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# A New Approach for Assessing the Needs of Service Members and Their Families

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## Summary

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Since the advent of the all-volunteer force in the 1970s, military family programs and quality-of-life initiatives for service members have grown and continue to grow. Despite widespread belief that these programs enhance military recruitment, retention, readiness and performance, scant evidence exists to demonstrate this link, or to determine what types of support have the greatest impact or return on investment. A 1988 Department of Defense Directive<sup>1</sup> requires military family support programs to be responsive to the needs of service members and their families, yet most assessments place existing programs at the center of the inquiry, not the needs of personnel and their families. Assessments that do ask about needs typically fail to link them with program use or whether those programs helped to meet those needs.

This document proposes a research framework and survey that differs from existing survey efforts. The new approach allows us to link service members' and spouses' most pressing problems to their self-defined resulting needs. Then, within that context, it can link those responses to responses about military and nonmilitary services used and not used and perceptions about those services, including whether they were able to help solve problems. This monograph proposes a research framework and a survey that differs from existing survey efforts. The new approach allows us to link service members' and spouses' most pressing problems to their self-defined needs. Then, within that context, it links those needs to the military and nonmilitary services they used and did not use and their perceptions about those services, including whether they helped solve their problems. The monograph shows the process by which we developed and tested this framework and a sample corresponding survey instrument. We also discuss how this approach differs from others, the challenges to implementing such a survey, and the value of the potential survey results to different types of military leaders and support service professionals.

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<sup>1</sup> Directive No. 1342.17, *Family Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1988.

## **How Can We Frame an Approach to Understanding Service Member and Family Needs?**

This study developed a new methodological framework for assessing military personnel and military family needs that fills a gap not currently met by existing efforts. The framework places personnel and spouse perceptions of problems and needs and prioritization of those problems and needs at the center of the analysis. The framework follows the logic of a set of questions that a research initiative on this topic should pursue:

1. What is the context? Context includes Military Service (henceforth referred to as Service), base, and personnel and family demographics, such as information about children and deployments.
2. What have respondents experienced as problems? The framework captures experiences across several domains (e.g., health, finances, or spouse employment) that service members and spouses self-define as rising to the level of a problem. For those with problems in multiple domains, this approach includes asking for prioritization of the most significant problems.
3. What types of help did respondents need in order to address their most significant problems (e.g., the need for information, advice, or counseling)? Which of those problem-related needs did they deem the greatest?
4. What military and nonmilitary resources did personnel or their spouses contact to try to meet the most important needs?
5. What factors made military and nonmilitary resources easier or more difficult to access? What barriers and bridges did the respondents perceive or encounter?
6. Did the resources that personnel or spouses contacted actually help them meet their problem-related needs?
7. What is the connection between met needs and outcomes? Outcomes could include satisfaction with military life and troop and family readiness and retention.

This approach is not designed to provide a comprehensive picture of any particular program or of the military community. Instead, it focuses on the most significant problems and needs that service members and their families are facing, and how and whether those priority needs are being met.

## **What Type of Tool Will Better Enable Decisionmakers to Understand and Support the Military Community?**

Using the framework based on the questions above, we developed a sample survey instrument to assess the needs of active-component single and married service members and spouses facing problems in any of an array of problem types. We developed

the survey content by synthesizing information from a variety of sources. Brainstorming focus groups with Army and Marine Corps service members, spouses, and support providers (such as chaplains, medical professionals, and first sergeants) helped us develop content that was current and relevant to their experiences. Meetings with subject matter experts and military leadership also provided their insights on the key issues and concerns from the perspective of the decisionmaker and resource manager. A review of previous research highlighted issues of concern historically, and a review of DoD survey instruments in this domain revealed what previous efforts considered worthy of assessment. Thus, the issues addressed—such as childcare, health care, mental health, relocations, and financial problems—are not unknown to military leaders or service providers and they do appear in prior research efforts. What is new is the approach of centering the experiences on service members and their families and drilling down to trace the connections between problems and associated needs to the resources that respondents contacted to meet those needs, to barriers and bridges to using government and private resources, and finally to whether respondents' needs were actually met. A limited pilot test of this new instrument with 759 respondents also helped identify problems, needs, and types of resources relevant today, particularly through the open-ended options in each category and at the end of the survey. The subsequently revised survey instrument, provided in Appendix A, illustrates the application of the research framework. However, this instrument could be modified, or existing surveys could be modified, and still successfully embody the new research approach.

