

DEFINING HOMEFRONT READINESS

THE ROLE OF MILITARY FAMILIES
IN NATIONAL SECURITY

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The Department of Defense (DoD) strategy for protecting America's interests is shifting. Former near peers have become peers. Private and local public land and infrastructure now play a critical role in national security as the fight is poised to shift to the digital domain or even to U.S. soil. The DoD spends considerable time preparing its force for potential engagement; one area where the planning often lacks is the homefront and those who help hold it down – military spouses. Do military spouses understand their role in a great power conflict? This question was posed at the Association of Defense Communities Installation Innovation Forum 2024 by the then Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Energy, Installations, and Environment. Below is the response from a group of military spouse advocates who argue that Homefront Readiness is key.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

National security is traditionally measured by military strength, strategic deterrence, and technological superiority. However, a critical under-recognized component of national defense is the stability of the homefront. The ability of service members to remain mission-focused is directly tied to the strength of their support systems—spouses who manage careers amid frequent relocations, children who navigate disruptions to their education, and households that weather deployments and subsequent reintegration.

This is *Homefront Readiness*—a framework that positions military families as a strategic asset in national security. Just as operational readiness ensures forces are equipped for mission success, Homefront Readiness ensures the total force has the stability, resources, and opportunities necessary to sustain it.

At the heart of Homefront Readiness are military spouses, who serve as:

1. **Ambassadors**, strengthening civilian-military relationships and fostering local community engagement that benefits both service members and the regions in which they serve.
2. **Advocates**, driving policy changes that improve key quality of life issues.
3. **Advisors**, offering critical insights to DoD, local governments, and business leaders on the challenges and needs of military families.

Despite long-standing efforts to improve military family support, gaps remain—specifically in employment, childcare, housing, healthcare, and education. Addressing these challenges requires a whole-of-nation approach—engaging DoD, state and local governments, chambers of commerce, and military families to craft policies and initiatives that will reinforce the homefront. Each of these stakeholder groups has key roles to play:

1. **For DoD**, to modernize military family programs using data-driven accountability with targeted investments and create an opportunity for direct feedback from military families.
2. **For states and local governments and chambers of commerce**, to enhance spouse employment initiatives, and strengthen partnerships with military communities.
3. **For military spouses**, to embrace their roles as ambassadors, advocates, and advisors, leveraging their voices to drive systemic change.

By adopting Homefront Readiness as a strategic imperative, we can build a stronger force that is not only ready to fight but supported by a community that is equally prepared.

Key Takeaways

1. **Fully integrating military families into the whole-of-nation approach is vital.**

Military families are deeply embedded in civilian communities, making them key to strengthening national defense through effective collaboration among DoD, policymakers, and local leaders.

2. **Systemic challenges undermine Homefront Readiness.**

Employment barriers, lack of childcare, and communication gaps between military families and leadership create unnecessary burdens, leading to distracted warfighters and weakened force readiness.

3. **Overreliance on volunteerism to achieve strategic goals is a vulnerability.**

Military spouses play a vital role in overall mission readiness and fill key roles within the defense ecosystem—often without pay or recognition. Using the triple-A (Ambassador, Advocate, Advisor) model ensures communities and units include the spouse's perspective on quality-of-life issues without taking advantage of an unrepresented community.

THE MODERN MILITARY SPOUSE

To understand the role of the military spouse, we must realize who the modern military spouse is.

Total Force

2.4 MILLION

Total Force Military Family Members

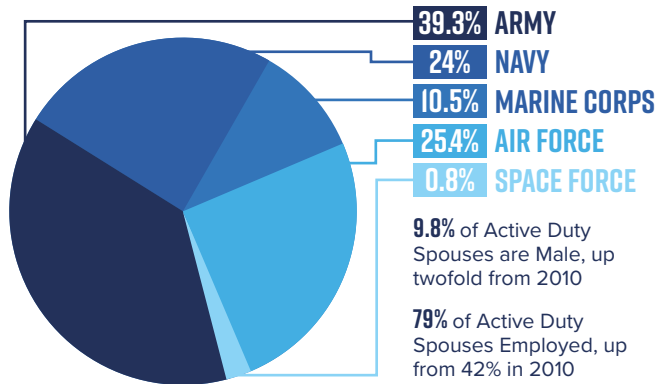
37.2%

Total Force Military Family Members

29.4%

Total Force Civilian Spouses Who Have Children

Active Duty Spouses by Branch



Source: *The 2023 Department of Defense DOD Demographics: Profile of the Military Community*

Military-connected families and spouses navigate their level of engagement based on their capacity at any given moment. With approximately 70% of military spouses living off-installation (Blue Star Families, 2023), being involved in installation events becomes a challenge for many families. Work commitments and/or children's activities often take priority.

