



**NMFA**   
National Military Family Association

Report on the  
**CYCLES OF DEPLOYMENT:**

An Analysis of Survey Responses from  
April through September, 2005

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***NMFA thanks the families of the uniformed services who completed this survey and shared their stories and suggestions with us.***

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*Cover photo courtesy U.S. Navy by Photographer's Mate Airman John P. Curtis.*

# NATIONAL MILITARY FAMILY ASSOCIATION REPORT ON THE CYCLES OF DEPLOYMENT SURVEY AN ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESPONSES FROM APRIL–SEPTEMBER, 2005

## FORWARD

In July 2004, the National Military Family Association (NMFA) published *Serving the Home Front: An Analysis of Military Family Support from September 11, 2001 through March 31, 2004*. This report provided a snapshot of family support for that specific timeframe and noted the progress made in the support of uniformed services families during the first 18 months of the Global War on Terror. In its 2004 report, NMFA noted that more research would be needed on the long-term effects of repeated deployments and the reunion and reintegration of families. NMFA conducted a Return and Reunion Survey on its website ([www.nmfa.org](http://www.nmfa.org)) in late 2004, which again indicated a need for further input from uniformed services families regarding the effects of multiple deployments.

Using lessons learned from the Return and Reunion Survey, as well as the web survey and focus groups conducted as part of the *Serving the Home Front* project, the NMFA Government Relations Department developed its *Cycles of Deployment* survey, which was posted on the NMFA website from April through September 2005. The survey was marketed through the NMFA website and publications, DoD and Service family support professionals, the *Military Times* newspapers, NMFA installation Representatives, and word of mouth among families.

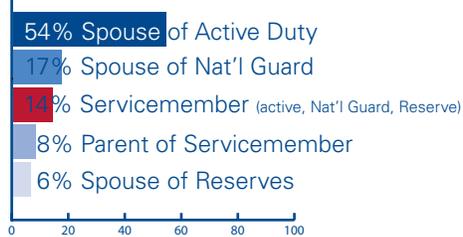
A copy of the survey questions is available in Appendix 1 of this report. A total of 1,592 respondents, representing both active and reserve components from six of the seven uniformed services (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, Public Health Service), completed the survey, with 70 percent of respondents offering comments and personal stories regarding their deployment experiences. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with twelve respondents. Half of the 1,592 respondents had their servicemember currently deployed.



*Maj. Scott Benson is trampled by his three sons after returning home April 19 from a three-month deployment in Southwest Asia. Major Benson is assigned to the 41st Airlift Squadron here. (U.S. Air Force photo by Claire Dattilo)*

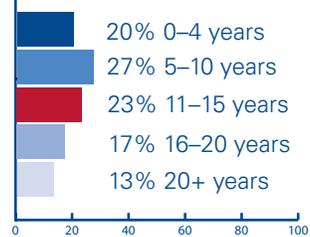
# SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

## Affiliation to the Military



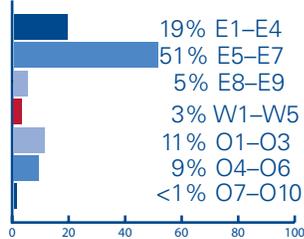
**77% of respondents were military spouses.**

## Years of Service

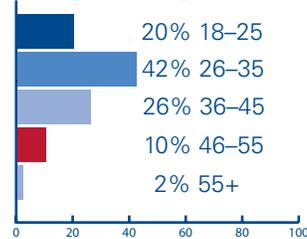


**47% of respondents have 10 years or less in service.**

## Servicemembers' Rank

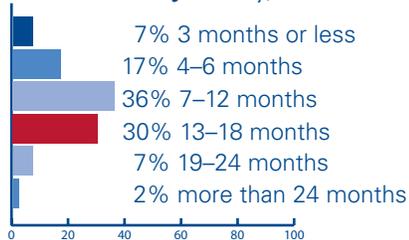


## Age of Respondents

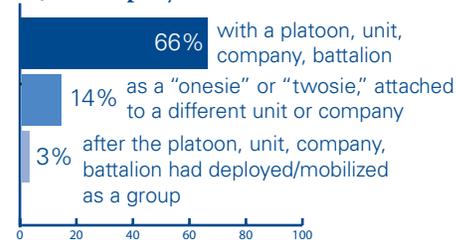


**62% of respondents are 35 years of age or younger.**

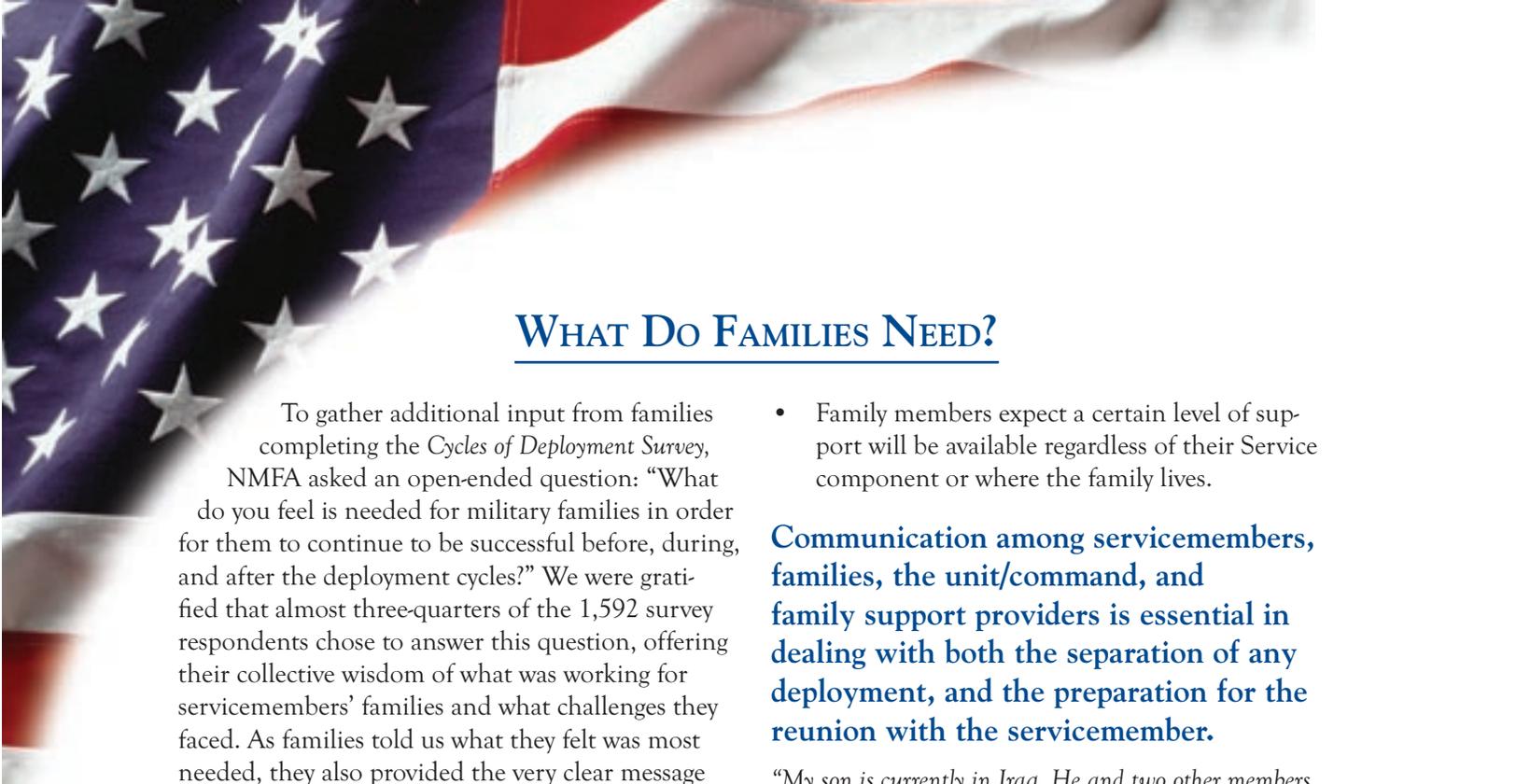
## Total length of time servicemember has been deployed or mobilized since January, 2003