To preserve the value of the new approach, several critical elements of this tool should be retained through modification or the creation of a new tool or adaptation of an existing survey tool. First, the population should be given the opportunity to provide information on the problems and needs that matter to them most. Second, the survey should be programmed to trace the linkages between problems, needs, resources contacted, and whether resources were able to satisfactorily address the most important problems and needs. Advances in technology make these connections possible in ways that could not have been done before in paper surveys. This strategy provides more information than surveys typically capture, but it is more economical than large-scale focus groups. Some existing recurrent surveys already contain some of these components and are already web-based: They could be modified so that they, too, could link the problems items, the needs items, and the resource items. Third, the tool should capture the full range of resources that service members or spouses may have used, not just military resources. The inclusion of such options as personal networks, private resources, and other government and community resources helps military leaders learn whether those who do not use military resources are having their needs met elsewhere or whether those needs are unmet.

## What Are the Obstacles to Implementation and How Should They Be Managed?

To benefit from the cohesive design of the proposed survey, the assessment should be implemented on a large scale (e.g., battalion, base, major command, Service, combatant command) and administered via the Internet. Smaller-scale implementation will provide useful information in each of the categories of problems, needs, and resources, but they will lose the value of linking top problems with top needs and resources used because too many response “cells” would be empty or too small to make meaningful statistical analyses possible.<sup>2</sup> Smaller-scale implementation (e.g., a company, a flight, a task element) would also prohibit complex analyses by demographic characteristics because of human subjects protections. Detailed descriptions of individuals (e.g., a report of responses from married Asian Sergeant Majors in a particular rifle company) could reveal identities to unit leadership along with their survey responses and thus would compromise their privacy. In smaller surveys, the results could be displayed by gender, then separately displayed by race and ethnicity, then separately displayed by collapsed rank categories, but not by all of those demographic variables simultaneously. Still, researchers could report the results of regression analyses revealing whether the responses of any specific subgroup were significantly different from those of their counterparts (e.g., whether minority-race enlisted males responded differently from other survey participants). For policymakers who wish to focus on a subset of problem types (e.g., child-related), a smaller-scale survey may still yield data that can be linked across survey sections because the branching will not become as elaborate.

To be able to inform decisionmakers at the Service or DoD level, a needs assessment must control for possibly influential characteristics of particular installations, such as base size, deployment patterns, or proximity to major metropolitan areas. Because of the elaborate and dynamic branching of the survey instrument—questions asked are based on previous responses—administration by paper is not feasible. In the pilot test, 100 percent of respondents chose to log on to the online survey option rather than call in to take the survey by telephone. For those without home Internet access, the military could give respondents on-base access or information about nearby locations that provide free access. The cost of administering a large-scale telephone interviewer-initiated survey design that would allow for the degree of branching and level of detail about problems, associated needs, and associated efforts to meet those needs

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<sup>2</sup> For example, one “cell” for analysis might be single enlisted Soldiers whose top problems included their child’s well-being and whose top needs for that problem included counseling and who turned to a private counselor for help. Another cell might be the spouse of a Navy officer whose top problems included household and auto maintenance while the spouse was deployed, and whose top needs included a helping hand with those tasks, and who turned to the Navy Fleet and Family Support Center for assistance. Not only are these cells too small for statistical analyses, but analysts would be unable to include this level of detail in their reports because of privacy and human subjects protection requirements.

would be prohibitive. The Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) conducts surveys with some branching of survey items, but not to the degree we propose here.

The greatest implementation challenges lie in participant recruitment. Unit and installation commander endorsement and promotion of the assessment can greatly facilitate survey participation by verifying its legitimacy to a population that may be rightly wary of solicitation and busy trying to meet competing demands for their time. Commanders can also promote a positive response through actions such as permitting service members to participate during the workday and providing the survey team with access to contact information for service members. Part of the challenge in reaching spouses stems from missing or inaccurate contact information in the personnel data files: Unit or family support group leadership may be able to help by soliciting more-current contact information from service members.

### **What Types of Results Are Possible, How Should They Be Reported, and to Whom?**

The data could be analyzed in myriad ways, depending on the priorities of the sponsoring command or organization. The data could reveal the full range of problems from the perspective of military personnel and their families and then show their highest-priority problems. It could also reveal the population's beliefs about what needs spring from those most significant problems. From the full range of perceived needs, the survey also asks which needs the service members and their families believe are most important. Decisionmakers could use these results either to ensure that their programs address each top priority problem-needs combination (e.g., the perceived need for education to manage problems with personal well-being) or to educate the population about the superior or complementary benefits of other approaches for managing those problems (e.g., the effectiveness of counseling to address particular well-being issues).

