were connected to the Army; 21 percent were connected to the Marine Corps; 17 percent and 15 percent, respectively, to the Navy and Air Force. 57 percent of spouses were married to service members holding enlisted rank at the time of the interview, and 43 percent were married to officers, including 8 percent warrant officers. Ethnicity representation was 55 percent white, 21 percent Latino, 13 percent black, 10 percent Asian and/or Pacific Islander, and 2 percent Native American.

For 83 percent of participants, the research team gained knowledge of their hometown or region; of those, 89 percent were from the United States—including 22 unique states, two U.S. territories (Puerto Rico and Guam), and four spouses reported being raised in various locations as part of an active duty military family. Five spouses reported being from foreign countries: Canada, Japan, Philippines, British Virgin Islands, and Togo. At least eight spouses were veterans of the U.S. military and at least nine were the children of military service members.★

A SPOTLIGHT ON MILITARY SPOUSES

Graphics included here represent the demographic breakdown of the interview sample for this project. These data points may not be representative of the entire military spouse population as acknowledged within the annual DoD demographics report.





BACKGROUND DISCUSSION

THE LIVES OF MILITARY SPOUSES are unlike those of most Americans. The role is part career, part tour of duty, part single parent, and part family counselor. It is a lifestyle dictated by the needs of the federal government with often little opportunity for individuals to choose their own paths in life. For many military spouses, the decision to join these ranks was not an explicit choice of lifestyle, but rather the consequence of love and partnership.

When embarking on an active duty military journey, military service members and their spouses leave their existing family, friends, and support networks behind. While service members quickly build relationships within their units, spouses often find it difficult to establish new trusted networks.

Spouses also quickly learn that the military expects them to handle all aspects of domestic life when service members are called away for training or deployments. It is a domestic arrangement that harkens to a bygone era when men worked and women stayed home; it is incongruent with 21st century American society.⁴ These high-pressure expectations are often shocking to military spouses and something they didn't bargain for when they joined the military community.

Along that way, frequent moves, undesirable geographic locations, and stints as a solo parent are just a few of the challenges that inhibit military spouses from pursuing their own paths. Accomplishing previously held life goals can seem much more difficult, and it's not uncommon for spouses to feel they lack a sense of purpose. Some spouses choose to deeply embrace the role of the military spouse. Others fight the label and seek alternative identities through jobs, volunteering, social interaction, family, or other outlets.

Many spouses assume they will continue to have a career, but that expectation is often shattered by the circumstances of military life. When the Pentagon ended the draft in the early 1970s, approximately 30 percent of American married couples with children had two income earners.⁵ Today, over 60 percent of households have dual incomes,⁶ and military personnel policies have been challenged to keep pace. The demands of the military make it incredibly hard for spouses to work outside the home.

When spouses do seek work, they often feel they are discriminated against in the job market because of their

association with the military. Employers are reluctant to hire them because of the likelihood that they will leave the position after just a few years. Many spouses remain unemployed or out of the job market, and military spouse unemployment rates are remarkably higher than the national average.⁷

As a compromise, some spouses take jobs for which they are overqualified or shift their energy toward volunteer opportunities. Military spouses volunteer at higher rates than their civilian counterparts,⁸ but the lack of compensation can mean financial burdens for the military family.

Spouses also encounter efforts from nonprofit organizations, government programs, and community do-gooders that focus on charitable gifts and handouts given to spouses and military families. All too often, these programs fail to empower spouses and instead focus on what the programs determine are the acute needs of military spouses. The catch is that these needs are often not fully understood and are poorly addressed.

Inside military culture there are hierarchies—driven by both regulations and tradition—that dictate how individuals may interact with one another. Spouses often feel subjected to these rules, which makes it harder for spouses to establish and maintain friendships with other spouses.

No matter how much they struggle or feel dissatisfied, almost all military spouses express a deep sense of pride in the role they play in the military service of their spouses. Some are simply happy to support the person they love in a job that means something to him or her. Others feel a sense of patriotism and national pride. For many, these feelings of service and pride allow them to endure some of the more difficult aspects of military life.

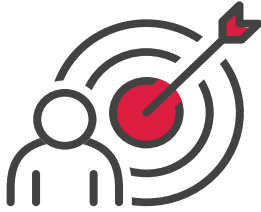
Through the pride and challenges, spouses emerge as the backbone of the U.S. military community. This analogy is particularly appropriate when you imagine the many dimensions of a backbone. In the human body, the backbone is a strong, rigid structure that keeps the body upright. At the same time the backbone is flexible and resilient, able to bend and stretch. And perhaps most telling, if the backbone is broken, a body can become paralyzed or die. So are the qualities of the military spouse: strong, rigid, resilient, flexible, but to be protected from damage at all costs.★

FINDINGS

Through more than 30 hours of interviews, the research team gathered key insights into the lives and behaviors of military spouses. Each insight offers a glimpse into the preferences, motivations, and struggles of military spouses. These insights also highlight the barriers inhibiting wellbeing and the places spouses go for support. The information that can be extracted from these insights is valuable to service providers and program development, as it can inform solutions built with the end user in mind. These insights are reflective only of information collected during this research. The quotes included are from the military spouses interviewed.

