The third and final breakout session focused on action planning to address the top five consensus goals. At the conclusion of this breakout session, a final presentation in the main auditorium provided an opportunity for each group to describe their top 3 action steps. Using the process described previously, all Summit participants registered their vote on which of these steps should represent the top priorities for DoD family support and readiness programs. The top three actions steps are listed below, and can be considered a roadmap for ensuring that military support professionals working into the next decade can continue to build on the accomplishments made since the beginning of the post 9/11 era:

- ★ Action Step 1: Create a coordinated, strategic map of all existing programs to identify redundancies and opportunities for consolidation; develop metrics of success and evaluate all programs to determine which are working.
- ★ Action Step 2: Design and implement a strategic communications plan to (A) improve service member and family awareness of existing resources/programs; (B) communicate realistic expectations about military life and the role of programs in supporting families; (C) share information and best practices; (D) optimize collaboration with community and non-governmental partners; and (E) employ cross-channel marketing and new media (e.g., social networking sites, Web 2.0) to reach diverse groups of families with the right message at the right time.
- ★ Action Step 3: Renew the Department's focus on behavioral health services to ensure access, availability, and education to encourage early identification, and to reduce the stigma associated with treatment of mental health.

Summary

More than 150 military family policy makers, senior leaders, service providers, practitioners, researchers, and family members participated in the National Leadership Summit on Military Families, offering their diverse insights and experiences. With a focus on the unique needs of military families in this "era of persistent conflict," the participants worked productively with their colleagues during the course of the two-day event to craft proactive recommendations for DoD's family support and readiness programs. Throughout the Summit, organizers encouraged participants to come up with innovative ways to enhance collaboration and partnership between agencies, both within and outside of the military. This would help in better meeting the current needs of military families and strengthening the capacity of the support system to anticipate and respond to future challenges.

Reinforced with the results of recent research on the impact of OEF/OIF on military families, Summit participants first defined and prioritized the specific challenges that military families are facing: the stress of repeated deployments, access to support for psychological health, obtaining information about the specific resources available and how to access them, a lack of consistency and predictability in support services, and issues related to frequent transition and relocation.

With a general consensus built around the major challenges, participants then worked to articulate the appropriate goals and scope of DoD family readiness and support programs, outlining specifically what families should be able to expect, and which areas are outside the limits of what can realistically be provided.

Among the major themes that surfaced included: the requirement for evaluation to determine the effectiveness of programs (i.e., are programs meeting the goals for which they were created?); enhancing the DoD's ability to communicate effectively with a range of stakeholders (including family members, service members, leaders, support providers and staff, NGOs and the general public); establishing and strengthening partnerships with community resources/agencies (such as the Cooperative Extension Service) to fill gaps and deliver the most effective solutions; addressing the psychological health of families and service members; and ensuring that effective programs exist to engage military children and youth.

Participants in the final breakout session were charged with identifying their group's top three priorities for action. At the final general session on the Summit's second day, a representative from each group articulated these priorities for the full audience regarding the top action steps for DoD military family support and readiness programs. In this final session, the Summit participants put forward the following three priorities:

1. Categorize and evaluate programs to enhance effectiveness, consistency and return on investment;
2. Develop and implement a strategic communications strategy that reaches families with what they need to know, and connects them with those who have the capacity and resources to provide support;
3. Strengthen the Department's ability to provide for the psychological well-being of military personnel and their families (with a particular focus on the health of children in these families).

The major themes, challenges, and action steps—articulated over the course of the Summit by more than 150 individuals involved in policy and provision of services for military families—incorporated with the input from military family listening sessions and other data, can be seen as an organizational blueprint for improvement and change for the DoD family support and readiness community. The National Leadership Summit on Military Families Final Report is recommended reading for those interested in a more detailed description of all of the ideas and recommended action steps that were expressed at the Summit.