The survey data could provide information beyond the level of general user satisfaction with military services. The data should be analyzed to reveal which military and nonmilitary resources, if any, the respondents turned to for help with their most significant problem-needs combination. Because not all problems and not all needs can be addressed through military resources—there are limits to what they can provide—it is important that resources are devoted to addressing the unmet needs for problems that military personnel and their families deem most important. Program managers can benefit from learning whether there are problem-needs combinations that their programs are designed to address but for which people do not turn to military resources. This may not be a problem: Community or private resources may be preferred and able to meet military member and family needs. However, if respondents are not tapping into any resources for help, or if community or private resources are unable to meet their needs, program managers may need to do more to make people aware

of the specific services they provide. Program managers should also look at responses about positive and negative characteristics of their programs. If, for example, survey participants at particular bases report financial problems, a perceived need for financial education/counseling, and long wait times to receive financial education/counseling, program managers might choose to increase the frequency at which those services are offered, add or train more staff in those skills, increase community referrals, or invite external financial advisors to make on-site visits.

Rather than an average satisfaction score for base or unit services, this survey can reveal strengths and weaknesses across various types of problems and needs. A program may receive many positive ratings for satisfactorily addressing certain problem-need combinations but fewer positive ratings for other problem-need combinations that respondents have deemed a top priority. This type of feedback gives program managers more specific information about where they may need to enhance their services. Or if respondents were turning to the wrong resource for help, the survey can reveal where the military should do more to educate its population about the appropriate resource for those unmet problem-need combinations.

We must not assume that only those who report using military resources are having their needs met. The survey results can provide a sense of how frequently service members and their families are turning to private or community resources for help and whether those alternatives are actually able to help.

Finally, the survey should be able to trace whether unmet needs in general are associated with satisfaction with and commitment to military life—specifically, whether certain types of unmet needs are more likely than others to have a negative impact on the attitudes of service members. Existing surveys link substantive item responses to satisfaction and commitment items, but not in a way that provides details on which organizations at which locations need to address which shortcomings to better meet the needs of service members and their families. These results can provide additional information to help military leadership prioritize where to focus their efforts, given that their resources are not unlimited.

To provide the most useful feedback to multiple levels of leadership, RAND recommends using the Air Force Chief of Staff's Climate Survey model to report survey results. In this survey, reports for all organizational levels—squadrons, groups, wings, major commands, and the Air Force as a whole—are provided to each level of leadership. But the leaders are only given the aggregate results for the units below them, so that the results are used for improvement of leaders' organizations and not for grading their subordinate leaders, which could run counter to commanders' promoting survey participation. For smaller units, reports by demographic variables are not specific enough to permit inference of individual identities. Results of the RAND needs survey should be shared not only with various unit and installation/ship commanders, but also with the organizations that provide support services, such as chaplains, medical professionals, spouse support groups, and community services. Dissemination

could also inform support providers that operate across the Services, such as Military OneSource and the Military Family Life Consultants Program.

Additionally, in the Air Force Climate Survey model, commanders are provided context with which to interpret their organization's results. The reports from the biennial survey display the responses for each organization over time (many items on the survey remain the same from year to year to enable this feature), and also provide commanders current results for comparable organizations. Without this context, commanders may be at a loss to discern whether their results are typical or the degree to which they may need to take action or further investigate climate issues at the local level. Ideally, this survey would be repeated for units and installations longitudinally to track trends and assess whether new initiatives are having the intended impact on the welfare of military members and military families.

### **Are There Other Applications of the Framework? Can the Instrument Be Adapted for Other Purposes?**

The overarching framework could be applied to other types of research questions as well, such as the operational problems, needs, and resources for military personnel serving in war zones. The content of the survey instrument offered here could easily be adapted to other populations or purposes. It could be modified to address other populations, such as veterans and their families, other DoD personnel (e.g., Guard and Reserve) and their families, or wounded service members (as RAND has proposed elsewhere). The individual questionnaire items could be modified to reflect emerging or declining concerns and needs and capture changing resources available to help personnel or their families. Survey items could delve in more detail into particular issues (e.g., well-being), needs (e.g., various forms of professional counseling), resources (e.g., individual programs within Marine Corps Community Services), or perceived barriers or bridges to accessing services (e.g., more details about a program's reputation or who recommended the services). Existing surveys could be adapted as well. As long as the overarching framework and interrelated survey item design are preserved, the new methodology can be adapted in a variety of ways without compromising its utility.