## When the servicemember last deployed, how did he/she deploy or mobilize?



\* Percentages rounded to nearest whole number (non-responses not shown)



## WHAT DO FAMILIES NEED?

To gather additional input from families completing the *Cycles of Deployment Survey*, NMFA asked an open-ended question: “What do you feel is needed for military families in order for them to continue to be successful before, during, and after the deployment cycles?” We were gratified that almost three-quarters of the 1,592 survey respondents chose to answer this question, offering their collective wisdom of what was working for servicemembers’ families and what challenges they faced. As families told us what they felt was most needed, they also provided the very clear message that families cannot—nor should they have to—make it through a deployment alone. They expect family support to be available to all families, regardless of their Service component or where the family lives. Respondents acknowledged they had a role to play in their own family readiness; however, they looked to their commands, their unit volunteers, and their communities to recognize their sacrifice and help them make it through a deployment.

Throughout this report, we have included representative responses from survey respondents’ answers to the question: “What do families need?” Most responses fell into several general categories, the most common of which were:

- Communication among servicemembers, families, the unit/command, and family support providers is essential in dealing with both the separation of any deployment and the preparation for the reunion with the servicemember.
- Deployment lengths, the frequency of deployments, and the day-to-day operational tempo (OPTEMPO) of servicemembers are taking a toll on servicemembers’ families.
- Continuous training of support providers and families is needed and must extend into the reunion phase.
- Family members expect a certain level of support will be available regardless of their Service component or where the family lives.

### **Communication among servicemembers, families, the unit/command, and family support providers is essential in dealing with both the separation of any deployment, and the preparation for the reunion with the servicemember.**

*“My son is currently in Iraq. He and two other members of his platoon are separated from the rest of the group so we no longer have good communication from his command. He no longer has regular access to phone or internet, so we’re much more out of touch. His family readiness officer updates us on whether or not they are safe, which is very nice.”*

*—Marine Corps Parent*

In its 2004 report, NMFA stated: “Commitment to communication is the key to coordinating family support programs. This communication needs to be a continuous flow of accurate, timely information from the highest levels of the Services to the individual servicemembers and their families.” Commitment to communication remains a priority today, but with a slightly different emphasis than earlier in the war. Then, the logistical challenges of communicating with the servicemember and command were the common complaints. These included slow postal mail, servicemembers’ difficulties in accessing phones or computers in the theater of operation, or units’ unsophisticated communication channels with isolated families. Families of servicemembers who are remotely assigned or in specialties such as submariners still reported they do not have regular communication with their family members; however, the majority of family members regularly correspond with their servicemembers via e-mail, phone,

and mail. "Hearing that voice" is very important. Family members worry about the expense of buying phone cards, maintaining Internet service, and mailing packages. They would also like to have longer than fifteen to twenty minute phone conversations once or twice a week. Seventeen percent of the survey respondents reported that communication with the servicemember was the top challenge during the deployment.

*"[We need] consistent communication from the leadership of my husband, telling us what is going on. So often the servicemember downplays situations and doesn't get the real truth so we have a false picture and the media does not help."*

—Marine Duty Spouse

Even though some families still talked of challenges in maintaining regular communication with their servicemember, respondents in the *Cycles of Deployment Survey* were just as likely to talk about the quality of communication and their expectations regarding communication with their servicemember's unit, command, and volunteer network. Families emphasized the need for open lines of communication between themselves and the servicemember's unit, command, and volunteers as an important element of effective support. In fact, many indicated that what they needed and expected first and foremost from the unit or its representatives was frequent communication regarding unit activities and the well-being of the deployed servicemembers. They also wanted to know someone cared about their well-being and understood the challenges they faced. Their comments indicated families believe that good family support starts with good communication.

*"We understand the need for being a little evasive as to what the soldiers are doing, where they are, etc... but it would be nice to know what they are doing in general."*

—Army Parent

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**"Successful deployments are about communication."**

—Army Soldier

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Families understand the need for operational security, but desire more information from the chain of command. They would like to know when the servicemember is deploying and where he/she is going. Only one-third of the survey respondents reported having communication with the unit or unit volunteer network at the critical pre-deployment stage. Once the servicemember is deployed, family members want to know generally what the servicemember's unit is doing, how the members of the unit are faring, and when he/she will return, even if it just a "ballpark figure." Not knowing even that approximate date is stressful. One-third of the survey participants reported contact with the unit early in the deployment. When the command or

unit fails to relay this information, the families want to know: "What are they hiding from us?" It is at the mid-point of the deployment cycle that more than a quarter of the families reported feeling the greatest stress. Families bombarded by press reports about the war want to be able to combat the sometimes negative press with accurate information.