Themes

The research team found three major themes around the shared needs of military spouses. The themes represent implicit conclusions gathered from all interviews.



IDENTITY & SENSE OF PURPOSE

Consistently, military spouses reported feelings of loss, uncertain identity, or lack of purpose caused by the rigors of military life.



TRUSTED NETWORKS & SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Military spouses often reported difficulty establishing and maintaining trusted networks and support systems, which negatively impact professional aspirations, social lives, and general satisfaction with military life.



AGENCY & THE ABILITY TO PLAN

Many military spouses cited a lack of control over their own lives and an inability to plan for the future, primarily attributable to the atypical burdens placed on spouses by the military.

Insights

INSIGHT ONE

Stereotypes associated with military spouses affect identity and behavior



Military spouses often possess conflicting personal identities, which can negatively impact life satisfaction, family wellbeing, economic productivity, and military retention.

Adopting Incongruent Identities

Spouses talk about the realization that, upon entering military life, they are now labeled a “military spouse.” Their identities can also be linked to the rank of their spouses, such as “the sergeant major’s wife” or “the commander’s husband.” While some spouses thrive on this identity, many eschew the implication that their identity and value are derived from their spouse’s profession. Though nearly to a person, military spouses report being proud to support the service of their military member.

Public Perceptions

For many military spouses, the manner in which they believe they are perceived by others—including civilians, other spouses, and the government—impacts how they define their personal identities. Many spouses report feeling good about being part of something bigger than themselves, while nearly all spouses indicate a strong distaste for the term “dependent” as it is used by the federal government. Spouses often think that civilians view them as “lazy,” “leeches,” or “freeloaders” because of government-provided housing and benefits. At the same time, spouses describe themselves

as “resilient” and “strong,” and they recognize that some outsiders view them this way too. When interacting with the civilian world, spouses often hide their military affiliation, compartmentalizing their lives outside of base from their lives in the military community.

The Elastic Backbone

Ask military spouses about the role they play in their families, and they are likely to say something like “backbone,” “reliable,” or “glue.” They will also probably include “flexible,” “elastic,” or “resilient.” Spouses are often a rigid support system for their family, while also harnessing the ability to embrace change in the short term. This is often not a role that spouses thought they were signing up for when entering into a marriage, but most spouses report being proud of the strength and resiliency they exhibit.

SPOUSE VOICES

“Don’t label me as a military spouse; I hate being called that.”

“It’s a split. Either, ‘Wow! It [must be] so hard,’ or ‘Wow you are lazy and don’t do anything.’”

VOICES FROM THE SALUTE

“I want the civilian population to break down their own stereotypes about what military spouses are and see us for who we really are and the talents we bring to the table.”



INSIGHT TWO

Expectations of military life often don't match reality

Military spouses without previous exposure to military life typically report that the reality they experience differs significantly from their expectations coming in.

The Decision to Serve

Most military spouses report that the decision to enter the military was made by the service member—even if the couple were dating or married at the time of enlistment. Decisions to stay are often a mutual decision between spouses and service members. The choice to separate from the military however is very frequently driven primarily by military spouses.

Managing Expectations

It is not uncommon to hear that a military spouse had “no idea” what he or she was getting into when his or her significant other entered military service. Shock and surprise seem to be part and parcel with the introduction to military life. The primary source of dissonance is described as the inability to find a distinct identity or purpose while supporting the military career of their partners.

Job or Family

A military spouse noted that her choices in life were: “...military, job, or family. Choose two.” This means that military spouses can have jobs or children, but they cannot have both unless their partners separate from the military. While this is not true across the board, it seems to be a paradigm that is adopted by many military families. One commonly noted contributing factor is the lack of sufficient childcare options. Individuals enter military life with the expectation that they will be able to balance work and children, as more and more civilian families do. But, spouses quickly find that they are forced to be the primary and only reliable caregivers for children, and this significantly impacts their ability to work.

SPOUSE VOICES

“I hate when people say, ‘You knew what you were getting into,’ because I didn’t.”

“It was really hard at first. I felt like I gave up everything to be with him—which I don’t regret—but it’s really hard.”

VOICES FROM THE SALUTE

“I’m grateful to be a military spouse. I’ve learned that maybe what I’m doing today is fulfilling the purpose in my life, but it might just look different from what I thought it was going to look like.”



INSIGHT THREE

Meaningful work can be difficult to find

Military spouses who are able to work often find a strong sense of purpose through their career, but many spouses are unable to find meaningful work because of the hurdles presented by military life.

Ability to Work

Military spouses report that their ability to work can be inhibited by many factors. Constant moves prevent growth in a career field. The far-flung geographic locations of military installations are correlated with a dearth of sought-after positions. Interstate moves prove difficult for professions requiring certifications or licensure. Additionally, unreliable, insufficient, or expensive childcare prevents spouses from seeking employment. Whatever the cause, nearly every military spouse reports some level of difficulty successfully obtaining, maintaining, or transferring work across the course of a military journey.