To combat these challenges, spouses are often called to be resilient which has led to resilience becoming a defining characteristic of military spouses. Resiliency as a trait rather than a tool is counterproductive. This phenomenon is explained by the "Resilience as Treatment" paradigm, which underscores the disproportionate burden placed on highly resilient individuals. When labeled as resilient, the population bears the burden of structural harm, allowing the status quo to persist for all other stakeholders (Suslovic & Lett, 2024). Military spouses are far more than their ability to adapt and overcome challenges. As a military spouse and CEO of Operation Child Care Project, Kayla Corbitt, aptly states, "Don't call me resilient. Call me relentless."

Military spouses bring unique perspectives to the relentless way they navigate the rewarding, yet often demanding, military lifestyle. They face steep obstacles, including frequent relocations, lack of support systems, isolation, food insecurity, and job instability. Despite such adversity, military spouses remain the backbone of the homefront, while advocating for one another to ensure no family falls by the wayside. The military lifestyle unites spouses from all backgrounds and cultures in one community –the military homefront.



The Roles of Military Spouses in National Security

While the average citizen remains largely removed from DoD's efforts to protect sovereignty, U.S. service members pledge to pay the ultimate price to protect and defend the Constitution. Somewhere in between these extremes lies the support system of the U.S. military: the families who stand behind the warfighter.

Military families – specifically spouses – have a vested interest in the effectiveness of the U.S. military but limited avenues to act on this interest. The support they provide is often grassroots and unpaid. Research has well documented the connections between military spouses, recruitment, and retention (House Armed Services Committee, 2024).

In the current environment, two elements become essential: homefront readiness and a whole-of-the-nation approach. Military spouses are key players in both areas.

Homefront Readiness

It is essential to first define who makes up the homefront and emphasize the need for holistic engagement from all members. Homefront Readiness is not exclusive to service members with spouses or children- it encompasses the Total Force -Active Duty, Guard, Reserve, DoD civilians, and their families.

Every homefront looks different. The needs of a single service member in the dorms differ from those of a single parent on active duty or a family navigating their first outside the continental United States (OCONUS) assignment. Today's military family is not one-size-fits-all. Ensuring the care and support of the homefront is essential to mission effectiveness and sustaining an all-volunteer, lethal, and ready force.

The military's first attempt to address the military family through policy occurred in 1983 by then Army Chief of Staff Gen. John A. Wickham Jr. in a white paper, stating:

Since we are in the readiness business, we are concerned not only with the number of people in the force but also with their degree of commitment – their willingness to not only train but also to deploy and, if necessary, to fight – their acceptance of this unlimited liability contract. The need for reciprocity of this commitment is the basis of the partnership between the army and the army family. (Wickham, 1983)

From this directive, the Army Family Plan was established, laying the foundation for modern military family programs and policy. The social contract between the Department of Defense and military families is unlike any other. No other profession exhibits such a duality and overlap between work and family life. A warfighter's family and relationships directly impact their quality of life, mission focus, commitment to duty, and overall deployability (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

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Whether in a far-off land or on home soil, when the force faces unresolved issues on the Homefront, their warfighter mentality is distracted, and readiness is degraded.”

The military lifestyle often requires military spouses to assume the roles of default parent, home manager, and family advocate. The military spouses' collective effort extends far beyond the walls of military-connected homes. They serve as the connective tissue in and around installations, playing key roles in military family engagement, unit communication, and morale building. Their role on the homefront is ever-expanding as they prepare for the future of warfare, including the possibility that future conflict may not always be oceans away.