*Staff Sgt. James Smith holds his eight-month old son Malik for the first time after returning home to Nevada from a 13-month deployment to Kuwait and Iraq. Smith is assigned to the 257th Transportation Company. Photo courtesy of U.S. Army.*

*"Ongoing support groups would be a great help as it gives spouses the opportunity to connect with others who are experiencing many of the same circumstances as they are going through. Younger spouses are able to meet and talk to more experienced spouses giving them the opportunity to gain knowledge from their life experience."*

—Navy Spouse

Families also cited communication with other military family members as very important.

Spouses and parents want to commiserate with someone who

understands, someone in the same situation, and especially someone who has experienced a prior deployment. Personal contact from a representative of the unit, whether it is the rear detachment commander or a unit volunteer leader checking to see if the family is okay, makes one feel less alone.

*"[Families need] contact with other families who are deployed with your servicemember. I know we have our own life but even a phone call is helpful."*

—Coast Guard Spouse

Survey results indicate that contact with the unit and its family readiness/support group during the deployment correlates to families' improved ability to deal with subsequent deployments. Almost 13 percent of all respondents reported no contact with their unit or unit volunteer groups. In addition, 3 percent chose not to have contact with their unit or its volunteer group. A higher percentage of respondents who indicated they were better able to deal with multiple deployments had contact from the unit or unit volunteer network during the deployment than did those respondents who stated it was harder to deal with subsequent deployments. Only 5 percent of family members who reported an increased ability to deal with deployments had no contact with these avenues of information and support, an indication of at least one tool for successful families.

Families indicated the support provided must be ongoing and not fade away as the deployment continues. When asked about stress during deployment, respondents indicated that not all families react to deployment in the same way or at the same time. The ability to handle the mid-deployment routine seems to be crucial for families' handling of subsequent deployments. Among respondents who said subsequent deployments were harder than the first, 37 percent stated they experienced the most stress during the middle of the deployment.

*"Return dates have not been released, I've stopped hearing from the battalion which was quite spread out in Iraq, and with as difficult as this deployment has been I know we are going to need to be prepared due to changes at home and changes for our servicemember."*

—Navy Reserve Spouse

*"[Families need] preparation for the psychological changes affecting the soldier upon return home. Things do not immediately return to 'normal.' Soldiers go through emotional 'homesickness' for the soldiers they were deployed with, and that was not something I was prepared for."*

—Army Parent

One of the most significant survey findings was that the information uniformed services families desire

is not solely what they need to get them through the actual deployment. They also want to know what the servicemember is experiencing so they will be more prepared for the reunion. "Forewarned is forearmed" seems to be the attitude. For example, if the family knows that a particular unit has had difficulty relating to the Iraqi people, then it will be less puzzling when the servicemember exhibits a great deal of anger after returning home. What stood out in many survey responses was that for families, communication during deployment is directly linked to the reunion process, the reintegration of the family, and the mental health needs of all concerned.

### **Deployment lengths, the frequency of deployments, and the day-to-day OPTEMPO of servicemembers are taking a toll on servicemembers' families.**

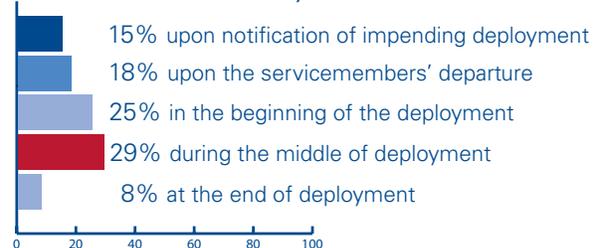
*"If there was some way to shorten the length to six or seven months, it would be a little more doable for families to see the end in sight. People don't realize how much happens in six months let alone a whole year or more. Families cannot continue to make things work with multiple year-long tours. The whole concept of feeling defeated before you have even started is overwhelming. You feel as though the cards are stacked against you."*

—Army Spouse

*"People are not realizing that the National Guard and Reserves make up half of our Nation's military. It is an awful feeling and we were not prepared for 18 months of deployment."*

—Army National Guard Spouse

#### **Point at Which Family Felt the Greatest Stress**



The amount of time servicemembers and their families have together is limited and very valuable. While families from all Services commented that deployments kept lengthening, it was no surprise that Army National Guard and Reserve families reported the greatest stress concerning deployment length.

Their servicemembers typically experience family separations of close to eighteen months—several months of training prior to the deployment, twelve months “boots on the ground,” and at least a few weeks following the servicemember’s return home. These families are quick to point out they are experiencing the longest family separation of any Service families and that the length of these deployments is having a detrimental effect. Family members comment about the time spent “training” before departing for foreign soil. They want to be assured that the time is used wisely and that the servicemember is not just “sitting around.” Eighteen months is two sets of holidays for many who feel that a twelve- or six-month deployment is more “doable.” As one spouse related, “I can do a six month deployment standing on my head.” As the deployment lengthens, family members worry more about the effect of the servicemember’s absence on the family dynamic.

*“I have made 6 total deployments. The actual deployment is NOT the greatest obstacle. The workup cycle is the hardest part, at least for the Navy. We start the cycle 6-9 months prior. We go underway for 2-3 weeks at a time (sometimes longer, sometimes shorter). We return home and need to reintegrate into our families. The actual deployment is by far easier to deal with; we know we are gone, we know our approximate return date.”*  
 –Navy Sailor

*“The optempo for our unit was VERY high. I had anxiety over accidents occurring because they were ‘on the razor’s edge’ for so long. I think there needs to be a balance before and after. Unfortunately, this isn’t always able to occur due to sudden changes in deployments.”*  
 –Navy Spouse

*“Allow servicemembers to have some time off to readjust to family life!!! Preferably without having to use up all their leave days. Give them an ‘adjustment to real life’ period before running them like crazy just after they get back. Chaos is not healthy after a deployment (especially a lengthy one).”*  
 –Army Soldier

As the operational tempo remains high both during deployments and at the home installations, families are concerned their servicemembers are working long hours without a break preparing for or recov-

ering from deployments. When asked about their greatest challenges after the servicemember’s return, 43 percent of the respondents cited concern the servicemember would have to deploy again. Respondents referenced a need for mandatory leave to replenish the spirit. Families worry about the long-term effects on the family of the “there, but not really” servicemember, who seems to come home only long enough to eat a meal and sleep. Families worry about the physical, emotional, and mental health of maintaining this pace and that OPTEMPO at home and the prospect of a subsequent deployment are making their reintegration with the servicemember difficult.

