



WHITE PAPER

# Deployed Dads: Strengthening Military and Veteran Fathers, Families and Communities

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Since the Cold War, U.S. military planning has included force levels capable of conducting two more or less simultaneous major ground combat operations. As the new millennium advances, however, the need for such high levels of force readiness is declining as campaigns wind down in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, record numbers of military personnel are returning home to families and communities across the country—and many of these veterans and wounded warriors are in need of coordinated assistance in their reintegration to civilian life. The impact on military families of the high operational pace of the past decade of war, longer deployments and more frequent redeployments remains to be seen. In addition, the current economic climate, characterized by increasing demand for civilian job creation and declining resources due to efforts to reduce burgeoning budget deficits, does not bode well for military and veteran families.

This article serves as a starting point for assisting military and veteran fathers in accessing available resources to help strengthen their families and communities. Maintaining an effective and efficient military requires ensuring the health, well-being and economic stability of service members, veterans and their families.

The United States converted its military to an all-volunteer force in 1972. As a result, the armed forces have transitioned from a body overwhelmingly composed of unmarried men without family obligations to a force that includes both men and women—the majority of whom have family commitments. These significant changes have had broad implications for military and veteran fathers and their families.

Further, military and veteran fathers have a wide variety of issues and concerns that other dads do not face. Deployments, moving from one location to another, nontraditional hours and training demands can put additional stress on these fathers and their families. The following discussion is designed to: (1) bring attention to the unique challenges and strengths of America's military and veteran fathers and families; and (2) share

information and create greater connections to ensure that military and veteran fathers and families have the opportunities, resources and support they have earned.

## Deployed Dads at Risk

Between 2001 and 2010, more than 2.2 million U.S. military members were deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Research shows that approximately 593,000 active-duty service members and nearly 300,000 reservists are dads. Other findings show that 150,000 military fathers are currently deployed, with deployments ranging from 30 days to 15 months. Still other results show that these fathers and families are adversely affected by the unique stresses of military life. While all military personnel who are deployed to combat regions are at risk for negative outcomes, military and veteran fathers represent an especially vulnerable group. Results of a recent study reveal that approximately 16 percent of military personnel who faced combat in Iraq demonstrated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Moreover, a growing body of literature suggests that military veterans are at increased risk of depression, anxiety and continuing high stress levels before, during and after deployment. The nexus of physical and mental health concerns, family and interpersonal challenges and an economic climate of high unemployment can impede the reintegration of military veterans into civilian life.

## Spouses, Partners and Deployment

Among U.S. military families, both marriage and divorce rates are higher than they are for civilian populations. These trends can be attributed to a variety of factors, including younger age of first marriage among military personnel, elevated stress levels and conflict involving issues of deployment and family separation. Deployment for active duty in the military can have negative effects on spouses and partners, particularly during pre- and post-deployment periods. While research findings regarding the influence of deployment on interpersonal relationships are



mixed, there is consensus that these relationships are significantly stressed immediately before and soon after deployment. Stress on military veterans and their spouses or partners due to deployment includes increased depressive symptoms, sexual frustration and mood disorders. Other research results show that rates of severe spousal aggression are higher among military husbands and that the probability of partner violence tends to increase with the length of deployment. Still other results show that levels of post-deployment domestic tension tend to diminish over time as military personnel, veterans and their families reintegrate into military and civilian life.

### Children and Parental Deployment

The growing number of parents in the military has contributed to the rise in the number of children who experience separation from their military parents on a routine basis. Over the past decade, more than 2 million children have experienced a parent's wartime deployment. The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that 592,646 of its active-duty service members have children under the age of 23, and the majority of these parents are fathers. In general, research findings concur that military children and youth often experience many of the same problem behaviors as children who live in father-absent homes. Among these behaviors are increased social and emotional, mental and physical health, and academic and adjustment problems. Specifically, research concludes that extended and repeated combat-related parental deployments have been found to increase children's behavior problems both during and after their parents' service. Other results suggest that in cases in which the at-home parent (typically the mother) reports high levels of disruption and distress as a result of deployment, children's levels of anxiety and behavior problems are heightened. Still other results point out that children experience increased academic and adjustment problems when their fathers are absent because of military service. Finally, behavioral and developmental problems associated with fathers' deployment are particularly significant among young boys.

### Joining Forces to Strengthen Military and Veteran Families

While the challenges of the deployment cycle are formidable, the negative impact of a father's military service on his family and children can be mitigated by increasing the family's access to resources to strengthen military and veteran fathers, families and communities. In 2011, President Barack Obama announced commitments by federal agencies responding to his directive to establish a coordinated and comprehensive federal approach to supporting military families. The Presidential Initiative, entitled Strengthening our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment, responds to Presidential Study Directive 9 calling on all Cabinet secretaries and other agency heads to find better ways to provide our military families with the support they need and deserve. In general, the initiative provides a unified federal government approach to help ensure that: (1) the U.S. military recruits and retains America's best, allowing it to maintain the high standards that have become the hallmark of our armed forces; (2) service members can maintain both strong families and a high state of readiness; (3) family members can live fulfilling lives while supporting their service member(s); and (4) the American people better understand and appreciate the experience, strength and commitment of those who serve and sacrifice on their behalf.