Discrimination in Hiring

It is extremely common for military spouses to report that they have experienced significant discrimination in hiring practices. Spouses report sending out dozens of applications with few responses. Most military spouses ruminate about the benefit or detriment of being honest about their military affiliation. Occasionally, military spouses report being told directly by a prospective

employer that they don't want to hire someone who will not be here in a few years. Even for those that haven't experienced obvious first-hand discrimination, there is a prevalent belief that this is a reality they will eventually face.

Volunteering

Numerous military spouses report a high propensity for volunteering. In some cases, volunteering is used as a proxy for meaningful work. Military spouses also report volunteering as a way to achieve mental wellbeing and a sense of purpose and community. It is common for spouses to describe volunteering as a core element of their identity.

SPOUSE VOICES

“I feel like I gave up my entire career.”

“When we moved here I was told that I wouldn't be hired because I was a military spouse.”

“Every interview was like ‘Well, how long are you here for?’”

VOICES FROM THE SALUTE

“When I found out about [a professional] network I clung to those people because I can talk to them about the challenges we face as military spouses in the employment space...we can also mentor and help the next generation of military spouses that are in our shoes.”

INSIGHT FOUR

Trusted relationships are valued, but elusive



It takes time to build trust and establish quality friendships, but many military spouses feel that frequent moves rob them of the time needed to build trusted relationships.

Prioritizing Trust and Discretion

For many military spouses, a culture of paranoia and caution pervades in spouse communities. Spouses struggle to determine whom they can trust and hesitate to open up about their personal lives, fearing that any perceived missteps could reflect negatively upon their partners' military career. When navigating social networks is daunting, spouses sometimes opt out of connecting with potential friends. Spouses who succeed in building strong, reliable networks are often those for whom trustworthiness is a high priority.

Support in a Pinch

Inevitably, most spouses bring up a time when they faced a situation that required searching for support in a pinch. A child may get sick on a day when the spouse cannot miss work, or a service member could be injured on a deployment. Spouses debate whom to call for help: a neighbor, a co-worker, another spouse from the unit, a parent from across the country, or a child-care professional. Alternatively, some spouses just shrug their shoulders and pray that nothing like that ever happens. Others tell stories of going into emergency surgery without anyone to watch over a small child. It's obvi-

ous that finding support in a pinch is a crucial element of military life, but it is often easier said than done.

Distance from Established Support Systems

Military families typically live far from their established support systems. Spouses with longer military tenures describe having existing networks at their gaining duty stations because they know other families there. Spouses with less time in service are more likely to rely on the systems found within their service members' units or provided by the military. Spouses report that the lack of strong and established support systems is a key factor in the degradation of mental well-being, and a remarkable number of military spouses admit to a lack of friends at their current duty stations.

Big Bases vs. Small Bases

A counterintuitive observation made by numerous military spouses is that oftentimes it is more difficult to make friends and build networks on larger military installations. This is due to the increased travel time, large populations, and general lack of community on larger bases. For example, at Camp Pendleton in Southern Califor-

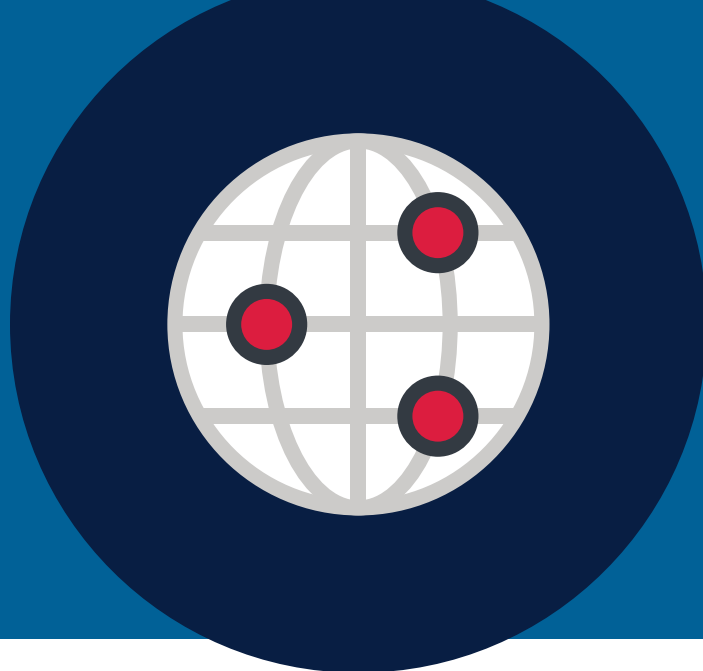
nia, the drive time between two housing areas can be as long as one hour. Meanwhile, on smaller posts, families live and work in closer proximity to one another; the byproducts are more tightly knit communities and more strongly bonded networks.

SPOUSE VOICES

“There are people [here] so different from myself, and you just meet them and next week they are your emergency contact. They are accelerated relationships.”

VOICES FROM THE SALUTE

“There’s a reason we can’t imagine military life without the support and friendship of our community. It’s that community that makes and keeps us strong. It’s the person sitting to your right and left right now who holds you up and pushes you forward.”