### Continuous training of support providers and families is needed and must extend into the reunion phase.

When asked about their greatest challenges after the servicemember’s return, 43 percent of the respondents cited concern the servicemember would have to deploy again.

*“With deployments happening out of the blue, there need to be steps made to ensure that the families and servicemembers are prepared before they even know when deployment is, so things aren’t rushed.”*  
 –Navy Spouse

*“Have training sessions for ‘how are you coping now’ like the pre-deployment things. We forget a lot of the info we get in pre-deployment meetings. Even our notes are not enough. We think we can remember more than we really can.”*

–Army National Guard Spouse

*“After the reunion stress—please consider adding something to the extent of learning how to share household responsibilities again. So many of us do it all while our spouse is deployed and get irritated when duties are shared again or if our spouse may unknowingly criticize the way we did something while he/she was deployed. Based on my own experience and talking with friends, this is a common experience post-deployment that many couples struggle with.”*  
 –Army Spouse

#### Level of Support Family Received



NMFA's *Serving the Home Front* report noted that: "Training is a continuous step... and the challenge lies in reaching the families who need it." Responses to the *Cycles of Deployment Survey* indicate this challenge remains, despite the increased activities of family support providers and commands and the increased realization by families of the need to become ready. Less than one-half of the respondents reported a consistent level of family support throughout the pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment phases and 17 percent reported no support was available.

Families are eager to know what to expect and how to locate needed resources. Respondents noted briefings and special activities are usually held when a large group of servicemembers are deployed, but the families of the individual augmentees—the "onesies and twosies"—are often forgotten. This training needs to be conducted repeatedly throughout the deployment cycle rather than as an optional, one-time session. This continuity of the information flow is most critical to the "suddenly military" National Guard/Reserve community. A pre-deployment briefing held the same weekend that the servicemember deploys is not meeting the need for these families to make the transition from weekend warrior to active duty.

*"I think the hardest part for my family was the fact that as a Guard family, we had never been through a deployment before. I knew nothing about that life, the phases, anything. I felt very unsure about where my resources were and who to call for help. I really think that, regardless of military status, every family needs to have a basic knowledge of deployment life...be it written resources, workshops, what have you."*

—Air National Guard Spouse

*"The initial phase was difficult and I felt that the Army information was thrown at us at one of the most emotional times and I couldn't absorb who could help me when. I still haven't had time to figure that out. I think if I had been given that information the same time as my*

*husband was activated, or while he was at the training prior to leaving for Iraq when life was still sort of normal because I could talk to him often, I would have been better prepared."*

—Army National Guard Spouse

Most active duty family members are used to the "military lifestyle." They live near other Service families and have experience dealing with the military bureaucracy. The "suddenly military" National Guard and Reserve families often do not. Prior to September 11, 2001, these reserve component families could expect their servicemembers to participate in two weeks of annual training or a short mobilization for natural disasters. Many are lost in the military bureaucracy because they do not necessarily know how the complex support systems work.

Despite extensive efforts by National Guard and Reserve leaders and family program staff to expand their outreach and information efforts, National Guard and Reserve families were the most vocal of all survey respondents regarding their need for additional information, especially in the pre-deployment phase. They want briefings sooner rather than later, with detailed information about

TRICARE, finances, and family support resources. They also want briefings offered more than once. Preparing for a servicemember's deployment requires a great deal of new information that may take time to absorb. Question and answer sessions after a period of time for reading the information provided, exploring the websites, and attempting to access the system or find a TRICARE provider increase the likelihood of a family's successful adjustment. Guard and Reserve families stated the need for a single point of contact when a problem arises or when they need information. Some talked about needing a reference book containing all the accurate and updated contact numbers and available community resources, both civilian and military, to keep all the information in one place.



*Lt. Col. Rey Q. Masinsin, the commanding officer of Marine Air Control Squadron 2, embraces his son Taylor and daughter Torii after returning, Feb. 13, from a seven-month deployment to Iraq. Photo submitted 03/03/2006 Taken by Cpl. J. R. Stence*

*"I am new to the military family scene and it would be nice to find out if there is someone that can tell me what to expect when he comes home. I am finding it difficult to find this type of information. I have talked to several counseling services and they don't offer this and I am referred to another service that doesn't offer it either."*

—Navy Spouse

In the deployment cycle, few things are as eagerly anticipated as the servicemember's return. However, survey respondents reported a high level of stress throughout the deployment in anticipation of the reintegration of the servicemember into the family and community. They wanted to know what to expect, what is normal/abnormal, and what to do about it. As we have stated, regular communication from the unit and command during the actual deployment is part of this requested information. Reunion/reintegration briefings for the servicemember and the family members before they are reunited are important, but many families are not taking advantage of any of the formal reunion programs to prepare for their servicemembers' homecoming. Only one out of every three survey participants stated they did something specifically to prepare for the reunion, either taking part in a formal reunion training program or talking to others who have been through the reunion process before.

*"The largest 'adjustment' issue we had to deal with was his redeployment, that looming over our heads, being recently married, and dealing with back to back deployments as a reservist is very frustrating. Also, in the readjustment phase after his return, finding our 'role' in what we each want to do...that compromise, and not always doing what we wanted to do individually...having time to ourselves, knowing he was leaving again was very hard."*

—Marine Corps Reserve Spouse

Family members are concerned about the relationships within the family. The need for marriage counseling and couples retreats was a common theme among the respondents. How the children, especially the very young or the teenagers, will re-connect

with a parent who may have been absent for most of their lives, was another common concern. Three-quarters of the survey respondents stated that zero to three months after the servicemember's return was the time of greatest stress.

