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Support for the 21st Century Reserve Force

Insights on Facilitating Successful
Reintegration for Citizen Warriors
and Their Families

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Elizabeth Wilke, Anny Wong, Joshua Breslau, Karin E. Kitchens

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Summary

Although many studies have examined the impact of deployment on military families, few have assessed the challenges that guard and reserve families experience during reintegration. This report aims to fill that gap. The goals of our research were to better understand how these families are doing,¹ the challenges they confront, the strategies and resources they use to navigate the reintegration phase of deployment, and what could be done to ensure that readjustment following deployment proceeds as smoothly as possible.

Reintegration Framework

In our study, we regarded reintegration success as a multifaceted concept. Accordingly, we focused on three different areas that we believe are key to understanding and characterizing reserve component families' reintegration success:

- family well-being
- resource usage
- military career implications.

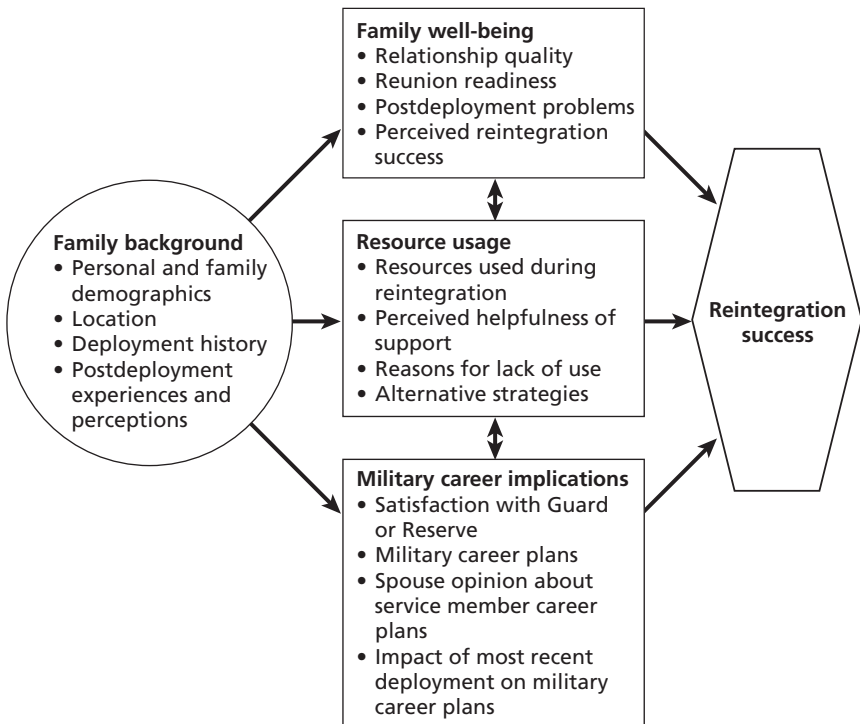
These domains could be interrelated—and likely are. For instance, family well-being may be both an influence on families' use of support resources and a consequence of such usage. Similarly, family well-being

¹ Throughout this report, *families* refers specifically to service members and their families.

and resource usage could both come to bear in a decision to continue guard or reserve service. Figure S.1 illustrates how these factors come together in the conceptual framework that underlies our analysis. Its development was informed by previous work conducted by the project team and shows the interrelationships that we considered between these factors in our current study. This framework also informed the development of our survey instrument and interview protocols.

This study included service members and spouses from all six U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) reserve components. The multifaceted data collection effort included a literature review of relevant policy, a web survey completed by reserve component service members and spouses, in-depth telephone interviews with reserve component mem-

Figure S.1
Conceptual Framework for Guard and Reserve Family Reintegration Success



bers and spouses, in-person and telephone interviews with resource providers, and an assessment of DoD survey instruments. A synthesis of the data obtained from these sources culminated in the findings and recommendations presented here.

