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## Shadowed by War: Building Community Capacity to Support Military Families

*The context of military service has changed greatly since the events of 9/11. The forward deployment of service members to active war zones, which involves the issues of separation, time away from home, and eventual reunion, increases the vulnerability of their families to multiple, negative short-term and long-term effects. This article explores these issues and suggests a new approach to building support systems to support these military families. To this end, a capacity-building framework is introduced, and 4 diverse and innovative social action programs consistent with this approach are highlighted. Implications for implementing*

*the community capacity-building model are presented.*

The worst time is when the phone rings because you don't know who is calling. They could be calling, telling you that he got shot or something. (Global War on Terrorism, 13-year-old son of Army Soldier; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007)

The forward deployment of service members to active war zones, which involves the issues of separation, time away from home, and eventual reunion, increases the vulnerability of their families to multiple, negative short-term and long-term effects. Although it is difficult to place a positive spin on family issues associated with war and its aftermath, the U.S. military has an impressive human service delivery system in place that is designed to support families and thus lower their chances of experiencing problems and dysfunction. In recent years, the military services have discovered the broad power of community—as both encompassing and distinct from the formal human service delivery system—as a resource for supporting military families and helping them cope effectively with adversity and positive challenges (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003; Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007).

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There are three parts to our discussion of building community capacity to support military families in the shadows of war. First, we present demographic information and research findings on military families that provide a context for the current discussion. This research is relevant for understanding the nuances and challenges of providing support to military families. Second, we present a community capacity-building social action model, which informs expanded program models that include attention to community partners and resources. Part 3 is an elaboration of programs now in the field designed to support military families who reflect this community capacity-building approach.

### THE CONTEXT

According to the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (2005), more than half (55%) of active military members are married and about 43% have children (40% of whom are younger than 5 years). There are two types of data that reflect key aspects of the circumstances of military families in today's Global War on Terrorism: deployment and death/wounded in action. As of November 2007, there were 162,000 troops deployed to Iraq (Reuters, 2007) and 26,000 to Afghanistan (Whitlock, 2008). About 1.5 million service members have spent service time in Iraq; about 500,000 have served two tours of combat, 70,000 have served three, and 20,000 have been deployed five or more times (Olson, 2007). Given that deployment tours can last up to 15 months, many military personnel have been spending more time overseas than at home. From March 2003 through February 2008, 3,965 U.S. military members died participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom and 29,320 were wounded in action (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2008). From October 2001 through February 2008, 478 military members died participating in Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan, the Philippines, Southwest Asia, and other locations) and 1,867 were wounded in action. How much or when these operations may change remains undetermined at this point; however, the issues of deployment and the risk of injury or death remain defining elements of military service (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Of particular note for professionals involved with family support programming are the over 1 million citizen-soldier members of the National Guard and the Reserves of the military branches.

More than half of them are married, more than 4 in 10 have children younger than 5 years, and many others are in serious relationships that may parallel or lead to marriage (Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense). At one point in 2004, 48% of the soldiers serving in the Middle East were members of the National Guard or the Reserves.

As these demographics suggest, the number of military service members and families impacted by Global War on Terrorism is significant. Within the context of these numbers, it is also important to note the difference in the type of military service that is occurring today. Specifically, the current War on Terrorism marks the first time in our Nation's history of *volunteer* military service that the United States has attempted to sustain such a large fighting force for such a prolonged period of time. Given the current context of military service, it is important to have an understanding of how this impacts military families.

### *Impacts on Marriages*

Researchers have most commonly studied military marriages in terms of divorce rates or marital satisfaction, or both. For example, using quarterly military personnel data that included deployment histories (from fiscal year 2002 – 2005) and marital status, Karney and Crown (2007) explored the stress hypothesis. Specifically, the stress hypothesis suggests that the demands or stresses on marriage should be expected to increase with the associated increase in stressors or the demands on the military. In their analyses of the relationship between deployment status and divorce, the authors concluded that in general, deployment actually increased the stability of the marriage. Paradoxically, they found that the longer the deployment, the greater the stability of the marriage. The authors note that they limited their analyses to include only those service members who entered into marriage after 2002. Additional limitations include the fact that the service member records do not include incidents of remarriage, separation, or marital satisfaction. However, McLeland and Sutton (2005) found that military men reported less relationship satisfaction than did nonmilitary men. Of note is the fact that deployment alert status had significant explanatory power in these relationships such that those who were on alert status at the time of testing demonstrated lower relationship satisfaction than did