*"Three deployments have caused great mental strain on me as the spouse of a servicemember. Thank goodness for mental health services, which I have used for more than a year now and will continue to use. I have to work daily on managing depression and anxiety, which I feel are a direct result of the deployments."*

—Air National Guard Spouse

The good news for family support professionals who believe military families are reluctant to seek help

for mental health issues is that many survey respondents did recognize counseling is an option for them. Families perceive counseling and mental health support as especially helpful if it is confidential and with a professional familiar with the military. Anger management classes and family counseling for the servicemember, spouse, and children apart and together were requested by the respondents. Almost half commented that they have used or would use counseling. This percentage increased among families who had dealt with multiple deployments. Three

quarters of those who stated they were better able to deal with subsequent deployments found counseling services to be helpful.

### **Family members expect a certain level of support will be available regardless of their Service component or where the family lives.**

*"I feel with the reserve units there is not enough contact with the command and the family service centers. My husband was active duty for 10 years and I am aware of the support that is available to them, and the support for reserve families is practically non-existent. It should be more available to them even when they are a great distance from a military installation."*

—Navy Reserve Spouse



A crowd of family and friends anxiously wait on the pier for the arrival of the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76) at Naval Air Station North Island, San Diego, Calif., on July 23, 2004. The Ronald Reagan is the Navy's newest and most technologically advanced aircraft carrier and was completing a two-month transit from Norfolk, Va., to her homeport in San Diego, Calif. The ship was commissioned in July 2003. DoD photo by Petty Officer 1st class Felix Garza, U.S. Navy.

*“Our situation is unusual because the servicemember did not actually deploy for 2004, but was in Korea for nearly 15 months, unaccompanied. Now we face a deployment to Iraq. I think support needs to be available when servicemembers are gone at any time, not just deployments, and that has not been the case so far.”*

—Army Spouse

In the eyes of the survey respondents, “The Military” has established an expectation that the uniformed services are family-friendly. As a consequence, just as they expect their servicemember will probably have to deploy in support of the mission, families expect there to be a certain level of family support available to them when they need it. Families expect this support to be integrated across the Services and components. They expect their commanders to recognize their needs. They assume all the support systems of all types of units should work together. The families do not give specific grades to each part. As far as they are concerned, the boundaries among their rear detachment/rear party, family readiness/support volunteers, and professional support staff at their Service or installation family centers are blurred. This expectation extends to TRICARE, regardless of where their health care is delivered or who is providing health benefit information and customer service.

Survey respondents countered the assumption made by commanders at all levels that families already know what their family support resources are and how to access them. They sent a powerful message that most families do not know (and don’t really care) who is in charge of what, who is paid or not. How far the family lives from the unit does not really matter, nor do Service or component distinctions. What does matter is that the promised support and information are provided.

*“Family Readiness Groups are the most productive way for families to reach the end of a deployment in the best shape possible.”*

—Army National Guard Spouse

*“The Family Support Group is often the difference between feeling supported and doing well during long underway periods or feeling alone and not coping well. Someone should give them money. They are always struggling for fundraising, often paying out of wives’ pockets for really key things, like welcome baskets, kid’s X-mas parties, etc. These*

*things may sound trivial, but when you haven’t seen your husband for 4 months, and you’re not sure you’re going to make it through without losing your mind, they are key.”*

—Navy Spouse

The family support expectation needs to mesh with the reality of services and programs that can be provided. As NMFA said in its *Serving the Home Front* report: “The expectations of servicemembers, family members, and ‘the military’ all need to be established and communicated.” The backbone of much of this support is the Family Readiness Groups (FRG), Family Support Groups (FSG), Key Volunteers (KV), and Ombudsman programs. Many families see these programs as the main source of their support and think of them in the same way they regard unit representatives and family center personnel. However, as unrealistic as this expectation might be, many families, especially the new and inexperienced members, expect the leaders of these groups to be well-trained and available when

needed (24/7) throughout the deployment.

Many respondents expressed concern that volunteers were becoming fatigued and subject to “burn-out.” They stated that the leaders of their unit family groups should be paid or have paid professional support personnel assigned to their groups. They noted that command support of the groups and their leadership is essential in establishing the need, the guidelines, the information flow, and the quality control. Families expect commands to be involved. If commanders at all levels do not communicate that these programs are important, stay involved in their activities, and give them the resources they need, families’ expectations will not be met.

*“It’s important for me to try and establish a foundation with the families of our unit. I do not want my first contact with them to be a deployment. Because it’s the Reserves, everyone has other lives. However, this war and any future wars are depending upon the Reserves like they were active duty. It’s time that Family Readiness Groups became more involved with their families in Reserve units.”*

—Army Reserve Spouse

Unit family readiness/support groups are a lifeline for many family members. Membership in these groups is automatic and the group is an expected part of military life. If the group is organized after

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**“We are all in this together—  
it doesn’t matter the branch  
of service.”**

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—Army Reserve Spouse

the deployment starts, located many miles away from families, fails to include extended family members, or doesn't have active command support, then discontent will follow. The quality of the family readiness/support group can make or break a successful deployment for a family trying to cope. More importantly, many families gauge the commitment of the whole Service chain of command to their well-being by what happens or does not happen in their unit family group.

"My husband is deployed...out of Korea so this has been a 'unique' experience which has been handled horribly by the Army. Family members ...have NOT been contacted by command and no official FRG sites were established until they were in the 6th and 7th months of deployment—and even then info is sketchy. We are told to check one site for official news and updates but nothing is updated, then the site is changed and no one is told, then it's changed back to the original site and no one is told. We hear everything through 'unofficial' channels (i.e. my husband said this, her husband said that). There are family members (spouses, parents, children) located all across the country who have been abandoned by the military during this deployment."

—Army Spouse

"I feel it's an injustice for soldiers to be cross-leveled from their original unit to another unit. The gaining unit doesn't stay in contact with their new soldier's family and their original unit drops them from their lists and the family is left out on their own to try and find someone or resources to help them through the difficult time of deployment."

—Army Reserve Spouse

"Most support groups focus on the spouse left behind. There are a large number of us who did not leave a spouse behind but we left our kids with grandparents. Not a lot of resources available to a non-military set of grandparents. The military could make it much easier to put our kids in

the hands of our parents when we deploy. This isn't the first time we have done this; before, the kids went to my parents' home from my home base. Nothing special was done or even offered for them, they went and found it on their own. Spouses' groups of deployed servicemembers were available but not appropriate for my situation."