Achieving Reintegration Success

Our analysis identified a number of factors that relate to reintegration success. These factors include whether the family felt ready for deployment, perceptions that communication between the service member and family members during deployment was adequate, perceptions that communication from the unit or Service following deployment was adequate, and comfortable family finances. Our analysis also indicated that when the service member deployed with his or her own unit and returned home without a physical wound, physical injury, or psychological issue, readjustment tended to go more smoothly.² In addition, interviewees felt that aspects of their family situation, such as prior deployment experience and the family's closeness, accounted for their smooth readjustment following deployment. They also described proactive steps they took to ensure that reintegration went well, such as good communication during and after deployment, activities for the family to engage in together, and the use of the reintegration-oriented resources. It seems clear that family initiative is key to successful reintegration. DoD can build on this knowledge by taking steps to empower families to be active, effective architects of their own reintegration success.

Yet, reintegration can be a time of diverse problems for families, especially soon after homecoming. Evidence from our web survey and family interviews indicates that the most prevalent problems experienced by study participants related to the service member's mental or emotional health, the service member's civilian employment, medical concerns and health care frustrations, and relationship problems with one's spouse or partner. Our findings show that families indicating

² Here, *physical wound* refers to a combat-related injury, distinct from other types of injuries sustained during a deployment.

that they were not ready at all for the service member's deployment were more likely to report some of these problems, including those related to the service member's mental or emotional health and relationship problems with one's spouse or partner. In essence, families experiencing challenges during reintegration tend to have the opposite circumstances or experiences from those that are associated with positive reintegration experiences—whether they be financial struggles, the service member not deploying with his or her own unit, returning with a physical or psychological injury, living far from the member's drilling unit, or a host of other factors. These findings suggest that efforts to bolster family readiness at the outset of the deployment cycle and reaching out to families soon after the service member returns home may be especially effective forms of support. In addition, they imply that certain populations may benefit from increased attention or tailored support.

Reintegration Resources and Their Use

A vast array of resources, which we characterize as the “web of support,” is available to assist reserve component families during reintegration. We identified five main types of organizations that contribute to this web of support:

- government organizations (including DoD and other federal organizations, as well as state and local governments)
- private for-profit organizations
- private nonprofit organizations
- faith-based organizations
- informal resources, including family, friends, and social networks.

The types of services offered, a second dimension of this web, tend to fall into the following areas:

- education
- employment

- family relationships
- financial issues
- medical concerns and health care
- legal issues
- mental health
- social networks
- spiritual support.

Altogether, the breadth of organizations and resources available to guard and reserve families is considerable.

More important than the amount of resources available is an understanding of the types of reintegration support that families find useful and how accessible these resources are. Our survey and interview participants most frequently cited using federal resources to aid with reintegration and found these resources helpful. This finding is both important and timely as the federal government considers where to cut federal spending. In particular, our survey and interview participants most frequently cited using unit-based resources to prepare for the service member's reunion with his or her family, and these resources were frequently perceived as helpful. Families also emphasized that private organizations, faith-based organizations, and state and local organizations were helpful in providing support as well. We learned that informal resources are used by almost half of guard and reserve families and that some families use these informal resources—such as family, friends, and social networks—in lieu of formal resources. These insights point to two specific areas where DoD might leverage existing resources to expand and enhance support: unit-based resources and informal networks. But it also suggests more generally that an improved understanding of the web of support, including gaps and redundancies, will enable DoD to better leverage existing programs and target its own resources to fill important gaps.

Despite the breadth of resources available, we identified a number of challenges that arise in supporting guard and reserve families. From the perspective of service members and spouses, there are a number of reasons why families do not use available resources, including lack of awareness, a perception that no one has reached out to them, difficulty

accessing resources, and concern about the quality of the resources. DoD efforts to improve the uptake of support resources should address these barriers to resource utilization.

Resource providers also face barriers in providing support to families, perhaps the most significant of which is that reserve component families tend to be geographically dispersed and often do not live near a military installation, so some populations are hard to reach. In addition, there is considerable concern about stigma in the military community that often inhibits service members from seeking help. There is also a lack of coordination across the web of support. Further, many providers do not have a good understanding of how effective their programs are. Providers are turning to creative solutions to overcome these barriers, such as using online tools, hiring retired military personnel who are able to build trust with service members, and experimenting with new ways to coordinate with other providers. But there is also a role for DoD. With a better understanding of these challenges, it is possible to identify ways that DoD can better support the provider community and, in turn, guard and reserve families. These insights have shaped the recommendations offered herein.