In his memo on Refocusing Family Readiness, Air Force Chief of Staff, General David W. Allvin (2024) urges military families to understand the mission, take an active role in readiness early, and be prepared to “take action in a critical moment with limited support while their service member is executing the mission.” (2024) Allvin emphasizes homefront readiness as essential not only in times of military conflict but also in responding to natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, and wildfires, all of which require a skilled and resilient response.

Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide

A fundamental divide exists between military and civilian communities. With only around 7% of the American population having served in the U.S. military, civilian communities are insulated against the costs of war (US Census Bureau, 2021). This divide creates a population with little to no understanding of the true cost of a conflict, leaving it ill-prepared for future wars (Harvard, 2022).

One solution to this disconnect lies in military spouses, who serve as ambassadors, advocates, and advisors, driven out of devotion to the military community – a community to which they somewhat belong, yet remain distinct from.

Ambassadors

Military spouses are defense community leaders, operating across both military and civilian spheres, serving as a vital link between the two. Integrating military spouses into strategic discussions allows them to serve as cultural translators, bridging gaps and dismantling stereotypes on both sides. This unique

dual perspective positions them as leaders within their communities, enhancing cooperation between military families and civilian institutions. This role is vital as policy experts are calling for a whole-of-the-nation approach to provide for a robust national defense.

The 2024 *Commission on the National Defense Strategy* clearly outlines the need for increased public awareness and participation in national defense. The Commission recommends a strategy “that goes beyond DoD and the rest of the federal government and that includes industry, the American public, the U.S. educational system, nonprofit and civic organizations, and U.S. allies and partners” (RAND, 2024).

Homefront Readiness Case Study: Special Forces Communities

The Department of Defense regularly looks to the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community as the gold standard for readiness in action. In the case of homefront readiness, SOF continues to lead the way.

The United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) consists of four special forces branch components – the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps- as well as a sub-unified joint command. SOCOM ethos is deeply ingrained in its three priorities and SOF Truths. SOCOM’s first priority is its people following the core principle: “Humans are more important than hardware” (SOCOM, n.d.). This philosophy has long guided the SOF community.

“The SOF truths were once thought to be solely applicable to the warfighter who wages unconventional war in far-off lands” (Rzepka, 2015). The military -especially the SOF community- gain valuable insight into the long-term impact of war on our warfighters during the 20-year sustained tempo of OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM and coalition efforts in Afghanistan. This knowledge led to the creation of the Preservation of Force and Family (POTFF) program.

Established by SOCOM in 2013, POTFF was designed to address the stressors of multiple deployments and demanding training schedules on SOF forces and their families. SOCOM codifies this concept in its

formal priorities, stating: “Our Force and families are USSOCOM’s competitive and comparative advantage. Our People are the reason we win” (SOCOM n.d.). Using a multidomain model POTFF is broken down into five areas: physical, psychological, social and family, spiritual, and cognitive.

POTFF’s mission for the Social and Family Domain is to strengthen the health and resilience of SOF service members and their families while fostering strong networks to meet the operational demands of Special Operations Forces (Lutter, 2024). “The POTFF program exemplifies DoD’s focus on taking care of people and is a model for similar programs, such as the Air Force’s True North and the Army’s Holistic Health and Fitness programs” (Maier & Fenton, 2024, p. 4).

In 2017, General Raymond A. Thomas, then Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee stating, “Ensuring our families are cared for is a necessary component of our readiness posture” (SOCOM, 2017). Beyond the marriage and parenting enrichment initiatives developed through POTFF programming, General Thomas highlighted SOF families’ role in for early identification of suicidal behavior among SOF personnel. He also emphasized SOCOM’s pilot program developing suicide prevention training for their families. Military spouses serve as the first line of defense in early recognition of stress injuries and suicidal behaviors, playing a critical role in ensuring the mental and emotional well-being of service members.

Implementing this strategy requires citizens who can see both sides and engage in both traditional defense circles and in their communities. While military service is becoming increasingly separate from the broader population, military families remain deeply embedded in their communities.