—Air Force Servicemember

"Extended family needs services also—I am the sister of a soon-to-be deployed servicemember, and we live and have

raised her son together. There doesn't seem to be anything for someone in my position—family, but not on the same level as a spouse and children for support."

—Army Sister

Families whose servicemembers deployed from unaccompanied tours in Korea to Iraq ask, "Where's my group?" Families of individual augmentees ask, "Who is my group?" One-third of the survey participants who identified their servicemember as deploying as a "onesie or twosie" stated that no support was available to them. Families of cross-leveled servicemembers deploying with units other than their

home unit ask: "Do I belong to the losing unit's group or the gaining unit's—or both?" Families who have just completed a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) move ask: "How do I find my group when I've just moved and my servicemember has already deployed?" Extended family members know there should be a group for them, but are unsure where to find it. Whose responsibility is it to help them connect to the support that is available for them?

Although the current cycles of deployment are challenging, families are proud of their servicemember and their own special service to our country. They understand that family support is primarily their personal responsibility, but they expect "The Military" to be involved in that support as well.



"Yeah, that's my dad," little Michael Standfill (center) seems to say as he intently watches his father Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael Standfill kiss his wife Terri during their reunion on Aug. 18, 2000. Michael's father, who is a Navy operations specialist, just returned from a six-month deployment to the Mediterranean Sea and Persian Gulf aboard the USS Mahan (DDG 72). The Mahan was one of nine ships assigned to the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Battle Group which enforced no-fly zones over the former Yugoslavia and Southern Iraq. DoD photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Martin Maddock, U.S. Navy.

## What Else Did Respondents Say?

While the majority of respondents' comments were linked to the four themes described above—communication, OPTEMPO, training, and expectations regarding support—many also referenced the day-to-day challenges faced by families dealing with deployment. Experienced families know that when the servicemember leaves, whether for a deployment or a training exercise, a major appliance will break, the children will get sick, and the car will break down. These day-to-day hassles of dealing with a deployment can become overwhelming if the family is focusing so much on the well-being of the servicemember. Child care concerns, school issues, house maintenance, and tensions at the spouse's workplace can all add up. Although the problems in each area may be minor, the sum of all is major stress.

*"I would like to see some no-cost child care in our community for dependents of deployed servicemembers, especially when they are new to the area and don't know anyone they can ask.*

*When my husband was deployed I never felt I could afford child care for my 3 children for me to go out, have time for me as the mother. Now I realize, after the deployment is finished, that would have really helped alleviate a lot of stress for me."*

—Marine Corps Spouse

*"School involvement! ...Anything that helps out our children during a deployment also helps us as spouses left behind. When I see my children, I see a piece of my husband, and when he's gone, I become ultra sensitive to their needs."*

—Marine Corps Spouse

Almost 500,000 military children are five years of age or younger. Much has been done to help military families obtain affordable child care in their communities. But there remains a need. Sometimes just a three or four hour period away from young children can make or break a spouse's week. Guard and Reserve families reported that dealing with the children was one of their greatest challenges during a deployment.

More than 600,000 children of servicemembers are school-aged. They primarily attend civilian public schools. In many cases, these children are a distinct minority in their school. Respondents noted that the staffs at their children's schools may not understand what these children experience when a family member is gone. The remaining adults in that family take on the additional burden of having to educate their children's educators. While military parents know they must act as their children's advocate, they are frustrated at the lack of teacher training in this area.

*"I have used approximately two months of vacation time from work for the purpose of helping my family prepare for the deployment and 15 day R&R [Rest and Recuperation], We need to lobby Congress to pass the Military Families Leave Act to protect the rights of immediate family members who are assisting our soldiers."*

—Army National Guard Spouse

*"Should I quit my job during his deployment so I can re-apply in 4-6 months and start over at the*

*beginning of my career? Recovering financially upon the servicemember's return means you took 2-steps back instead of getting ahead."*

—Air Force Spouse

Sixty percent of military spouses are employed outside the home. While this survey did not specifically ask about their workplace or employer concerns, some told us of employment problems they had encountered. Several asked about the viability of military family leave for the pre-deployment period, during the servicemember's R&R leave, and post-deployment. Some asked for help with educational opportunities and employment searches. Still others related they had quit their job to stay home with their children or that they were considering the feasibility of doing so.

Some families expressed a need for financial counseling. Even with the additional deployment pays and allowances and the combat zone tax advantages, respondents still referenced low pay, running "two households," child care costs, and juggling the

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**With 2 small children and a full-time job it is hard to juggle all of the requirements. You have to pick your battles.**

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—Army National Guard Spouse

responsibilities of running the household alone as imposing a toll on financial stability. National Guard and Reserve spouses reported that balancing the spouse's career and family responsibilities were the greatest challenge they faced during a deployment. In addition, Guard and Reserve families worry about the servicemember's employment-related issues: the disparity between civilian and military wages, saving their servicemembers' small businesses, and re-gaining civilian employment.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

*"This has been so far the hardest experience I've ever had to deal with. I expected that. I thought there would be peaks and valleys of happiness and strain. That has not been the case. Even the most wonderful moments are shadowed in the pain that he isn't here. It has been a constant struggle. It isn't getting easier, it isn't getting more comfortable. Not having my husband, my children's father, around has left a hole in this family that can't be filled with routine or time. He is too important to us. His spirit is too much a part of this family. Everyday I tell myself we're one day closer. That is what keeps me going. Regardless of the hurt and sadness that goes with deployment, we believe in him and what he's doing. We know other fathers, other husbands will go home tonight because he's protecting freedom. We just miss him so much, and we want him home."*

—Army National Guard Spouse

As stated in NMFA's *Serving the Home Front* analysis report, certain elements are essential for a military family support system that works: communication, continuous training, partnerships to enhance family support efforts, and community support. The *Cycles of Deployment* data reinforce those findings, even as they show that both family readiness programs and family challenges have evolved. As NMFA predicted in the 2004 report, the issues of return and reunion and of how families handle multiple deployments