Implications for the Military Services

Reintegration success is related to military career preference. DoD regards a successful reintegration experience for the service member and his or her family as critical to a mission-ready, effective Reserve Component. Our research offers support for this premise by suggesting that families that have a smooth readjustment following deployment not only enjoy such positives as increased family closeness and a stronger marriage or domestic partnership but also have favorable views regarding the service member's continued service in the Guard or Reserve. We found that families that felt reintegration was going well also (1) planned a longer military career for the service member, (2) reported that the spouse or partner favored the service member staying in the Guard or Reserve, and (3) felt that the most recent deployment had a favorable influence on continued military service.

Conversely, we found that four types of problems were associated with the military career plans of reserve component personnel: service member civilian employment, relationships, spouse or partner mental or emotional health, and child well-being. These problems were associated with shorter planned tenure or being more undecided about future guard or reserve career plans. Similarly, problems with service member mental or emotional health, health care or medical issues, one's relationship with a spouse or partner, and financial/legal issues factored into the spouse or partner's opinion about continued service. Families that indicated one of these problems were more likely to note that the spouse or partner did not favor the service member staying in the Guard or Reserve. Finally, reporting health care issues or a relationship problem was associated with less-favorable views toward the most recent deployment. These findings may have important implications for military readiness if the problems and patterns described in this report are more prevalent in the Guard or Reserve as a whole.

Recommendations

Our findings point to a number of recommendations for improving DoD support to guard and reserve families. They fall into two areas: (1) actions DoD could take to improve its own support resources for families and (2) actions that DoD could take to improve the broader web of support.

Improving DoD Support Resources

While significant responsibility for successful reintegration falls on service members and their families, there are actions DoD can take to facilitate this process—from providing information on how to prepare for reintegration to enhancing opportunities for guard and reserve families to learn from each other's experiences. We offer a robust set of specific recommendations in six broad areas.

1. *Emphasize Early Preparation for Reintegration*

Promoting reintegration preparation earlier in the deployment cycle is critical. DoD should encourage families to use the time before and during deployment to prepare for reintegration. DoD should also explore opportunities to reach families sooner after demobilization—even before the first Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP) postdeployment event. Our survey findings suggest that some reintegration problems begin to emerge in this early period after demobilization, so reaching families during demobilization and soon after could have a positive effect on successful reintegration. Remote support via mail or the Internet during deployment, or voluntary programs within the first few weeks after reunion, could be useful. Finally, family finances are associated with a number of problems during reintegration and may affect reintegration success. Thus, DoD should promote financial planning for families and expand efforts to increase awareness of financial resources and the need for this type of planning.

2. *Ensure That Family Members Are Involved in the Reintegration Process*

To increase the likelihood of a smooth readjustment after deployment, DoD should also ensure that family members are involved in the reintegration process. It is particularly critical to engage spouses because they are often the primary means of support upon which service members rely. DoD should consider doing more to engage spouses before the service member returns home. This might involve increasing contact from the service member's unit, allowing more interaction at the demobilization site, and using informal resources as a means to provide information to spouses about reintegration and support services. In addition, our findings suggest that good communication during deployment (as perceived by study participants) helped with reintegration. DoD should continue and even expand efforts to facilitate family communication during deployment. Ensuring that families have the technology to communicate via whatever means works best for them may facilitate successful reintegration.

3. Shape Perceptions About Reintegration

When service members and their spouses understand what to expect during reintegration and can plan accordingly, the likelihood of a successful experience may improve. Thus, DoD should shape perceptions about reintegration and, in doing so, recognize that there is no single “right” way to reintegrate. One important aspect of shaping perceptions is to take continued steps to remove any perceived stigma associated with self-care and emphasize that seeking out support resources is not a barrier to career advancement. In addition, DoD should recognize and praise reintegration success. Toward this end, an effective approach could be to disseminate successful reintegration strategies used by families. Our findings suggest that families are eager to learn from one another about how to successfully navigate the deployment cycle.