Advocates

Military spouses advocate for their careers, children, and other dependents as they navigate setting up their lives in new communities. They bring attention to the military community's needs, ensuring their voices contribute to policy discussions and decision-making. Specifically, they add value in three main ways:

1. Key Voices in Quality-of-Life Issues

Military spouses are essential advocates for quality-of-life improvement areas such as childcare, healthcare, education, employment, and housing. Each spouse's experience is unique; however, many challenges and barriers are shared across the community. Their firsthand perspective allows them to identify and highlight areas for improvement, enhancing overall well-being.

2. Identifying and Driving Solutions

Military spouses play a critical role in identifying and implementing solutions to challenges affecting their families. Due to the demanding nature of military service, service members frequently lack the time to manage relocations, family logistics, and integration into new communities. Military spouses fill these gaps, ensuring stability and continuity for their families.

3. Community Engagement

Military spouses are active participants in local communities, engaging in schools, places of worship, and civic organizations. They bring diverse perspectives and experiences, enriching the local communities while fostering mutual understanding between military and civilian populations.

Advisors

Military spouses have long served as volunteers, providing critical support to military units in various capacities. They help manage unit calendars, distribute local resources, and organize events fostering family support networks—a role especially crucial during

deployments. Unit volunteers provide essential guidance to new military spouses who may be unfamiliar with available resources. Additionally, they reduce the communication barrier between military spouses and leadership when service members fail to relay information to their spouses. Relying on volunteers to complete these functions without proper structure and training can lead to misalignment and misinformation.

“When applying for jobs, I have found that my DoD volunteer work is not accepted as work experience.”

Military spouses continue to be asked to run unit support programs in an economy where most American families rely on two incomes (BLS, 2024). Being an unpaid advocate out of love for a community is one thing; serving as an unpaid advisor to an organization as large as DoD – which budgets millions of dollars on quality-of-life issues – is another thing entirely (DoD, 2023). Spouses are often given well-intentioned but misleading advice that volunteer work, such as a Family Readiness Group (FRG) leader, will translate on a resume. However, volunteer roles like this rarely combat the 23% unemployment rate in the military spouse community (BSF, 2024). Establishing official leadership roles for military spouse advisors independent of relation to commanders would be a strategic move, ensuring their contributions are both effective and acknowledged as part of a whole-of-nation approach to supporting military families.



CALL TO ACTION

DoD

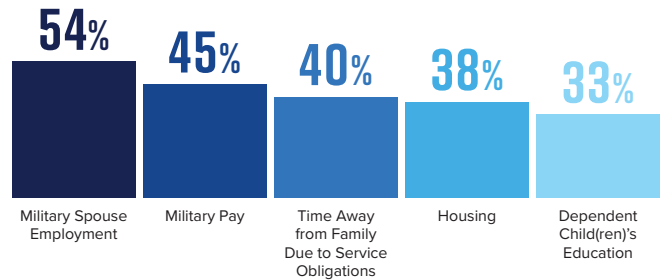
While DoD has attempted to track the influence of spouses on retention, no research has examined the nuanced effectiveness of military family policy and its impact on both recruitment and retention (BSF, 2023). A study of this caliber would be critical in assessing the effectiveness of military family policy and if cultural change has been achieved in this area.

Re-Evaluate How Family Readiness and Support Centers Are Measured

DoD provides a range of family support services to enhance the well-being and readiness of military families. Programs such as Military and Family Readiness Centers (M&FRCs), Fleet & Family Support Program (FFSP), and Army Community Service (ACS) are critical to ensuring service members and their families receive financial, emotional, and logistical support. Evaluating the effectiveness of these programs is essential to ensure the evolving needs of military families remain accessible to all.

DoD assesses the impact of family support services through multiple channels, including The Status of Forces Survey (SOFS), The Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), and program-specific assessments such as the Military Family Readiness Program Review. Despite these efforts, several challenges persist. In RAND Corporation's 2011 report, "A New Approach for Assessing the Needs of Service Members and Their Families," authors concluded that existing DoD assessments were insufficient for effectively identifying and addressing the needs of military personnel and their families. In the last 14 years progress has been made, but the challenges persist. The Blue Star Families Lifestyle Survey shows that the top issues for Spouses are largely within these centers' areas of responsibility (BSF, 2025).