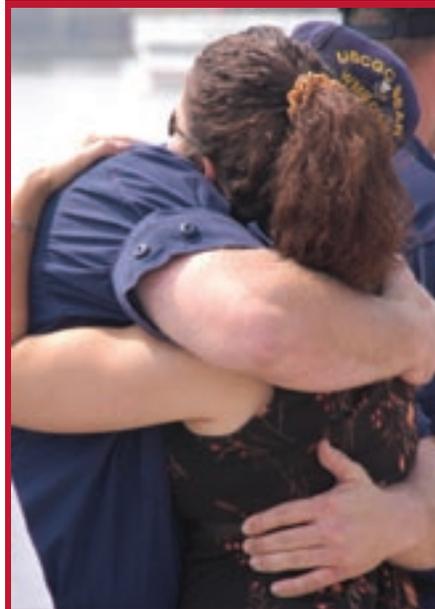
necessitate new approaches to family readiness. The most striking conclusion to emerge from this survey is that we were probably mistaken to talk of the "Cycles of Deployment." Families' descriptions of the issues they faced pre-deployment, during deployment, post-deployment, and then gearing up again indicate a spiral and not a cycle. Families never come back to the same place they started. When entering a second or third deployment, they carry the unresolved anxieties and expectations from the

last deployment(s) with them along with the skills they gained. While they may have more knowledge of the resources available to them, respondents whose servicemember had deployed multiple times also reported being more fatigued and more concerned about their children and their family relationships.

We did find good news in the survey results. Given the opportunity to vent when answering the question about what families need, many respondents instead praised programs that are working well. They talked of the responsibility families have to seek out the information and support they need and of the strategies they were using to cope during deployment. Almost half reported that support was available to

them throughout the pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment cycle. And, in a community known to fear the stigma of seeking mental health care, more than one-half knew counseling services were available and almost 50 percent said they had used or would use counseling services. This percentage increased for families experiencing a second or third deployment.

Based on its observations regarding deployment-related challenges facing uniformed services families today—and supported by the results of the *Cycles of Deployment Survey*—NMFA makes the following recommendations to strengthen military family readiness:



A Coast Guard crew member from the CGC Bear greets a family member after the Bear returned from a 91-day deployment to Africa. USCG photo by PA3 Larry Chambers.

1. **Address return and reunion challenges throughout the deployment cycle:** When survey respondents talked of communication challenges, they often spoke of the need for information that would help with the reintegration of the servicemember with the family after deployment. Families worry about how the reunion will go even as they are worrying about the servicemember's safety in theater. Since most families are not taking advantage of specific return and reunion briefings and activities, family support professionals and commanders must look for innovative ways to help families and servicemembers prepare for the challenge of reintegration. They must also take full advantage of the various post-deployment assessments to gauge not only the servicemember's readjustment to life at home, but also the readjustment of the family.
2. **Direct more resources to support family volunteers:** Even the respondents who praised their family readiness volunteers and support groups noted the need for more resources and "professionals" to support their efforts. Generally, these calls came for the assistance of counselors and administrative support detailed to specific units. The Services are making strides in providing more staffing—whether uniformed or civilian—to support the logistics of family support and conducting family readiness activities. However, survey respondents called for counselors assigned to unit family readiness groups, as well as on-call professionals who would be available to deal with troubled families or the emergency situations currently being thrust on often inadequately trained volunteer family members, who are dealing with the deployment of their own servicemember. Given widely-publicized concerns over family relationships, children, and the mental health of the returning servicemember, NMFA believes more professional support must be directed to the unit level to assist families in meeting these challenges.
3. **Recognize that family time is important:** For many survey respondents, the joy of their servicemembers' return was short-lived because of a high operational tempo at the home installation or the prospect of a subsequent deployment. NMFA understands the demands of the mission on an over-extended force, but encourages Service leaders to give family time a higher priority when planning operational activities, especially for servicemembers who have only been back from deployment for a few months. The impact on family time of Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves, servicemember attendance at schools, and training activities that take the servicemember away from the home installation must also be considered.
4. **Expand program and information outreach:** While more families are accessing family support services and maintaining touch with their commands and unit family group, a sizeable number still remain outside the fold. They may have expectations about a certain level of support, but are located too far from either the unit or other families to feel a connection to the military. Integrating the "suddenly military" Guard and Reserve family into the support system needs to begin prior to the activation of the servicemember and continue through the reintegration of the servicemember back into the community. It cannot continue to be a one-time use-and-dispose system. We did not ask about the use of Military OneSource ([www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)) on this survey, but have in other queries and have generally been pleased that awareness and use of this program is gradually increasing among active duty, National Guard, and Reserve families. It remains the best example of a joint family readiness program that is not dependent on a family's Service or geographic location.
5. **Assist families in developing realistic expectations, and then meet them:** Although challenged by the demands of deployment, families are proud of their servicemember and their own special service to our country. They understand that family support is primarily their personal responsibility, but they expect "The Military" to be involved in that support as well. Some families, especially those of servicemembers deploying for the first time, may expect someone in the military to ensure they have help with even the simplest household tasks. Others may think they have to handle everything on their own—that asking for help would reflect badly on their servicemember. Families need connections

with other family members to show them the ropes. They need accurate information about their benefits and available programs. They need to feel their command cares about them and is interested in keeping them informed. They need their servicemembers to assist them in gaining the tools they need to meet deployment challenges.

- 6. Never assume families know what they need to know:** As units continue to deploy, some commanders, professional family support staff, and even family readiness volunteers may assume families do not need the same kind of intensive support they required earlier in the war. Cutting back on pre-deployment briefings because “we’ve done this all before” short-chang-

es the new spouse or the parents of the new recruit. Experienced family members may find new challenges during a subsequent deployment or find the accumulated stress from multiple deployments creates the need for re-engagement with the family readiness/support group or for accessing different support personnel. Commanders, rear detachment/rear party personnel, family center staff, chaplains, and family readiness volunteers must continually devise innovative ways to reach out to families, gauging what they need and meeting those needs. A consistent level of resources is crucial in giving them the flexibility to create the comprehensive, responsive support system families need in order to succeed in the face of repeated deployments.

# Appendix

## Cycles of Deployment Survey

(as posted on the NMFA website: April through September, 2005)

Since Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom have begun, our servicemembers have experienced deployments into combat zones, longer work hours, and intensive training schedules and military families have continued to support the commitment to their servicemember.

NMFA wants to know what your family is experiencing as cycles of deployment, longer work hours and rigorous training programs continue. Please take a moment to answer the following questions regarding you and your family's experiences.