INSIGHT FIVE

Networks are difficult to maintain

While military spouses talk often about joining groups and building networks, changing landscapes and high-churn military communities make it difficult to maintain truly supportive networks.

Many Flavors of Networks

Nearly all spouses have some type of social network, be it in-person or virtual. Spouses who work claim professional networks. Friends and family typically populate emotional networks. Many spouses engage with interest-based networks, e.g. children's activities, religion, hobbies, etc. While all spouses have the theoretical opportunity to engage with a unit-based network, not all units have the same quality of group interactions and not all spouses are interested in interacting with these groups. No matter the flavor, spouses who are able to build strong networks, generally report better outcomes in many aspects of their military journey.

Starting Over...Again

After a change of duty station, military spouses report the need to rebuild networks—sometimes from scratch. More experienced spouses share secrets to success, e.g. signing children up for sports, visiting community-centric locations like libraries, getting involved with the unit's family groups, etc. Whereas military members receive weeks of integration training upon a permanent change of station, spouses get very little. In addition, the supportive services dedicated to military members'

career transitions—something that occurs once in a career—dwarf the services that spouses receive when they make a similar transition at each and every change of station.

Outside the Gate

Modern spouses state that they are just as likely to find community outside of military circles as in. Spouses often find connections in the civilian community through their children's school, sports, and extracurricular activities; through religious affiliations or church groups; with co-workers; or amongst ethnic communities with whom they identify. While connection to the civilian community is not mandatory for military spouses, those who are able to negotiate successful networks outside the military tend to benefit from the additional networks.

Social Media #gamechanger

Increasingly, military spouses acknowledge utilizing social media as a lifeline to previous networks, including family at home and friends from prior duty stations. Spouses prefer Facebook and Instagram over phone and email as the primary means of communication with people in far-away locations. Locally, social media also serves as a virtual message board

for activities and services aimed at military families. Spouses have taken advantage of social media to stay connected, but it is unclear how this type of interaction has impacted the quality of relationships and networks within military spouse circles.

SPOUSE VOICES

“Once your husband gets a certain rank they sometimes don't talk to you anymore. All of a sudden you're the chief's wife, and my friend wouldn't come over.”

“I am a social butterfly. I didn't know you weren't supposed to make friends with spouses of higher rank.”

VOICES FROM THE SALUTE

“We don't just hold down the home front, we empower it and each other every single day to do amazing things. We see the best in our community and we push that forward.”

INSIGHT SIX

Mental health needs deserve more attention



Many spouses report the need for mental health services, yet often the mental health needs of military spouses are overlooked and underserved.

Grief & Anxiety

Numerous military spouses report that chronic anxiety and grief are a part of their daily lives. Whether they are anxious about the next life change, mourning the loss of previous friendships, or lamenting opportunities that have passed them by, spouses commonly express challenges to their mental well-being. A broadly shared source of anxiety is the fear for the safety of a spouse's service member when he or she is deployed. Yet, those fears are rarely listed as the most prevalent concern. Rather spouses seem more likely to report concern with a child's educational outcomes, the family's financial situation, or a loss of personal identity or purpose.

The Stigma of Seeking Treatment

In some cases, military spouses admit to either not seeking or being hesitant to seek mental health support because they believe that it could negatively impact their spouses' military career trajectories or security clearances. Spouses are often reluctant to make their needs a focal point, for fear it would cause focus to be taken from their loved one's important mission. In that case, the lack of treatment can become a life-threatening concern for spouses in need of care.

SPOUSE VOICES

"You're human first, and that is something that outsiders need to get."

"I didn't call anyone. I sat alone for 18 months by myself. When [my friend] met me, I was in a very dark spot. There were a lot of times when I packed myself and the kids up and went home."

VOICES FROM THE SALUTE

"There are other people that are feeling the same thing and that, in and of itself, knowing that you're not alone in this life, that people are facing the same challenges but also the same successes... that's great and it really helps make life a little bit easier when you know you're not alone."

INSIGHT SEVEN

Well-intentioned services break down in execution



Too often, military spouses describe how well intentioned institutional services—the ones in which spouses place the most confidence—vary significantly between duty stations and can break down completely in execution.

Targeted Programming

Each branch has its own flavor of groups and programs to support military spouses and families. And for each different system, military spouses report both successes and failures. Family readiness groups are often only as successful as the spouse leader or unit commander, and thus their effectiveness can ebb and flow. Deployments also hamper the ability and willingness for capable individuals to lead such groups. Key spouse programs have proven successful in many instances, but spouses also report that the programs can grow into their own hierarchical networks with cliques and status grabbing—making them less effective for new spouses.

Wartime and Budget Cuts

All modern military spouses have been connected to the military during a time of war, when fluctuating budgets impact programs offered to military spouses. Spouses report that many of the recreational, extra-curricular, and supportive activities that

were put in place in the early years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been cut with little or no notice. The reduction of programs has varied effects on spouses and children, but less funding ultimately leads to fewer services and therefore less provision of help to those potentially in need.