Top 5 Military Spouse Concerns



Source: *The 2024 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey*

Military families require services that are fiscally responsible and promote independent use. One improvement opportunity is data. Real-time data is limited due to current assessment tools relying heavily on periodic surveys which miss urgent and emergent needs. Additionally, there are significant barriers to access, including but not limited to remote locations, frequent relocations, and stigma around seeking support. Finally, there is the variability of standards across installations; some bases offer extensive family support, while others have fewer resources, creating inconsistencies in access and trust in services.

A needs-based assessment approach is crucial for DoD to design and implement programs that genuinely meet the evolving needs of military families. By placing the experiences and perceptions of military families at the forefront, this framework aims to inform the development of more responsive and effective support programs.

To improve evaluation and accessibility, the DoD should commission a comprehensive study on use and accessibility using a longitudinal, mixed-methods study. Areas of focus include:

1. Real-Time Usage Data Collection

Implement a secure, anonymous digital check-in system at M&FRCs, FFSP, and ACS locations to track engagement trends. Integrate AI-driven analytics to predict emerging needs based on service member demographics and operational tempo.

2. Accessibility and Barriers Study

Conduct focus groups with military families across diverse duty stations (urban, rural, overseas) to identify common barriers. Examine the impact of rank, deployment cycles, and dual-military families on program usage. Assess the effectiveness of virtual and mobile resources compared to in-person services.

3. Impact Measurement and Policy Recommendations

Develop a standardized performance evaluation framework tied to DoD's broader family readiness goals. Provide recommendations for resource allocation based on data-driven insights- including benchmarking other community and non-profits services. Assess the feasibility of expanding funding for underserved installations.

By adopting a data-driven, family-centered approach, the DoD can ensure that its family support services remain both effective and accessible, strengthening military readiness and retention.

Create Direct Feedback Opportunities for Spouses

To balance the power dynamic between the service member and the dependent, military spouses need to see timely and meaningful change when facing challenges. The only documentable options are Interactive Customer Evaluation (ICE) comments for service providers or Inspector General (IG) complaints. ICE comments are meant to "enable the users (customers) of Department of Defense (DoD) services to provide feedback (comments and/or ratings) about the products and services that they have utilized" (ICE, 2024). ICE is well-intentioned and can be very effective if used correctly. However, outside the individual asking for feedback on the form there is almost no clear escalation point. If one is only looking at military families as DoD customers, that may not matter.

The limited number of solutions available to military spouses to navigate military life highlights the lack of agency in the current system. Taking all matters, large or small, through such a formal process creates resistance to use. It disenfranchises military families and creates fear of retribution. As pointed out by a policy professional, the DoD has an opportunity to employ spouses to create a feedback office like that

of the VA's Veterans Experience Office (Hilton, 2024). Breaking down barriers to feedback detangles the force from essential readiness tasks by empowering military spouses to act on their behalf.

States and Local Communities

Establishing structured military-community partnerships fosters a symbiotic relationship between installation affiliates and their host communities by strengthening local economies, enhancing support networks, and improving quality of life for military families.

Understand the Lasting Economic Impact of the Military Community

Community development organizations and non-profits play a key role in improving quality-of-life factors that directly impact military families. Chambers of Commerce facilitate business investment and directly impact the communities' degree of military friendliness. When businesses and community stakeholders adopt a military-friendly mindset together, military families experience an easier transition into the community as well as directly impacting the longevity of military service.

When serving as a unified voice, chambers can directly advocate for initiatives to address key issues such as un- and under-employment for military spouses, anti-discrimination in housing and employment, small business support for military-affiliated entrepreneurs, and advocacy alignment with DoD state legislative priorities. Military spouses significantly influence economic decisions for their families. These military families integrate into neighborhoods, local economies, and social networks. Instilling programs to support thriving spouses will translate into thriving communities. Elevating the economic status of military members and their families benefits the entire community and the government. Providing military community workforce development reduces the estimated \$1.07 billion annual cost to the government that results from spouse unemployment. The high spouse unemployment rate creates lost income tax, higher payout of unemployment benefits, and a lack of healthcare benefits. (Sorenson Impact Center, 2016). It is mutually beneficial for communities to make a business case for military-friendliness within their mission, vision, and purpose.