### Deployment / Mobilization

- How many times has the servicemember been deployed or mobilized since January 2003?
  - None
  - Once
  - Twice
  - Three times
  - More than three times
- What is the total length of time the servicemember has been deployed or mobilized since January 2003?
  - 3 months or less
  - 4-6 months
  - 7-12 months
  - 13-18 months
  - 19-24 months
  - More than 24 months
- Is the servicemember currently deployed?
  - Yes
  - No
- If the servicemember is not currently deployed, when did the servicemember return from the most recent deployment?
  - 0-3 months
  - 4-6 months
  - 7-12 months
  - More than one year
  - Not Applicable
- Has a date or time frame been set for the servicemember's next deployment?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Don't Know
  - Not Applicable
- When the servicemember last deployed, how did the servicemember deploy or mobilize:
  - With a platoon, unit, company, battalion
  - As a "onsie" or "twosie" attached to a different unit or company
  - After the platoon, unit, company, battalion had deployed/mobilized as a group
  - Not Applicable
- When did you have contact with the unit or unit volunteer group (check all that apply):
  - Before the deployment/mobilization
  - During the deployment/mobilization
  - After the deployment/mobilization
  - No contact from the unit or volunteer group
  - Chose not to have contact with the unit or volunteer group
  - Not applicable
- At what point during the deployment did your family feel the greatest stress?
  - Upon notification of impending deployment
  - Upon departure of deployment
  - In the beginning of the deployment
  - During the middle of the deployment
  - At the end of the deployment
  - Not Applicable

- What is/was the greatest challenge for your family during deployment or mobilization? (check all that apply)
  - Communication with servicemember
  - Financial challenges
  - Health challenges (physical, mental or emotional)
  - Health insurance/TRICARE changes
  - Balancing spouse's career and family responsibilities
  - Challenges with children
  - Concern for servicemember's safety
  - None
  - Other
  - Not Applicable
- If your servicemember has deployed more than once since January 2003, rate your ability to deal with repeated deployments.
  - I am better able to deal with subsequent deployments
  - I have not noticed any change in my ability to deal with subsequent deployments
  - It's harder for me to deal with subsequent deployments
  - Not Applicable

### Reunion

- What is/was the best resource when preparing for the reunion with the servicemember?
  - Participated in a formal reunion program
  - Talked with someone who had been through reunion before
  - Talked with a professional (chaplain, counselor, etc)
  - Relied on past personal experience
  - Did nothing special
- How prepared did you feel your family is/was for reunion before the servicemember returned?
  - Excellent
  - Very Good
  - Good
  - Fair
  - Unacceptable
- How prepared did you feel your family is/was for reunion after the servicemember returned?
  - Excellent
  - Very Good
  - Good
  - Fair
  - Not at all prepared
- At what point after the reunion did your family feel the greatest stress?
  - 0-3 months
  - 4-6 months
  - 7-9 months
  - 10-12 months
  - Over 12 months
- What is/was the greatest challenge for your family after the reunion? (check all that apply)
  - Concern of deploying/mobilizing again
  - Longer work hours/change in unit

- Relocated to new area
- Financial challenges
- Balancing spouse's career and family responsibilities
- Challenges with children or family
- Health of family members (physical, mental or emotional)
- Health of servicemember (physical, mental or emotional)
- Health insurance/TRICARE changes
- None
- Other

### Day-to-Day Challenges

- Are counseling services available for your family within a reasonable distance?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Don't know
- Would your family use or has anyone in your family used counseling services?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Don't know
- If you did use counseling services, were they helpful?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Not Applicable
- What support services are offered for families whose servicemembers are not deployed to assist them in dealing with the stresses of military life, to include: high operations tempo, servicemember training in preparation for deployment, and return and reunion issues that emerge months after the servicemember's return?
  - No-cost child care
  - Ongoing family readiness group activities
  - Family center programs
  - Chaplains' programs
  - Counseling
  - Special support activities offered by organizations in surrounding civilian community
  - Nothing offered beyond regular programs open to all families
  - Other
- Choose the one that best describes the level of support your family has received:
  - Support available throughout the pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment
  - Support available throughout the pre-deployment phase only
  - Support available throughout the deployment phase only
  - Support available throughout the post-deployment phase only
  - Support available throughout the first deployment, but not at the same level on continuous deployments
  - No support is/was available

- What do you feel is needed for military families in order for them to continue to be successful before, during, and after the deployment cycles?
- Would be willing for us to contact you with further questions about your family's deployment experience?
  - Yes
  - No
- If you would like to be contacted, please provide your email address
- Comments

### Demographic Information

- What is YOUR affiliation to the military?
  - National Guard (activated or not activated)
  - Reserve
  - Active Duty
  - Spouse of National Guard
  - Spouse of Reserves
  - Spouse of Active Duty
  - Parent of servicemember
  - Civilian or government employee
  - Retired
  - Other
- With what branch of uniformed service is the servicemember affiliated?
  - Army
  - Navy
  - Air Force
  - Marine Corps
  - Coast Guard
  - NOAA
  - Public Health Service
- How many years has the servicemember been in service?
  - 0-4 years
  - 5-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - 16-20 years
  - 20+ years
- What rank category is the servicemember?
  - E1-E4
  - E5-E7
  - E8-E9
  - W1-W4
  - O1-O3
  - O4-O6
  - O7-O10
- What is YOUR age category?
  - 18-25
  - 26-35
  - 36-45
  - 46-55
  - 55+
- Do you have dependent children?
  - Yes
  - No







The National Military Family Association is the only national organization whose sole focus is the military family and whose goal is to influence the development and implementation of policies that will improve the lives of the families of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. For more than 35 years, its staff and volunteers, comprised mostly of military family members, have built a reputation for being the leading experts on military family issues. Visit [www.nmfa.org](http://www.nmfa.org) for more information.



***NMFA thanks DefenseWeb Technologies, whose support made the printing of this report possible.***

DefenseWeb Technologies, Inc. ([www.defenseweb.com](http://www.defenseweb.com)) provides customized software solutions including web portals, electronic screening tools, case management systems, and online training systems to address the needs of military servicemembers and their families.

The company's solutions are used by all branches of the U.S. military to make health and family programs more effective, more efficient, and less expensive. Recently, DefenseWeb developed the Army's Virtual Family Readiness Group (vFRG), an online community portal to help families communicate and stay connected to regional support services, improving quality of life and military readiness.

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