those who were not on alert status. Only about half of spouses of enlisted members felt they coped well during their most recent deployment (Orthner & Rose, 2006). Further, in a national sample of National Guard spouses, about one third (37%) said they were well prepared for the deployment-associated separation (Caliber Associates, 2003). In the Orthner and Rose (2006) study of deployed Army married spouses, no factor predicted positive coping and adjustment more than having a strong marriage. Having a strong marriage increased the likelihood of good adjustment to the separation by 289%. The next most predictive factor was having strong social support, which increased the likelihood of adjustment by 24%.

### *Impacts on Children*

Children in military families are also affected by deployment. To date, most studies have focused on the relationship between the nonmilitary spouse and the children/youth as opposed to the relationship between the deployed parent and the children. We believe this is largely a function of the fact that service members have been in such a constant state of deployment rotation that research has not had a chance to catch up. However, child maltreatment is one indicator of parent-child relationships that has been examined. A recent study of child maltreatment rates reveals that rates of child maltreatment in military families increase during departure to and return from military deployment (Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, & Johnson, 2007). The authors report that "nonmilitary caretakers" were responsible for most such perpetrations, providing further evidence of the stress that families face when a member is deployed. Huebner et al. (2007) found that adolescents in the midst of parental deployment to an active war zone presented symptoms consistent with the concept of ambiguous loss. Specifically, youth in this qualitative study reported feelings of uncertainty and loss, boundary ambiguity, symptoms of depression, changes in daily routines, and relationship conflict. Barnes, Davis, and Treiber (2007) found that adolescents who had a family member deployed recorded significantly higher levels of posttraumatic stress and blood pressure than did their peers whose family members were not currently deployed or their peers from civilian families. Finkel, Kelley, and Ashby (2003) reported that family cohesion, positive mother-child relationships, and length of time at the current residence were predictive of children's

reports of loneliness, peer relationships, fear of negative evaluation from peers, and self-esteem. Additionally, mothers' depressive symptoms seemed to be related to children's overall well-being such that depression was predictive of children's sadness, anxious, and withdrawal behavior. Further, Orthner and Rose (2005) found that 37% of Army spouses report their children seriously worry about what could happen to their deployed parent and that depression and school problems occur in about 20% of their children. On the other hand, their findings also revealed that the best predictors of children's overall ability to cope with deployment were the parent's adaptation and coping success. Further, a common denominator of those youth who seemed to be adjusting well was that of an at-home parent who had adjusted well (Huebner et al.).

Rather than presenting a comprehensive review of the literature, this article is intended to suggest a new approach to providing support to military families. Yet, even a cursory review of the available data indicates either the reality of widespread negative reactions to certain aspects of military life or an increased risk of being negatively affected by military lifestyle events such as deployment. This negative response occurs in the context of the military's significant level of expenditures in providing formal agencies and support programs to service members and their families in coping with the demands and adversities, as well as the everyday challenges, of military life. The research indicates a need for multicomponent family support programs that integrate both civilian and military family support systems and one that draws upon the resources of the informal community in support of military families (Martin, Mancini, Bowen, Mancini, & Orthner, 2004). All things considered, the key to developing a strong support system is the readiness of the community to engage their families and then form a partnership in response to the issues they present.

