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

**Summary Report: Spouses and Families of
Service Members and Veterans**

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SPOUSES AND FAMILIES OF SERVICE MEMBERS AND VETERANS

A military family member is defined as any person who is the spouse, partner, parent, sibling, or child of a service member. Military families are highly diverse. Generally, military and veteran families have strong family bonds, and adapt to change easily. They value a sense of purpose, teamwork, and service (Park 2011). Many of these traits and strengths help them overcome military-specific challenges or stressors stemming from military lifestyle and transitioning to civilian life (Park 2011; Blaisure et al. 2012).

This summary explores the challenges that spouses and families of service members and veterans face, as well as how community arts engagement programs can respond.

NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Deployments and Separations

Separations happen due to training, schooling or deployments for service members, including National Guard and Reserves. On average, service members are deployed for between 10 to 18 months at a time (Wenger, O’Connell, and Cottrell 2018). Frequent and lengthy separations mean spouses must assume both parental roles and shoulder family responsibilities on their own. Children experience these separations as a loss with older children often assuming more responsibilities and taking on parental-like responsibilities (Hooper, Moore, and Smith 2014).

Transitioning to Civilian Life

While civilian life often means less moving and fewer separations for military families, the transition can be challenging. As service members transition to civilian life, they may lose access to military services, communities, and support systems that lessened burdens and stress during active service, including health care, easy access to fellow military families, and housing support (Karney and Crown 2011). The transition process can be more complicated if the service member or veteran was injured, suffers from post-traumatic stress (PTSD), or traumatic brain injury (TBI). In these cases, spouses often assume a caregiver role (Renshaw, Rodrigues, and Jones 2008).

DEFINING FAMILY IN THE MILITARY

Military policy and programs define ‘family’ narrowly and exclude unmarried partners, multigenerational family members (such as grandparents), or LGBTQ+ families and spouses. This narrow definition does not match the lived experience of military families (NASEM 2019). Although these family members may reside with the service member (or veteran) they are not entitled to military benefits and military programs do not serve these family members.

Service Member Military Families

Few programs are specifically designed for military families and their unique challenges and strengths. Military life includes frequent transitions and moves, family separation, unpredictable work schedules, and a significant amount of paperwork for families. These factors create additional stress due to lack of stability, continuous changes in schools, lack of childcare, and the worry that comes with a family member deployed to another

part of the world. Military families report that social isolation and loneliness are major stressors. Families living off-base may be ‘hidden’ within the civilian community creating social isolation and a lack of connection and belonging to civilian communities and neighbors (Shiffer et al. 2017). The military lifestyle may move families away from grandparents and other family support networks, adding to social isolation (Shiffer et al. 2017).

Dual Service Military Families

Dual-service military families are families in which both parents and/or spouses are service members. This kind of relationship faces unique challenges, especially if children are involved. Some dual-service couples are separated for long periods of time due to deployments or training, and parents must decide where children should live during these times. Parental gender norms often deviate from traditional roles for military families, and these along with work-family conflicts can sometimes cause one spouse (typically the female spouse) to leave the military before retirement.

Single Parent Military Families

Female service members are more likely to be single parents than their male counterparts and single parents are less likely to be officers (Clever and Segal, 2013). While research on the specific needs of single parent military families is scarce, it is thought that single parents in the military experience decreased social support and increased stress when compared to their civilian counterparts, especially where deployments are concerned (Kelley 2006; Vaughn-Coaxum et al. 2015).

Veteran Families

Veteran families include those with a partner, spouse, child, sibling, or parent of a veteran. Veteran families face several challenges. After transitioning to civilian life, veterans often face under and unemployment once they leave the military regardless of health status. This creates financial challenges for families who are now without the housing and other support once provided by the military. After years of deployments with spouses and possibly older children managing both parental roles, veterans and their spouses must renegotiate their family roles. Nearly half of veterans surveyed felt like guests in their homes and 37% were unsure of their role within the family (Sayers et al. 2009). Once out of the military, family members lose access to health care, as the Veteran’s Administration does not serve family members.

Military Spouses

Spouses of service members often struggle with social isolation and feel that they lack an identity. Moving to new duty stations often takes spouses and families far from their home communities and family support networks. Frequent moves and transitions mean spouses are chronically under or unemployed, though often highly educated. Unemployment can increase feelings of social isolation and loss of self-identity (Sonethavilay et al. 2020). These challenges can be felt more acutely by partners who are not recognized as family members by the military and thus do not receive any services. The transition out of the military exacerbates many of these challenges for spouses. They continue to navigate under and unemployment, seek additional education, and address gaps in resumes. Out of the military, they must find access to community and VA services, health care, and benefits. Like their service member spouse, military spouses experience the loss of military community and a loss of identity (Keeling et al. 2020). Unlike their service member spouse, there are few resources, supports, or programs that target spouse experiences (Keeling et al. 2020). Spouses that must take on the caregiver role face additional challenges.

STRENGTHS AND RESILIENCE

Shared experiences help alleviate some of the stressors for military families and reinforce the type of communication that serves as a source of relief. Programs that focus on resilience can also strengthen bonds between spouses and families, and community connection is tied to increased resilience (Blaisure et al. 2012).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ARTS PROVIDERS

Few programs target military spouses and families. Programs should focus on the strengths and resilience of military families, such as shared experiences, openness to change and 'new adventures', and the values of service and selflessness. Programs for families should consider:

- Taking a holistic family-based approach and using a strengths-based approach.
- Helping families make meaning of challenges.
- Building social connections with other families.
- Enhancing family communication and reconnecting after deployments.

Military spouses are less commonly included in programs. Possible program elements should consider:

- Programs that increase social connections.
- Programs that support affirming and building self-identity.
- Programs for veteran spouses, as well as spouses of service members.

Arts providers 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 spouses and families, Creative Arts Therapists should consider:

- Offering a holistic approach in serving the whole family. In addition to serving veterans and service members, include spouses, children, and other family members in the services offered.
- Using a strengths-based approach. Operating from a strengths-based perspective puts the focus on building or enhancing skills, strengths, and relationships, which is often more engaging and more beneficial.

- Embedding evidence-based practice and evaluation in programming. Research and evaluation allows for programs to be more effective and engaging.
- Using a multidisciplinary approach. Multiple treatment options and providers address varying needs (e.g., physical health, mental health, and community engagement) and promote collaboration and coordination among service providers.

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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