Building Military-Civilian Partnerships Is No Longer Optional

Chambers of Commerce should consider incorporating military affairs-connected responsibilities within their organization or expand to create a new position that ensures military engagement practices are in support of the chamber's mission and vision. This role can include functions such as advocacy, military-connected employment, community and installation alignment, quality-of-life initiatives, defense-related economic development, connection to local and national initiatives, and serving as a military-to-community liaison. Many chambers and economic development organizations have already incorporated military-affiliated positions within their local organizations. These partnerships can support benefits for military affiliates that traditionally fall outside of the scope of the installation, including promotion of military discounts, appreciation programming or events, land use alignment, and advocacy for non-installation issues that impact basing decisions. Additionally, national support is available through the U.S. Chamber Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes program and the Military Spouse Chamber of Commerce.

Within communities where there is a heavy DoD presence, a top priority should be to establish military interest groups, such as a military affairs committee (MAC). The traditional role of MACs has been to support lobbying and advocacy for pro-military initiatives at local, state, and federal levels. However, these organizations have expanded to support modern military needs, such as quality-of-life initiatives, economic development, and BRAC-proofing (Elevate Rapid City, 2021). Additionally, MACs can serve as the primary conduit between the base and its community, ensuring the flow of information between the two and that the installation's needs are met. Some installations, such as Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas, host DoD-funded positions within their Community Partnerships program to support such services. (Air Force Community Partnership, 2023).

Ensure Military Spouses Are Recognized as Key Stakeholders in Community Quality-of-Life Decisions

When forming a MAC-type organization, consider the needs of the military community when crafting priorities to support not just your installation but the families that dwell in your region as a result.

Within communities where a MAC or similar entity exists, ensure there is adequate representation from military spouses, preferably at different ranks and life stages. Communities, no matter how well-intentioned, cannot address needs of which they are not aware. Communities can strive to address issues with quality local inputs by involving military families in their decision-making processes.

Create a State Military Spouse Liaison Position

Pertinent resources for spouses require tailored solutions at the national, state, and local levels. At the state level, the liaison position would aid in workforce development, military-friendly legislation, and increasing a sense of belonging to encourage military families to put down roots. A liaison can offer workforce solutions and career development to the military community by promoting partnerships with employers, state stakeholders, installation leadership, and community leaders. Promoting military friendliness increases the talent settling in the region and encourages businesses to expand there as well. Additionally, the role is a focal point for military families in the state to elevate concerns that are not being addressed at the installation. From this viewpoint, they can address any negative trends or enshrine best practices with policy or legislation.

Get to Know Your Defense-State Liaison Office Regional Liaisons

The Defense-State Liaison Office (DSLO) is a specialized office in the DoD that focuses on ensuring states have the information and support to address military family issues. They are trusted advisors who are key stakeholders in addressing quality of life for the homefront. Their legislative priorities provide insight into how a state can achieve military-friendly status and ensure DoD installations remain in their state. One example of their legislative priorities is expanding veteran protections for housing and employment to military dependents, which was added as a DSLO priority in 2024. Five states have implemented employment and housing protections, and four states have introduced legislation awaiting decision (DSLO, 2025). Understanding the impact of DSLO priorities for the homefront is essential for states to do their part in the collective defense.

A NOTE TO MILITARY SPOUSES

Just as the military is a microcosm of society, so are military spouses. This community is rife with solutions but is often not empowered to share them. Military families have been invited to the table through tireless advocacy from past military spouses. Current families should strive to continue that work through continued engagement with DoD, defense communities, and military service organizations. As military community advocates, we understand the challenges of advocating for yourself or others and ask where you can – do it anyway. Our strength is in bringing our individual lived experiences forward with the drive to better the entire homefront.

Don't Complain; Advocate

There's a line between advocating and complaining and the differentiator is intent. Are you trying to solve the problem or do you just need to vent and move on? Use these tips to boost your efforts when advocating for the military population.