SPOUSE VOICES

“I don’t need them to try to make me feel better; I need them to help me find a job.”

“They have a quota that they want to meet and brag about, ‘We’ve interviewed x number of military spouses,’ but that doesn’t get me a job.”



INSIGHT EIGHT

Frequent transitions present major challenges

In addition to frequent changes of duty station and separating from the military, spouses face many transition points across a military life journey requiring unique support.

Repetitive Disruption

Relocating every three years, unpredictable training cycles, and long deployments all make it very difficult to plan and pursue life goals like job advancement, education, and training. Many spouses feel they are forced to “reinvent themselves” with every PCS. They feel their lives lack balance. The uncertainty of short-notice trainings and deployments can create bitterness and contempt for the military amongst military spouses.

Staying Home

Spouses often talk of the difficulty that three-year PCS cycles pose on job prospects, stability for children, and planning for the future, generally. It’s widely discussed that different branches of the military are more and less lenient with longer time periods between moves. Some families have an opportunity to stay at their duty stations for seven years or longer, but, unfortunately, it is more common for families to move every three years or less.

SPOUSE VOICES

“Transition doesn’t mean when you PCS only, but also when your husband is going to deploy.”

“I feel more selfish. I’m not willing to give up everything. I stayed here to finish my career. The next duty station, we’re going to look at separation. I feel like we’re playing tug of war.”

VOICES FROM THE SALUTE

“You have to be open and flexible and adaptable to [the military] lifestyle and try to use your tribe--the people that you know you can count on and work with to make it a little bit easier.”



INSIGHT NINE

Sufficient childcare is lacking

Lack of childcare is the most commonly reported challenge faced by military spouses, specifically the impact on spouses' abilities to work, volunteer, or enjoy social activities, which affects sense of identity, quality of life, financial wellbeing, and military retention.

Inaccessible Childcare

According to the vast majority of military spouses, the most significant barrier to securing a job outside of the home is childcare. On base, government-subsidized childcare is rarely supplied at a level that meets the demand of the community; this causes wait lists and priority ordering. Similar waits often exist for civilian childcare providers in many areas. The frustration from military spouses is omnipresent, and many with longer military tenures report childcare as a major problem for decades.

Dropping In

While nearly every spouse with children or planning to start a family has complaints about childcare, one specific complaint is the lack of drop-in childcare. Whether spouses are in need of help in a pinch or just looking to finish running errands more quickly, there are few options for childcare that don't have to be set up well in advance of the need.

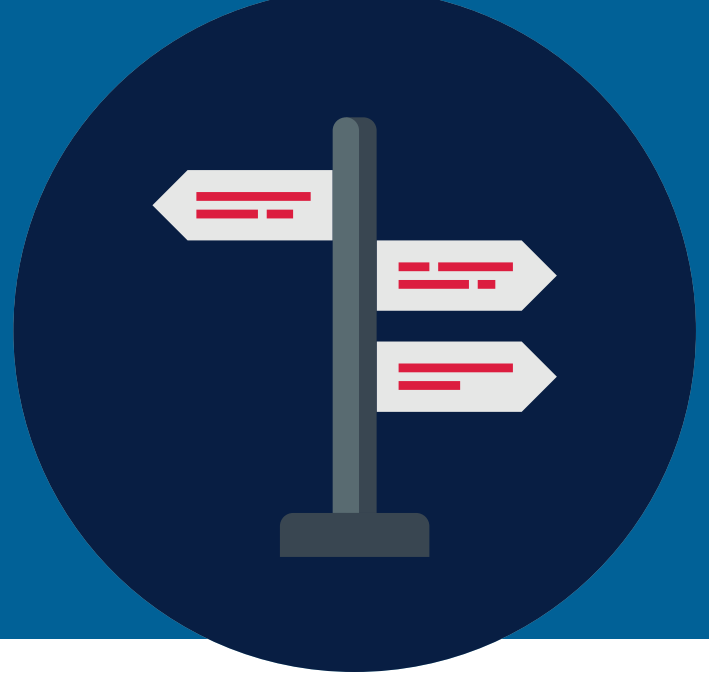
SPOUSE VOICES

“My mom covers a lot. She’s here now actually, and she has the luxury: she’s retired. I’m stressed, and she helps a lot.”

“They say they do drop-in care, but they really don’t. Care out in town is really expensive. This is all a lot harder than it should be.”

INSIGHT TEN

Planning for the future is nearly impossible



Nearly all military spouses complain about a marked inability to plan for the future, including careers, finances, retirement, and family.

Financial Literacy and Well Being

Military spouses often mention that their role in the household includes managing finances and making decisions on savings and expenditures. At the same time, many of these spouses are not educated beyond high school and of their own admission lack sufficient financial literacy. Living check-to-check becomes a burden for military families and a balancing act that falls into the lap of military spouses while the service members tend to their duties.

Retirement

When asked about retirement—from the workforce, not from the military—a number of military spouses admit to having no plan or savings. New military retirement options have begun to change that scenario; nonetheless, for many spouses, retirement seems so far in the future that it can't be considered today. Part of this mindset is due to financial capabilities, but another part is reported to be tethered to the itinerant military lifestyle, where spouses can't see beyond a three-year horizon into their future.