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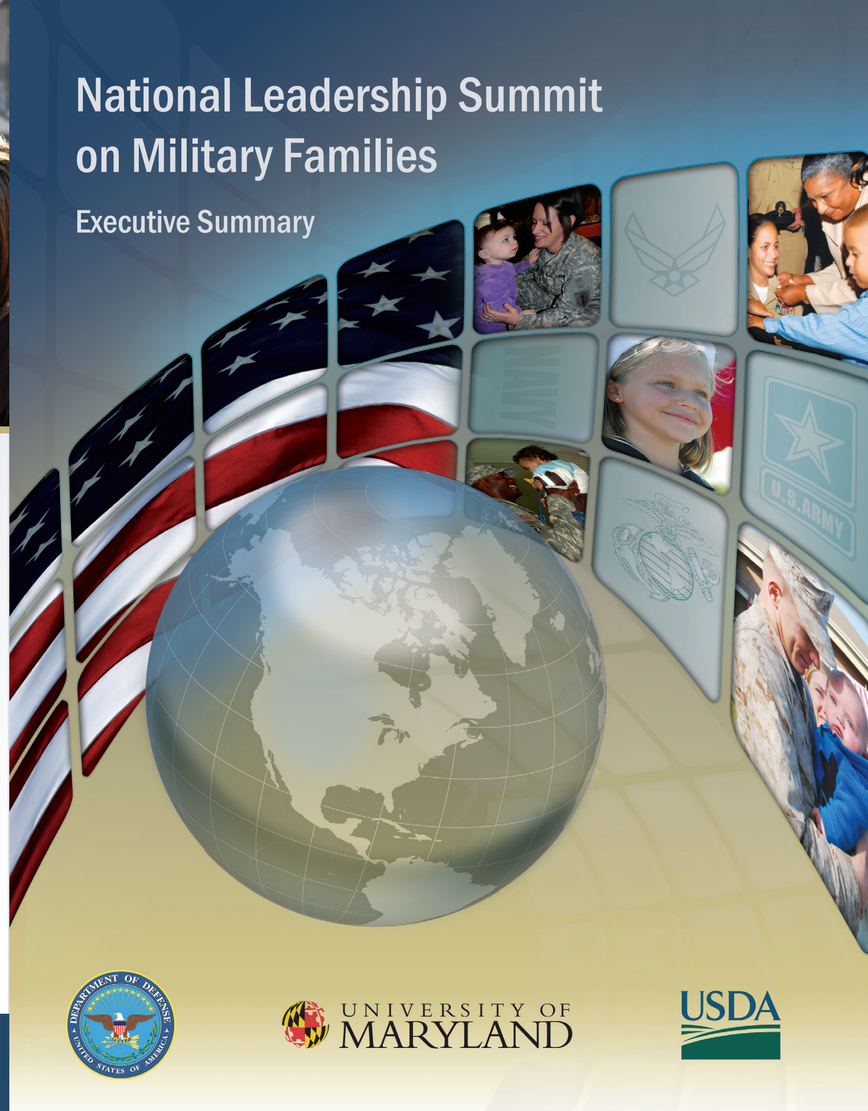
National Leadership Summit on Military Families

National Leadership Summit on Military Families

Executive Summary



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Executive Summary

Background

The National Leadership Summit on Military Families (the Summit) is one of the steps in an ongoing process to transform military family support and readiness programs and eventually lead to more effective coordination and implementation. The Summit was held November 9 - 10, 2009 at the University of Maryland University College Inn & Conference Center in Adelphi, MD. The Summit was a partnership between Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the University of Maryland.

This innovative partnership grows out of recognizing the value of using the unique resources of these organizations to benefit the quality of life of military personnel and their families. These organizations include agencies that conduct research on military families, provide direct services to military personnel and their families, and possess the potential to provide even more knowledge and services to enhance military family well-being.

Participants

Summit participants included senior military family policymakers, family program leaders and their staff, military family researchers, and military family members. Additional participants included faculty from the University of Maryland and other land grant universities, and staff from USDA who have ties with military family programming. All of these participants share common interests in strengthening the well-being and resiliency of military families during an era of persistent conflict, and the goal of transforming family support and readiness programs in ways that enhance their effectiveness, efficiency, and overall impact. All the military service components were represented at the Summit (including the Department of Defense, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard and Reserve components), as were land-grant universities and other non-governmental partners.

Summit Objectives

The objectives of the Summit were to bring together those most knowledgeable about contemporary military family issues and challenges—and the programs/services in place to support service members and their families—to candidly discuss areas of strength, opportunities for improvement, and methods to enhance collaboration within and across the Department of Defense (DoD), the military services, USDA, the land-grant universities, and the Cooperative Extension Service. The Summit also challenged participants to identify barriers to effective support and to create specific action steps based on group consensus. The action steps developed at the Summit, which are described in this document, represent the participants' collective vision about which areas in military family support must be considered top priorities and what specifically needs to be done to ensure (a) military family programs are relevant to the challenges families face today, and (b) programs are appropriately configured and resourced to produce meaningful, measurable outcomes.

Summit Activities and Process

The Summit was kicked off by a 'call to action' by Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, Mr. Tommy Thomas. In his remarks to participants, Mr. Thomas

emphasized their role as active contributors in helping chart the way forward for military family support, and encouraged them to use the next two days to collectively define the top issues and challenges facing military families and the family support community, and to craft and prioritize the actions required to address these needs. Mr. Thomas also opened the Summit's second day of work by summarizing key accomplishments from earlier related activities, including the DoD Joint Family Readiness Conference held in Chicago during September 2009.