### A COMMUNITY CAPACITY-BUILDING APPROACH TO FAMILY SUPPORT

For several years, we have been articulating and endorsing a community capacity approach perspective on family support systems. Our particular approach to capacity building, which is part of our conceptualization of social organization (Mancini, Bowen, & Martin, 2005), is informed

by the work of Coleman (1988), Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002), and Kretzmann and McKnight (1993). One of its primary features is elevating a results-oriented social action mechanism that pivots on achieving desired results rather than promulgating a broad menu of community activities whose effects cannot be discerned (Orthner & Bowen, 2004). Community capacity is conceptualized as being composed of two essential elements, *shared responsibility* for the general welfare of the community and its members and *collective competence*, demonstrating an ability to take advantage of opportunities for addressing community needs and for confronting situations that threaten the safety and well-being of community members (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000). Shared responsibility is a collective sentiment of concern, whereas collective competence is about taking action. In effect, community capacity is community readiness and performance in the context of opportunity, adversity, and positive challenges. This model is activated through the utilization of formal and informal networks, which lead to the generation of social capital, which in turn leads to family well-being/adaptation. Empirical investigations have demonstrated support for this model (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2001; Bowen, Martin, & Ware, 2004; Bowen et al., 2003). In this article, we focus on formal network aspects of the community capacity model; the entire model is included because it helps "locate" formal network examples in the chain of social action.

Formal networks in the military context include unit leadership, as well as both military and civilian formal organizations and agencies focused on family support. Examples of such military formal supports include Family Readiness and Ombudsman Groups and Family and Community Support Centers. Formal organizations are targeted to the support needs of individuals and families and sponsor activities that provide citizens with opportunities for meaningful participation in the collective life of the community. In many respects, they provide a framework for people coming together or at least have that potential. Given that a large proportion of the current military population comprises service members from the National Guard and Reserve, it is important to expand the vision of formal support systems to include those agencies and organizations located outside of the military installations. Examples of

these other formal support systems may include Cooperative Extension (4-H and Family and Consumer Sciences), schools, hospitals, youth-serving organizations (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs), civic groups, or mental health service providers. However, it is important to note that formal networks alone do not ultimately change situations for families.

Informal networks include any number of group associations, typically less organized networks of personal relationships that are voluntarily formed and maintained, including relationships with work associates, neighbors, and friends. We contend that a primary function of formal networks should be the support of informal networks, because it is these informal group associations that are most accessible to individuals and families and those who they most often rely upon on a daily basis (Bowen et al., 2000). Ultimately, we place a premium on the power of informal networks, rather than on service-provision and professional programming per se, which may work against civic competency and exploiting the power of informal networks. For example, two spouses may meet during a Family Readiness Group meeting, become friends, and then go on to provide informal support via conversations, friendship, and child care for each other during their spouse's deployment. Similarly, two spouses may meet at a Parent-Teacher Association meeting and become friends who find they can rely on each other during stressful times.

Of particular significance is the relationship between formal and informal networks, with regard to the cumulative effects of their common efforts, as well as how each supports the other to support families. Small and Supple (2001) have discussed community effect levels, suggesting that first-level effects are those contained within a solitary network. Second-level effects accrue when similar networks share common goals, and third-level effects (arguably the most powerful) occur when dissimilar networks share common goals. From a perspective of shared responsibility and collective competence, when formal and informal networks have common goals, such as military family support, odds for making positive differences for military families increase. Another dimension of the formal-informal system nexus is how networks support one another. Because research on military families suggests that informal sources are the preferred source of support by both family and service

members (Orthner & Rose, 2007), the community capacity framework places high value on formal systems being intentional about building resilient informal support systems. This approach recognizes the important community support role of formal systems because of their possession of experts that can assist families to navigate needed services and to develop opportunities for families to come together. It also recognizes the importance of informal systems for helping its members to access needed formal services.

Social capital is an aggregate of resources (informal, opportunities, and instrumental support) that come from what transpires in social networks, in both formal and informal settings (Mancini et al., 2005). Social capital includes the “good will” or “friendships” that result from informal interactions. It promotes reciprocity and trust and is seen in the actions of civic and social advocacy groups. In our community capacity model, social capital is important because it develops in networks and promotes shared responsibility and collective competence. The capital that accrues from these networks contributes to the energy that enables communities to support families in ways that otherwise might not be feasible or possible—thus contributing to family adaptation (Bowen et al., 2000). Family adaptation is particularly important in the present discussion because we are ultimately describing capacity-building, on-the-ground efforts that increase a family’s ability to adapt to the demands of military life, especially during deployment. As communities are successful in reaching desired results (demonstrating community capacity, in effect), additional social capital accrues and a mutual environment of support emerges. Consequently, a “web of support” envelops military families, which involves the reciprocal and synergetic effects from the combination of formal and informal sources of support.