Schools and Kids

Most spouses will explain that as soon as they know where they are going to PCS next, they start exploring childcare, schools, housing, and perhaps job prospects. Military spouses indicate that their children's schooling is a top priority. Changing from school to school every couple years can be difficult both socially and academically for military children. Unfortunately, the military lifestyle doesn't accommodate planning beyond the next school year or two, and issues like special needs or special education only complicate the challenge.

Coping with Military Life

Spouses all find their own ways to cope with the challenges of military life. It's common to hear spouses admit to not having plans for their life or family beyond a three-year window—or whenever the next change of duty station occurs. Other spouses make deliberate long-term plans despite knowing their plans will almost certainly change. This is a way to feel that they have some agency or semblance of control over their own lives.

SPOUSE VOICES

“It was more of an adventure before we had kids, but now with kids it feels like much more of a challenge. It's hard to be stable. Everything is so unstable.”

“Every time we move my identity shifts, and it messes with me.”

VOICES FROM THE SALUTE

“As hard as this life is, I would do it again in a heartbeat. I would proudly marry my husband again. I am proud to be serving alongside of him and what he does.”

OPPORTUNITIES

For any organization that wishes to further engage and support military spouses, there are a number of opportunities worthy of exploration based on the initial findings of this research project. The opportunities below are not presented in order of priority or preference.

For every idea, incorporating service design principles while moving an idea from seed to scale can save organizations time and development resources; they also enable teams to build something that meets the needs of those it's intending to serve. Using tools like "personas" along the way builds empathy for teams and keeps customers central to solutions.

DESIGNING FOR MILITARY SPOUSES

SERVICE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

As a general rule of thumb, teams developing new services and products for their customers can take into account these service design principles as a way to develop offerings that are meaningful.

1. Before developing any solution, start by understanding user needs
2. Think about a journey, not just a point-in-time service
3. Co-design—develop solutions with your customers
4. Develop feasible solutions with defined and measurable value for customers and the organization
5. Enable iteration by building prototypes, testing with customers, editing, and testing again

PERSONAS

Personas are tools that can help teams build empathy for customers by understanding the needs and behaviors of others. They help teams view a service offering through the eyes of a customer. Personas are fictional characters developed from research data that represent the different kinds of users who may interact with a given suite of services. Personas can be used as one of many tools during the design process. They do not, however, take the place of co-designing with real customers. Military Spouse Personas for this research effort are presented in the appendix.

Project Ideas



Celebrate Working Military Spouses

Develop methods of calling attention to military spouses who maintain meaningful employment despite the rigors of the military lifestyle in order to demonstrate the value of dual income military families, inspire other military spouses to seek careers, and normalize the idea of working military spouses for policy makers and military leadership.

For numerous reasons, military spouses have difficulty finding meaningful employment. Over years, the stay-at-home spouse has become a cultural norm for the military spouse community, despite being at odds with the trends of American society. Spouses who do find meaningful employment often must work harder than their civilian counterparts to obtain and keep a job. Not only do military spouses report that gainful employment is a major component of self-satisfaction and identity, but also the economic wellbeing of the entire military family is enhanced with the addition of a second working adult. In a society where dual income households are now the norm, the military is holding back its own by not providing sufficient opportunity for spouses to work.

RELATED INSIGHTS

- Finding meaningful employment
- Expectations of military life

Develop Social and Professional Networks

Create military-wide networks of military spouse interest groups that would build community; create continuity between duty stations; and enable spouses to more quickly develop, engage with, and maintain quality social and professional relationships.

A series of spouse-centric programs focused on building networks and providing continuity between duty stations could be built around common interests within the military spouse community. Networks could be built around professional interests or personal hobbies—for example, book clubs, sports groups, or gatherings for spouses with young children. By also incorporating childcare, these groups could be attended by any military spouse.

RELATED INSIGHTS

- Finding meaningful employment
- Building trusted relationships
- Maintaining networks
- Combating stereotypes
- Mental health needs
- Dealing with frequent transitions

Increase Availability of Childcare

Design a global program to provide training for childcare providers—babysitters, nannies, etc.— in order to increase the number of childcare options in military communities and to help bridge the supply-demand gap for childcare amongst military families.

A training and certification program for childcare would begin to address one of the most pressing needs in the military family community—a severe lack of childcare options. Individuals who possess a certification demonstrate to military families that they have completed a specific training process that might include basic child development, emergency procedures, first aid, and financial responsibility. A program like this would provide much-needed additional childcare options for military spouses to complement what already exists on military bases. Whether the services were evening babysitters or full-time professional nannies, the military community would benefit immensely. In addition, the program could create jobs for military youth and civilians in the local community.

RELATED INSIGHTS

- Childcare
- Finding meaningful employment
- Building trusted relationships
- Supplementing systematic programs

Create a Spouse Life Coaching Program

Create a life-coaching program specifically aimed at military spouses with focus on job prospects, financial planning, mental health, and transition assistance.