1. Be objective.

If you are not yet in a place where you can clearly look at the situation, make sure you have a conversation with a trusted friend or mentor first. The last thing you want is to show up unprepared or overly emotional. Take your time here. Seek guidance and do your research. Emotion is not the enemy of reason, but your ability to communicate and be heard may be clouded when emotions run high.

2. Know your ask and come with solutions.

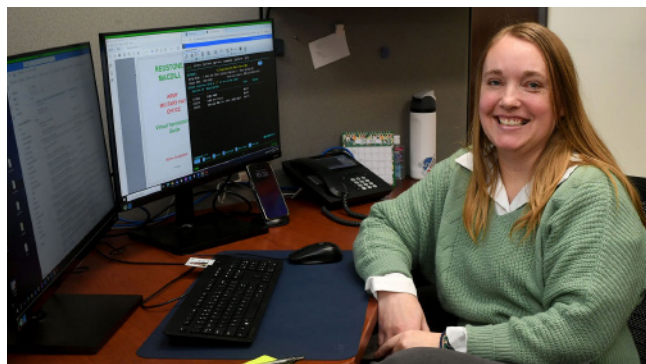
Sharing your challenges is important. Even more important is being able to bring solutions to the challenges you are experiencing. Before you can get to solutions, you must know your ask. What specifically are you looking to do or change? Focus on a bite-size solution first and then build on it over time. For example, asking for a major policy change or special consideration from a base hospital is unlikely unless you've done some serious groundwork. However, advocating for a referral because you'd like more specialized care or a second opinion is very attainable.

3. Bring the Data

In advocacy, focusing on the facts of your request is the key to convincing your audience. We know it's challenging to maintain a career and many of us can share anecdotal evidence. What is more compelling is citing the Blue Star Families report stating that military spouses face 23% unemployment (BSF, 2024). Take it a step further by contrasting that the national unemployment rate in the 4th quarter of 2024 was 4.1% (BLS, 2024). The data shows there is an issue for military spouses. The labor participation rate is similar to their civilian peers, and yet military spouse unemployment is more than five times the national average. Use that data to tell a story or solve a problem for the intended audience. Since both DoD and military families want our military to be the premier fighting force, lowering military spouse unemployment can now be presented as a DoD issue. In short, use data to make your problem their problem.

4. Get the right people to the table

You have data and a proposed solution with a reasonable ask, now you need to make sure you are asking the right person. Who are your stakeholders, and who is the decision authority? Make sure the organizations impacted by your request are on board before bringing it to a decision-maker. If there is resistance at this level, don't stop there, but be prepared to mitigate the risk of disagreement. The person deciding will want to understand the broader impact and will likely ask the stakeholders their opinion. You want to know what those people will say before this conversation happens. If you have the best solution in the world, but the person you are asking can't enact your solution, it's not going to be successful.



DECIDE YOUR ROLE

As the DoD seeks to enhance lethality with fewer resources, the temptation to rely on unpaid military spouse labor grows. Documented cases show that military spouse contributions have saved DoD hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. In one hospital in Germany, the DoD saved "more than \$600,000 in unpaid labor, according to Red Cross figures in 2023" (Bath, 2024). These military spouse nurses, physical therapists, or other medical professionals were encouraged to volunteer for the Red Cross with the hope of obtaining a full-time paid position, which often did not materialize. While heavy reliance on volunteer labor works as a short-term solution, it ultimately leads to disenfranchised dependents and undermines the whole-of-nation approach. When military spouses don't see a path forward, they disengage impacting service member job satisfaction thus creating a readiness and lethality issue for the total force.

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It's more than free labor; it's a net loss to volunteer and have to pay for childcare.”

Each military spouse must decide if unpaid advocacy offers enough influence to make change for the military community. Understanding the social contract between the DoD and families is essential to ensuring you are functioning as an advocate and not an unpaid advisor in this community. There are right and wrong choices for every spouse, and the key is to strengthen the systems that legitimize homefront readiness efforts for those who want to participate. These systems allow the warfighter to focus on being the most lethal fighting force and protecting the American way of life.



THE BOTTOM LINE

Military spouses are force multipliers whose homefront contributions are critical to national security. Fortifying the homefront through policy, community partnerships, and strategic engagement will ensure the viability of the all-volunteer force for national defense.



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