

# CFRP POLICY BRIEF

## Improving Family Services for Military and Veteran Families

Although the overall rate of child maltreatment is lower among military families compared to civilian families, rates of child maltreatment have risen faster among military families, particularly in the last decade.<sup>1</sup> The Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) Division of the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) launched the Military Families and Veterans Prevention Program (MVP) to provide a range of support services to the three largest military communities in Texas. The Child and Family Research Partnership is evaluating the effectiveness of the MVP program, and determining how communities can best meet the unique needs of military and veteran families. In the summer of 2016, CFRP held focus groups with program providers in Bexar and El Paso; the findings are briefly summarized below.

### What do military and veteran families need?

Providers reported that they were surprised by the breadth and depth of need for prevention services that could reduce the risk of child maltreatment, including:

- Financial assistance, especially for single parents
- Child care
- Housing, especially for veterans
- Basic necessities such as car seats and school supplies
- Transportation
- Community support groups
- Prevention services that include respite care, for when a family is in crisis
- Medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment—the military and veteran community has a heightened risk for conditions that could lead to a Child Protective Services (CPS) case, including Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBIs) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

## What are challenges to serving military and veteran families?

### Barriers to Getting Help

Military families tend to be more private and independent than civilian families. Many families do not seek help until they are in crisis for the following reasons:

- There is stigma associated with accessing help from outside the military, or from known social service organizations, such as CPS, Army Community Services (ACS) or the Family Advocacy Program (FAP). Often within the military, needing to rely social services organizations is viewed as a weakness or dependency.
- Families believe that the military provides access to sufficient resources and are reluctant to leave the base or post for additional services.
- It is difficult to serve children of veterans because only children of active-duty service members are identified by their schools. Veteran children may be at the highest risk of need, given the high proportion of veterans who have PTSD.
- Social services providers often do not outreach to military communities because they assume that the military provides for the needs of military and veteran children.

### Military Schedules, Deployment, and Moving

Active-duty military have demanding schedules that limit their engagement with the program. It is difficult for providers to serve military families because active-duty service members usually cannot commit to long-term or extended programs, due to demanding military schedules, field-training requirements, and the need for permission from commanding officers. Frequent relocations among military families make it difficult for families to connect to resources.

- One provider reported trying to adapt a 7-week class into an all-day class for 7 hours to meet the needs of active-duty military who cannot commit to a 7-week class.
- Children of active-duty service members may be facing isolation because these military families usually move every three to five years and sometimes they move during the middle of a school year, which makes it hard to make friends, and makes youth vulnerable to bullying.
- Military spouses may also be facing isolation due to regular moves, field training, and deployment. The burdens of child care are exacerbated without a partner to co-parent or reliable social networks for support.

## What strategies do providers use to serve military and veteran families?

### Building Trust using Military-Affiliated Staff

Critical to program success is hiring military-affiliated staff (either staff who have a personal history being in the military or having family who was/is in the military).

- Program staff with a military affiliation can connect with military and veteran families through shared experiences and understandings (e.g., social isolation from frequent moves; not being able to vent to a partner, or get away from their kids when they needed a break).
- Military-affiliated staff can go to their personal networks and rely on their knowledge of where and how to interact with these families—this has been particularly important for recruitment. One provider said that they go to military prayer breakfasts and pre-deployment briefs. Another provider said that they go to newcomer briefings, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) events, and military wives' clubs.
- Familiarity with “military language” is important to connect with military and veteran families.

### Persistence and Targeted Recruitment

Providers talked a lot about how to frame and “sell” the program to military families.

- One provider said that they describe their program as a “strength-based” program, in which the program works with the family as a team to help the family use their current resources toward their individual family goals. This approach appeals to military families who do not want to rely heavily on outside resources or case management.
- For veterans, the program can be sold as another way to serve their country.
- Providers said that depending on their knowledge of the people they are recruiting, they will differentially emphasize specific aspects of the program (parenting classes, strength-based wraparound services, and/or case management).
- One provider said that they try to erase the stigma of accessing help outside of the military by connecting with the family and showing that they genuinely care and want to help. Providers reported that building trust with these families could take a long time, e.g., a year of regularly visiting with them at their homes to see how they are doing.
- If the families perceive the program only being for families in crisis or in need of CPS, staff in both El Paso and Bexar reported that being affiliated with certain organizations or agencies can inhibit their ability to recruit families. One provider said that they

created special badges for when staff were working on the military installation that did not include the names of organizations.

- To meet the high needs of families, programs often provide “give-aways” to families such as car seats and school supplies to help them connect with and recruit military families.

## What are on-going program challenges that providers face?

### Program Participation and Coordination with Other Organizations

As the programs establish connections in the military community, providers are starting to identify needs, such as transportation and a central meeting place that would increase program participation. Providers also struggle to coordinate their services with other contractors in their communities (and within the MVP program), and communities are trying to understand how they can work with Family Assistance Program (FAP) on post or base to serve the military and veteran community.

- Providing transportation vouchers or options would increase the program’s ability to reach people. Some spouses do not drive. Spouses living in areas without public transportation cannot access program services.
- A central meeting place would bring together military communities that may be spread out and live in separate parts of town, especially due to racial segregation.
- Offering low-cost child care during parenting classes or events would allow parents who have deployed spouses to attend programming.
- Some providers are still trying to figure out who to contact at the FAP, and hypothesized that the FAP may be lacking resources and connections to the military community, given that they provide so few referrals. Another provider suggested that the FAP may not have the right people to support families and that some of the people in the FAP have been there for 15-20 years and are not aware of what contemporary military families need.
- Contract restrictions discourage providers from spending the necessary amount of time or effort on a family that can only be counted by another program. A few providers talked at length about the lack of coordination between organizations. Providers noted that the contract restrictions motivated competition between organizations that should be working together to provide comprehensive services to families and their children.
- A significant challenge providers face is how to balance the fidelity to the program models they are using to serve military and veteran families with the constraints that the unique needs of these families present.

## Conclusion

MVP communities have been surprised by the breadth and depth of the need for prevention services in military and veteran families. They are beginning to understand why military and veteran families are not accessing the supports and resources that could reduce their risk for child maltreatment, and how their programs might be able to improve outcomes for child abuse and neglect. Providers were driven to meet contract numbers and felt they were successful when they were able to build trust with families to recruit them to the program, and when military families would complete program courses. Providers were especially excited about long-term funding that enabled them to establish partnerships with other organizations and relationships with families that they would be unable to work with, during a shorter time frame.

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*The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.*

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<sup>1</sup> Suma Social Marketing. (2015) A review of literature: Programs for fathers and strategies to engage them in services for child abuse and neglect prevention for military families.