Specifically, the initiative provides the federal government's response to the Presidential Study Directive. The response identifies four strategic priorities that address the primary challenges facing our military families; the priorities are: (1) enhancing the well-being and psychological health of the military family; (2) ensuring excellence in military children's education and their development; (3) developing career and educational opportunities for military spouses; and (4) increasing child care availability and quality for the Armed Forces. These four priorities address the concerns and challenges of the families of active duty and reserve component Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard

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members; veterans; and those who have fallen. Each cabinet secretary has pledged to continue to communicate these priorities, share expertise and establish sustainable solutions through leveraging partnerships.

The Presidential Initiative identifies partnerships that expand capacity and quality of services in a fiscally responsible way. The initiative also elevates the need for more awareness of the challenges facing military families and in turn generates more effective use of government resources across society. In addition, the initiative demonstrates how innovation and sharing best practices can generate resources and reduce barriers. Finally, the initiative serves as a springboard to highlight military families' contributions as a national and community resource and identifies opportunities to leverage more of the skills, experience and capacity of military family members.

Consistently, Joining Forces is a comprehensive national initiative to mobilize all sectors of society to give our service members and their families the opportunities and support they have earned. The Joining Forces Initiative: (1) brings attention to the unique needs and strengths of America's military families; (2) inspires, educates and sparks action from all sectors of our society—citizens, communities, businesses, nonprofits, faith-based institutions, philanthropic organizations and government—to ensure that veterans and military families have the opportunities, resources and support they have earned; (3) showcases the skills, experience and dedication of America's veterans and military spouses to strengthen our nation's communities; and (4) creates greater connections between the American public and the military. Joining Forces highlights issues that are of special importance to military families, including employment, education and wellness. The initiative also provides ways for all Americans to support and show their gratitude to our service members and their families. In addition, Joining Forces recognizes the contributions of outstanding American citizens, communities and businesses that support our troops and make commitments to serve our nation's military families.

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## Conclusion

As America's post-9/11 military operations wind down in Iraq and Afghanistan, record numbers of military personnel are returning home to families and communities across the country—and many veterans and wounded warriors are in need of coordinated assistance in their reintegration to civilian life. The impact on military families of the high operational pace of the past decade of persistent conflict, longer deployments and more frequent redeployments remains to be seen. In addition, the current economic climate of increasing demand for civilian job creation and declining resources does not bode well for military and veteran families. Enhanced assistance to military and veteran fathers is called for, not only to help strengthen their families, but also their communities.

Maintaining an effective military demands ensuring the health, well-being and economic stability of service members, veterans and their families. The Obama Administration has set in motion efforts to coordinate the resources of the federal government, identify new opportunities across the public and private sectors and lay the foundation for a coordinated approach to supporting military and veteran fathers and families. In a climate of increasing demand for military family support services and declining resources due to budget reductions, the following recommendations, based on the research, can contribute to informed decision-making that will help ensure military and veteran fathers and their families overcome multiple barriers to successful reintegration.

- **Coordinate, coordinate, coordinate**—Continue to coordinate and build military family support infrastructure focusing limited resources on the provision of comprehensive services during the deployment cycle with increased emphasis on post-deployment reunion and reintegration.
- **Maintain the continuum of care**—Ensure enhanced supports of both active and reserve components, and well and wounded military



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members and their families, across an expanded continuum of care from the military to veteran life cycle.

- **Focus on fathers and families**—Military fathers and their families find themselves in circumstances that exacerbate the routine challenges inherent in military life. Research findings reveal the need for more family supports among this group than among other members of the military community—particularly among young enlisted families, the combat deployed or geographically separated and those who are injured or their caretakers.
- **Follow evidence-based practices**—Continue to ensure that investments made in support of service members and their families are effective via rigorous research combined with strong methodology and using this evidence to inform policy and practice, as well as to develop, implement and improve support programs and services for military veterans and their families.

### About the Author

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Mr. Lewis has 20 years of program management, planning, research and evaluation experience. Currently, he serves as a strategy-focused Fellow for ICF International (formerly Caliber Associates)—a global professional services firm that partners with government and commercial clients to deliver consulting services and technology solutions in social programs, defense, homeland security, energy, environment and transportation. Mr. Lewis provides high-quality professional services that help ICF International clients drive mission effectiveness, develop and manage organizational outcomes, and implement and advance effective programs and policies for the public good. He also serves as a consultant subject matter expert to The Urban Institute, a nonpartisan economic and social policy research organization, and advises on criminal justice system and legislative issues involving improving outcomes for children, families, and communities. Mr. Lewis' broad knowledge base includes: managing federal, state, and privately funded contracts and grants; providing advice and counsel to various agencies and organizations on public policy issues and fund development initiatives; and developing and maintaining value-added strategies, partnerships and effective working relationships with members of various branches of the federal government. His skill set also comprises conducting policy relevant research, developing balanced performance measures, and empirically evaluating programs designed to solve social problems. In addition, Mr. Lewis develops cutting-edge training curricula and delivers state-of-the-art technical assistance to clients in the public and private sector. Finally, he authors papers and proposals, lectures on contemporary social justice policy issues, and provides Congressional testimony.