The Summit keynote address was delivered by the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans Ms. Gail McGinn, then performing the duties of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. She emphasized the progress that has been made in supporting military families since Army Chief of Staff John A. Wickham's seminal white paper "The Army Family" was published in 1983. Ms. McGinn acknowledged that the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are placing military families under more strain than at any time in the era of All-Volunteer Force, and that more needs to be done to ensure that programs and policies are able to meet current challenges. Some of these challenges include ongoing, repeated deployments, a geographically dispersed military population, and changes in the ways military families communicate and access information.

Remarks by Mr. Thomas and Ms. McGinn were followed by an introduction and welcome from University of Maryland President Dr. Dan Mote, who emphasized the university's commitment to America's service members and veterans, and described the unique role played by the land grant universities in national defense and the opportunities to continue that tradition through CES programs.

Following these tone-setting remarks, participants were provided an overview of research findings on military families from Dr. Shelly MacDermid-Wadsworth, Director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, and Dr. Beth Ellen Davis, Chief of Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics at Madigan Army Medical Center. Additional research findings from recent and ongoing studies and surveys of military families were provided on day two of the Summit by Dr. Angela Huebner of Virginia Tech's Department of Human Development, and Dr. Rachel Mapes, Special Assistant for Policy, Planning and Evaluation in the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Plans).

Following the first research overview, a panel of nine military spouses from across the various military service components shared their reflections and experiences on being in a military family during a time of persistent conflict. A question and answer format was employed, in which both a MC&FP moderator and audience members posed questions to the panel. Though these military spouses, all female, described numerous challenges that they had faced and were facing as a consequence of being in a military family, the panel as a whole exhibited a high degree of resilience and commitment to helping improve the quality of family support.

During the afternoon of the first day of the Summit, attendees participated in the first of three breakout sessions, which constituted the main work of the Summit. Facilitators and recorders, mostly University of Maryland faculty and graduate students, were present in each session to ensure that the questions to be addressed were consistent across groups and a transcript was captured reflecting the discussion and recommendations. By design, the focus of the last two breakout sessions built on the results and conclusions arrived at in the prior sessions. The topics of the sessions were:

- ★ Breakout session one: Unique issues and challenges for military families
- ★ Breakout session two: The goals and scope of family support and readiness
- ★ Breakout session three: Identifying action items and next steps

Each breakout group chose a speaker for the general session to describe their group's top issues and findings. All participants then had an opportunity to vote via electronic clickers on priority issues, goals and action steps, with the resulting selected priorities being displayed in real time on a large screen. Armed with the priority issues and topics as selected by majority, group members then were tasked to address these specific subjects when developing recommended courses of action in subsequent breakout sessions. Major themes and action steps from the breakout and general sessions are briefly summarized below, and described in detail in the Summit final report.

Summit Outcomes

Not surprisingly, participants in breakout session one raised a wide range of issues and challenges that affect the well-being of military families. The following information provides a sample of these issues.

Selected Military Family Issues and Challenges Raised by Summit Participants

- ★ Length of deployments/multiple deployments
- ★ Need to improve access to medical care, psychological health and other support services
- ★ Need for standard, consistent, predictable programs regardless of component/location
- ★ Addressing stigma of seeking and obtaining mental health and family support services
- ★ Challenge of providing support & information to geographically dispersed families
- ★ Need to communicate the resources/information about family and community support to families
- ★ Effects of deployments on children and youth
- ★ Financial issues faced by military families (particularly for Guard and Reserve)
- ★ TRICARE issues, such as a lack of providers and challenges making appointments
- ★ Childcare, including the need for flexibility, equitability, accessibility (particularly for Reserve component families)

In the general session that followed, representatives from each group put forward their group's top issues and challenges to the full audience, which then rank ordered the top five priority issues through a group vote. The consensus top five issues were:

1. Challenges of the deployment cycle
2. Psychological health of military families
3. Access to services and consistency of support
4. Communication challenges
5. Frequent relocation

Based on this prioritization, participants in breakout session two were challenged by Summit coordinator Dr. Cathann Kress to define the appropriate goals and scope of family support and readiness programs. Following breakout session two, a representative from each group "reported out" their group's priority goals in a general session. The full audience of participants then cast their votes to collectively determine the top five goals, which were:

1. Evaluate programs and build on successes
2. Communicate critical information to family members
3. Establish collaborative partnerships
4. Address psychological/behavioral health needs of military families
5. Develop and implement programs supporting military children and youth