Many spouses claim to lack the ability to plan their own lives beyond the next change of duty station. If these spouses were equipped with professional life coaches, spouses could learn skills and techniques to think about their own future—no matter how uncertain it might be. This may be a high investment program, but something like this would address one of the major issues plaguing military spouses, today. Life coaches can be a consistent, familiar presence across an entire military journey, despite geographic changes of duty stations.

RELATED INSIGHTS

- Planning for life
- Building trusted relationships
- Mental health needs
- Finding meaningful employment
- Expectations of military life

FOOTNOTES

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- 5 Pew Research Center. "The Rise in Dual Income Households." June 18, 2015. http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_dual-income-households-1960-2012-2/
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Military Officers Association of America. "Military Spouse Unemployment Rate at Least Four Times the National Average." October 6, 2017. <http://www.moaa.org/Content/Take-Action/On-Watch/Military-Spouse-Unemployment-Rate-at-Least-Four-Times-Higher-Than-National-Average.aspx>
- 8 Blue Star Families. "Military Family Lifestyle Survey." 2017. <https://www.secome.org/MFLS-ComprehensiveReport17-FINAL.pdf>

APPENDIX

PERSONAS OF MILITARY SPOUSES FROM 2018 USO DISCOVERY

Personas are tools that can help teams build empathy for customers by understanding the needs and behaviors of others. They help teams think through interacting with a service offering through the eyes of a customer. They are fictional characters developed from the research data that represent the different kinds of users that may experience and interact with a given service or suite of services. Personas can be used as one of many tools during the design process; teams can use them while building prototypes for testing. They do not take the place of co-designing with real customers, but they can be helpful along the way.

Proudly Serving

“Proudly Serving” military spouses live and breathe military life. They know the lingo and military protocol. They believe their supportive role is a special one and feel eager to serve in their own way. They are keen not to embarrass their spouses with missteps, which they feel could negatively affect their military careers. While this group holds deep pride for military life, the day-to-day realities of this lifestyle are draining and stressful. Unpredictable training and deployments make juggling children, finances, and household duties very difficult. More difficult is talking about these challenges and gaining support from people who understand the burdens and who don’t misperceive them as complaining about the military. While the rigors of military life present great difficulties, it’s nothing Proudly Serving didn’t expect. Yet, it can still be hard to deal with it day to day. It’s not uncommon for Proudly Serving to have served in the military themselves or to have been raised in a military family.



“We’re very adaptable. We can flourish, but not always. And we’re constantly bending and molding ourselves.”

“We serve too!”

“It’s his choice to get out. I want to support his career.”

PRIORITIES

Mission First, Family Always

PRIMARY NEEDS

I need safe pathways and outlets to talk about my stresses—including mental health resources that respect the idea that I am proud, but I could also use a hand. I need very specific supports to help me take care of household duties that often fall on my shoulders: financial counselors; reliable, affordable, flexible childcare; and an extra set of hands when my husband is away. I need to be able to make independent decisions about my household without a power of attorney from my husband.

LANGUAGE & TONE

Military friendly language like “service” and “duty to country” appeal to me. I call my husband “my Marine.” I like tones that express and acknowledge my service to the country, the military, my husband, and my children. I ask for acknowledgement of the challenging nature of my daily duties.

GETTING HELP

I don’t really turn anywhere for help—I tend to rely on my husband and myself as much as possible. You have to carry your own weight. I maintain social support by keeping in contact with my friends from old duty stations via Facebook.

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

Transition for me doesn’t just happen when I move. Feelings of transition occur with every deployment, when my friends move away, and when my Marine changes units within our current duty station. I need some way to get supportive services with each transition at a single duty station. He consults me about every re-up, and we’re both anxious and unsure about what life after the military will be like—so, we’ll stay in as long as we can.

IDENTIFYING AS A MILITARY SPOUSE

Yes! I am a military spouse, most definitely and proudly. I lead with and embrace the military spouse role as my primary duty and function.

My Dreams, My Path



“My Dreams, My Path” feel attached to the trajectory they had prior to marrying a military service member. The fact that they got married has no impact on their visions or expectations of pursuing their lives’ goals and dreams. The military lifestyle, however, creates constraints that make it nearly impossible to follow their path. My Dreams, My Path didn’t expect their lives to change so drastically through marriage. They are often left feeling disenchanting, unfulfilled, and extremely frustrated by this realization. They vacillate between feeling deeply hopeless and feeling empowered to make changes for themselves. It’s not unusual for them to proactively request a meeting with the base commander to recommend changes to childcare policies, to be the first responders for a friend in great need, or to create their own virtual careers.

PRIORITIES

Career, Purpose, and Continuity

PRIMARY NEEDS

I want a portable career and continuity between duty stations. I am seeking services that focus on life coaching and attainment of my goals, as well as tangible pathways to careers that fit the military lifestyle. My sense of purpose must be well defined for me to feel whole; without it, I begin to question my entire identity.

LANGUAGE & TONE

Language that addresses identity outside of the military. Terms like “your career and advancement.” I don’t need flowery language, and I don’t like feeling patronized by codling language. I prefer accessible, plain language that emphasizes tangible progress and achievement.