4. Make Additional Refinements to the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program

The results of our survey and interviews suggest that a majority of service members and spouses find these events beneficial. But study participants also offered insight on ways the program could be improved to optimize their experiences. DoD should consider making it easier for families to participate in these events. While some families enjoy the travel, others would find it easier to participate if the events were closer to home. Conducting more YRRP events during drill weekends is something with which DoD could experiment. Increasing opportunities for family members to interact with one another during these events is another promising step. Second, DoD should allow families to customize their YRRP experience to a greater degree—such as by altering the schedule to fit with the timing of a service member’s deployment cycle, allowing service members to opt out of some events after their first deployment or substitute other events (such as the Army Strong Bonds program), or expanding opportunities to participate in elective sessions that are most pertinent to their needs. Finally, DoD should increase ways to elicit feedback from service members and their families to learn from these events’ successes and failures and continually improve them for both family participants and resource providers.

5. Ensure That Units Have the Resources They Need to Support Families

DoD should provide units with the resources they need to support families. Given the importance of adequate communication to successful reintegration, DoD should work with units to ensure that they have the resources needed to reach out to families in a *personal* way—something families expect both during and after deployment. Units should also equip someone to serve as a point person to whom families can turn for information on resources. This person could serve as a “clearinghouse,” guiding families to where they can find the resources they need. Not only would such a service aid families, but it would provide useful information to DoD about the types of resources families need and use most, which, in turn, could help identify gaps in available resources.

6. Refine Ways to Learn About the Experiences of Guard and Reserve Families

DoD should continue to refine the ways it collects information about the reintegration experiences of guard and reserve families. Even as DoD wants to understand more about family reintegration experiences, it must do so in a way that minimizes survey burden. Administering short surveys on a small number of related topics to different samples of service members and spouses is one possible approach. It is also important to demonstrate to families the value of their feedback and how it results in concrete changes to policy. We also believe that DoD should add additional questions and focus areas to the set of surveys associated with the reintegration and deployment experience more broadly. We offer specific suggestions in the body of this report, but responses to such questions would provide insight into the support resources that families use and why, which, in turn, could inform decisions regarding resource allocation for DoD support programs. Finally, DoD should consider ways to supplement surveys with other data, such as conducting interviews or focus groups with service members and their families, as well as collecting information from those who interact with guard and reserve families on a daily basis.

Improving the Broader Web of Support for Families

One important insight from our work is the fact that DoD does not have to “do it all” in providing support for reserve component families in conjunction with the deployment cycle. As we have described earlier, there is a vast web of support resources available to these families, provided by government and private-sector entities, by faith-based and other nonprofit organizations, and through informal networks. But DoD can play a valuable and important role in improving awareness of and access to these services and in working with providers to facilitate coordination, enhance resource use, and improve resource effectiveness. In doing so, DoD could gain a better understanding of how to most effectively direct its own family support resources. Our recommendations focus on five areas.

1. Target a Broader Audience to Support Families

Both DoD and non-DoD resource providers should target a broader audience to reach more family and friends and to disseminate information on how they can better support guard and reserve families. Given our findings about the degree to which guard and reserve families rely on nongovernmental resources, DoD should recognize their role in supporting these families and leverage such resources to facilitate information dissemination—especially to hard-to-reach populations. DoD should also build and promote community capacity, which, in turn, could lead to heightened awareness and involvement in reintegration. Community members are valuable assets who can work with military and civilian leadership to support guard and reserve families. Employers can also play a role. Although some service members experienced problems with civilian employment after mobilization, others found employers helpful and accommodating. DoD should continue its efforts to honor employers who support reserve component personnel and their families through various employer-recognition rewards.

2. Identify Gaps and Overlaps in the Web of Support

The web of support could be a powerful force multiplier in providing support to guard and reserve families, and DoD should leverage the ongoing efforts of other organizations. The first step in doing so efficiently would be to develop an inventory of resources—perhaps using

network analysis techniques—and then identify gaps and overlaps in support resources. With this information, DoD can more effectively target its own resources.

3. Facilitate Coordination Across Resource Providers

Our research indicated that coordination among providers does occur to some extent, but DoD can help expand the level of interaction between different types of resource providers and build on existing interactions. Again, network analysis could help identify the most promising areas to target. Another effective role for DoD could be to promote efforts to organize local resource providers, which can also contribute to building community capacity. A starting point would be to capitalize on initiatives that are already in place, such as the Joining Community Forces program sponsored by Michelle Obama and Jill Biden. In addition, DoD should consider hosting or promoting networking opportunities among resource providers. This would allow providers to learn about one another, as well as increase DoD's own awareness of resources available to service members and their families. These networking events can also be used to encourage providers to share best practices, which, ultimately, should lead to improved support.

