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**Military and Veteran Family Needs Assessment and Literature Review:  
Considerations for Arts Providers and Creative Arts Therapists**

**Summary Report: Military Caregivers**

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# MILITARY CAREGIVERS

More than five million people in the United States are military caregivers. This report defines caregivers as individuals who offer unpaid care for veterans or current service members with disabling physical or mental injury or illness (Ramchand et al. 2014). The typical caregiver for a veteran is female, and often a spouse or partner (read our Spouse Summary here). However, caregivers can also be close relatives, including children, parents, friends, and even neighbors. Military caregivers devote their time to assisting service members and veterans with daily living, emotional support, and financial planning in addition to serving as an advocate for their needs and coordinator for health care and assistance programs.

This report explores the challenges these caregivers face as well as how community arts engagement programs can respond.

## NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

### Caregivers

Advances in battlefield medicine have led to more survivors from traumatic brain injury (TBI) and amputation, creating a need for veterans and their caregivers to adapt to and live with life-altering conditions. Veterans receive care for a variety of physical and mental conditions such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as traumatic brain injury, diabetes, and paralysis or spinal cord injury (National Alliance for Caregiving and United Health Foundation 2010). Post-9/11 veterans also receive care for back pain as well as mental health and substance abuse disorders (Ramchand et al. 2014).

Military caregivers are at risk for neglecting their own health as caregiving activities often take priority. This neglect often manifests as disturbed sleep, physical strain, a higher incidence of illness than non-caregivers, and high blood pressure (National Alliance for Caregiving and United Health Foundation 2010; Ramchand et al. 2014). Preventative health care and unaddressed medical needs are a major population need for caregivers.

Caregivers have increased rates of anxiety and depression when compared with non-caregivers due to daily life challenges, such as financial issues, spousal relationships, physical health, whether they have children to care for, and even their gender (Ramchand et al. 2014; Stevens et al. 2015).

A loss of personal identity and independence are also common challenges for military caregivers. Because they spend so much time caring for others, their personal life, including personal relationships, often suffer, which may increase feelings of social isolation. This is especially true for caregivers caring for their spouse. Shifts in intimacy and friendship with the service member occur when caregivers take on a parental role with a spouse or partner, putting these couples at an increased risk of divorce (National Alliance for Caregiving and United Health Foundation 2010; Ramchand et al. 2014).

Grief is another experience and contributor to poor health and social isolation. Caregivers, especially spouses, often grieve because the life they planned has been altered due to the changes in the veteran from TBI or other life-altering conditions (Saban et al. 2016). They also experience increased depressive symptoms and stress when care recipients have marked cognitive challenges due to TBI. Secondary traumatic stress (STS), a condition related to caring for someone exposed to traumatic events, also contributes to poor mental health for caregivers (Bride and Figley 2009; Strong 2018). All these issues may increase feelings of burnout and a desire to leave the caregiver role.

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## Children

Caregiving can impact children as well as the adult caregiver. In 2010, the National Alliance for Caregiving reported that three out of ten veteran caregivers have children under the age of 18 in the household. Sometimes children themselves are pulled into the caregiving relationship and provide care to the veteran.

Learn more about the impact of caregiving on children growing up in military caregiving homes in the report [Hidden Helpers at the Frontlines of Caregiving: Supporting the Healthy Development of Children from Military and Veteran Caregiving Homes.](#)

## STRENGTHS AND RESILIENCE

Caregivers cope with many adverse outcomes of caregiving, however, by overcoming these stressors they also build resiliency. In fact, caregivers have many factors that help them experience resilient outcomes including their health, social support, religiosity, and caregiving networks with friends and extended family (Smith-Osborne and Felderhoff 2014).

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ARTS PROVIDERS

Arts programs should focus on holistic health, ideally including the care recipient in the program when appropriate. Flexibility in scheduling is an important factor to weigh, as caregivers might not be able to participate during traditional business hours. Offering programs in different formats, such as the following, can also ease barriers to access:

- Online programs.
- One-on-one classes (both online and in-person).
- Community classes with other caregivers to foster social connection, stress reduction, and self-care.

Community connection is an important element of successful community arts engagement programs. Caregivers connecting with each other can help reduce isolation and improve mental health.

Arts organizations should build organizational skills in the following areas:

- Using evidence-based practices and evaluating programs.
- Increasing understanding of military culture.
- Collaborating with existing veteran or military serving organizations, and other community-based organizations.
- Conduct continuous outreach to military-connected participants and family members.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR CREATIVE ARTS THERAPISTS

When working with military caregivers, Creative Arts Therapists should consider:

- Offering a holistic approach to serving the military-connected population by serving caregivers, spouses, and children in addition to serving veterans and other military family members, when possible.
- Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach that can include several different types of therapies (e.g., music therapy, art therapy, and mental health counseling) and services (e.g., peer-to-peer support groups, activities, and engagement in the community) to promote engagement.
- Orienting programming around opportunities for self-care, meaningful engagement, and connection to other caregivers. Creative arts therapy services can address needs associated with mental health, identity, stress management, and the caregiver/care recipient relationship.
- Providing flexibility in appointment scheduling, hours of operation, and format of service delivery to reduce barriers to engagement.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Over the course of 12 weeks, a research team collated a data and literature review about experiences of service members, veterans, caregivers, and families. They then collected peer-reviewed content to identify important names, concepts, and connections across disciplines. Finally, a selection matrix of key individuals and organizations was created to help identify 19 subject matter experts who were surveyed about their insights regarding support methods, programs, and effective service.

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