GETTING HELP

I don’t necessarily have a hard time making new allies when we move. That said, my closest friends are my college classmates and my co-workers from my life before I entered military life. I keep in close contact with them, and I see how they are growing and evolving in their lives. I see their promotions and job changes, and it makes me feel increasingly negative about my own prospects.

“Don’t label me as a military spouse;
I hate being called that.”

“The military is stunting the
trajectory of my life.”

“I left a cubicle with my name on it, and now
I am so-and-so’s wife. I’m sitting at home.”

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

Upon entering military life, I need to be swept into an extended orientation that not only teaches me about the real expectations for my life in the military, but also provides immediate and tangible pathways for pursuing my career. Once my husband receives orders for our next duty station, I need a career counselor who can help me navigate a new professional landscape and land on my feet.

IDENTIFYING AS A MILITARY SPOUSE

Not at all. I shun the term. It feels weird to me. In my daily life, I don’t readily offer my affiliation with the military—not because I’m ashamed, but because it doesn’t naturally occur to me. I had a life, dreams, and achievements well before I became a military spouse. Furthermore, I know the stereotypes about military spouses and I don’t want to be associated with that.

Making Ends Meet



For “**Making Ends Meet**”, the military provides all of the basic needs they struggled to obtain in life before marrying into the military, and for this they are grateful. The military provides a steady paycheck, a place to live, and healthcare for the entire family. Making Ends Meet value these, along with the opportunity to move away from their hometowns or countries that have few options for growth and productivity. Despite the benefits, Making Ends Meet still struggle to provide for their families, especially when assigned to a duty station with a high cost of living. They shoulder a lot of the household responsibilities without reprieve.

PRIORITIES

Fulfilled Basic Needs

PRIMARY NEEDS

I am chiefly interested in when and how military benefits are updated, and I seek clear, concise language about how this will affect me and my family so I can make good decisions. I need tangible opportunities to provide for my family—like coupon shopping and free meals. I work multiple jobs as an hourly employee off base, and my childcare requirements can be unpredictable. I need a flexible and responsive child support network and available babysitters are hard to find. Traditional childcare is often too expensive, so I rely on help from friends, who are equally overburdened.

LANGUAGE & TONE

I benefit from tailored recommendations for how I can be more financially secure that feel accessible and achievable. I want plain language about opportunities that enable my family.

GETTING HELP

I find my community wherever we move whether it’s at work, at church, or on base. I make friends with wives from my husband’s unit, and I rely on them for help with childcare.

“We are on WIC because we don’t make enough money to live here. [My children] have been on a childcare waitlist for a year and half. Funding was cut, and there’s another waitlist.”

“Milpay versus what it costs to live in that city; they never match up for enlisted.”

“I felt like I was never sleeping. I took a step back. I had to take double shifts, and it was pretty hard. There wasn’t enough time for my kids, and I would sometimes be up at 2am and there until 4pm.”

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

My situation can be fragile. I am often one step away from a crisis that could severely compromise my financial, health, family, and job stability. I can benefit from a high-touch support network that knows me, embraces my unique situation, and can coach me toward stable and lasting habits.

IDENTIFYING AS A MILITARY SPOUSE

Yes, I do identify as a military spouse. I like my role, and I feel like it helps shape my identity and gives me a purpose I feel good about. I’m thankful for the title.

Searching For My Tribe

Those who are **“Searching for My Tribe”** are aware that they don’t look like most other military spouses—that is, women with husbands and children. They are made more keenly aware of their differences when support systems intended for military spouses don’t address their unique needs. In the 21st century, military spouses don’t occupy the same profile as previous generations, and Searching for My Tribe exemplify the changing military. While they often express frustration when services fall short, they never really expected them to meet their needs in the first place.

PRIORITIES

Reception and Connection

PRIMARY NEEDS

I need to find and connect with others who look like me in order for me to feel like a valuable part of the military community.

LANGUAGE & TONE

Language that respects and appreciates my relatively unique situation as a so-called D.I.N.C. or “dual-income, no children.” The same is true for same sex spouses, male spouses, stay-at-home dads, prior service spouses, etc. I need to hear and read language that feels inclusive to all military spouses.

GETTING HELP

I often find myself very isolated and without anyone to turn to when I need help. I tend to rely on myself and my spouse, who often occupies a similar “outlier” status because of our lifestyle.

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

I’ll slip through the cracks when I encounter supportive services that are largely tailored to the average military



“I have a name, and I have a face.”

“[It’s] a little harder as a male. The women have their cliques and all three of us men have our clique.”

“I just wanted to be treated like everyone else. Not a gay spouse. Not an officer’s spouse.”

spouse. When we land at a new duty station, I could use an outstretched hand to pull me into the military community and an invitation to use existing resources to connect me to new networks. I’ll pay it forward.

IDENTIFYING AS A MILITARY SPOUSE

Sure, I do, but I don’t lead with it. I mean, I am a military spouse, but I guess I don’t really think about it much. I have other identities that I think about much more.

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