4. Work with Providers to Address Reasons for a Lack of Resource Use

DoD should work with providers to address barriers to resource utilization. Specifically, it should work with providers to target specific populations that may not be able to access resources, such as families that live far from military installations, are economically disadvantaged, or lack access to online resources. Reaching out to these populations at different points during the deployment cycle can improve support. Similarly, DoD could work with providers to increase awareness (as several previous recommendations have touched on) by leveraging informal resources, such as social networks, or engaging the public. DoD should explore the possibility of developing a system for credentialing providers to mitigate concerns among service members and their families about using non-DoD resources. And finally, to help families find resources, DoD, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the U.S. Department of Vet-

erans Affairs should continue to refine the National Resource Directory by including more nongovernmental organizations, adding more areas of focus (e.g., financial resources), and ensuring that it is easy for families to navigate.

5. Encourage Resource Providers to Develop and Learn from Measures of Effectiveness

For resources to be useful to guard and reserve members and their families, they need to be effective. But many resource providers do not use formal measures of effectiveness. It is in DoD's interest to help providers develop and share these measures because they could improve available support. An important first step is to convey to resource providers the value of assessing how well they are doing in meeting the reintegration needs of guard and reserve families. For example, effectiveness metrics can indicate to the providers themselves, as well as to other stakeholders (e.g., prospective clients, potential funding sources), how well programs meet the reintegration-related needs of the guard and reserve families that turn to them. Such measures also can help identify areas of support that are in need of improvement and best practices that may be shared with other resource providers.

Final Thoughts

This study is one of the most comprehensive examinations to date of the reintegration experiences of reserve component personnel and their families. We acknowledge that limitations in our data collection—most notably, the underrepresentation of the U.S. Army Reserve and Army National Guard among our survey and interview participants—mean that the results presented in this report cannot be used to generalize about the experiences of the entire Reserve Component. However, despite these limitations, we believe that the research presented here is rich with insights that can improve support to members of the Guard and Reserve and their families during the deployment cycle, particularly the reintegration phase.

The findings that emerged from our survey and interviews led to a robust set of recommendations—steps that DoD can take not only to improve its own support programs but also to facilitate improvements in the resources provided by others. Given the number and diversity of these resources, the recommendations are as detailed and specific as possible. But stepping back, we have identified a number of themes that can usefully guide resource providers, both within and outside of DoD, as they take steps to improve their programs.

- *Effective communication is critical.* The importance of communication—within families, between the Services and families, between DoD and providers, and among providers—cannot be overstated. It is fundamental to successful reintegration and touches on nearly every aspect of our research.
- *Preparation is essential to success.* Preparing for all phases of deployment is an essential element in successful reintegration and an underlying theme throughout this report. Preparation during the various stages of mobilization—in identifying means of communication, in financial planning, and in developing support systems, for example—can ease the challenges faced by guard and reserve families. Hand in hand with preparation is awareness—knowing what to expect. While much of the preparatory burden falls on reserve component personnel and their families, DoD also has a role in facilitating this process.
- *DoD does not need to do it all.* Opportunities for collaboration with resource providers outside DoD abound and can best be leveraged if steps are taken to improve coordination between DoD and outside providers, among providers of all types, and between providers and families. Such steps will ultimately enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of support to reserve component members and their families.
- *One size does not fit all.* There is no “recipe” for reintegration. Adequate and effective support needs to be tailored to the needs of the Reserve Component and individual families. This concept applies not only to DoD programs and to how units interact with service

members and their families but also to the full network of support providers.

While this work sheds light on the reintegration experiences of the guard and reserve families that participated in our study, opportunities exist to learn more about the reintegration phase of the deployment cycle. The needs of reserve component families are continually evolving and, consequently, merit ongoing monitoring and research. Similarly, changes to the web of support, the gaps and overlaps in resources, and how that network of providers interacts also warrant observation. Although military operations in Afghanistan are winding down, these issues will remain important over the longer run because the Reserve Component will likely be called upon again to support emergency and wartime missions. Moreover, those service members who have deployed over the past decade and their families may confront longer-term challenges that have yet to appear and deserve the nation's continued support.