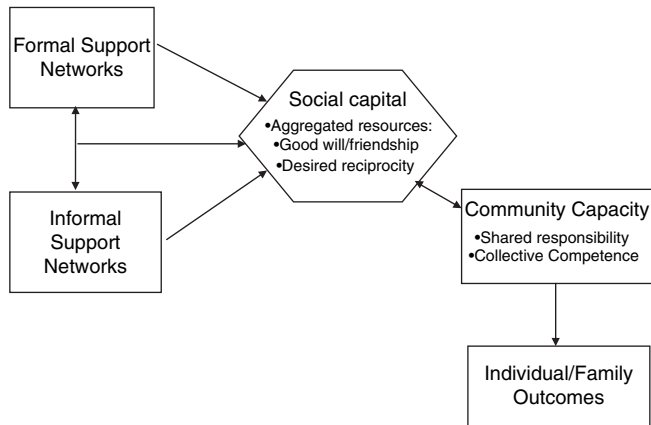
We have hypothesized community capacity as leading to achieving important community results such as family adaptation, community satisfaction, and well-being (Bowen et al., 2000; Mancini, Martin, & Bowen, 2003). In 1999, we examined how community capacity, community connections, and community participation influenced sense of community in the Air Force (AF; Bowen, Martin, et al., 2001). Respondents were more likely to report a strong sense of community when they perceived higher community participation (members and families participating in base events

and activities), greater community connections (members and families experiencing ease in connecting with others in the base community), and higher levels of community capacity (community members demonstrating shared responsibility and collective competence in their community). In a more recent investigation with 10,102 married active duty AF members, positive perceptions of community capacity had a strong and direct effect on self-reported symptoms of depression; these perceptions were also a significant mediator of the effects of formal and informal support networks on depression (Bowen et al., 2004). Other researchers have also demonstrated the benefits of community capacity-building efforts. For example, Knox, Litts, Talcott, Feig, and Caine (2003), using a quasi-experimental design, reported a reduced rate of suicide and reductions in other adverse outcomes associated with the AF’s suicide prevention program, which incorporated inter-agency planning and coordination, commander awareness education and training, and peer monitoring.

The relationship among the community capacity model concepts is displayed in Figure 1. According to this model, formal support networks and informal support networks are bidirectional in their influence such that formal support networks can lead to the formation of informal support networks and informal support networks can lead to the formation of formal support networks. Both formal and informal support networks contribute to the formation of social capital (e.g., aggregated resources, good will, desired reciprocity). Social capital enjoys a reciprocal relationship with community capacity such that social capital can influence community capacity (e.g., shared responsibility, collective competence) and community capacity can lead to social capital. Finally, community capacity is thought to lead to individual and family outcomes.

Our community capacity framework is directly aligned with social action program development. Empirical research from this framework has demonstrated the significance of both formal and informal support, and consultation with military support agencies has demonstrated its merits for developing prevention and intervention programs. This framework was born of our consultation with formal support agencies in the military, wherein we honed an approach that mobilizes formal supports that ultimately help build

FIGURE 1. ELEMENTS OF THE COMMUNITY CAPACITY MODEL.



informal community (Bowen, Orthner, Martin, & Mancini, 2001).

*Foundational Aspects of Community Capacity–Building Programs*

Our approach suggests a range of organizational characteristics that support capacity building and, in particular, strengthen informal networks of support for military families. These characteristics spring from our social organization framework, which elevates community capacity, networks, and social capital (Mancini et al., 2005). An organization that operates from a building community capacity perspective:

- Is a part of the community rather than apart from the community. Capacity building requires formal organizations to coalesce with informal networks of individuals and families.
- Is knowledgeable about the various communities that comprise the greater community. Even as *The Family* is a misnomer, so is *The Community*; military families are diverse, and the communities in which they function are equally diverse. For capacity building that engages the breadth of families, organizations must be attuned to that breadth.
- Understands and values the importance of connections. Our capacity-building approach is built on the principle that connections become powerful allies in family support.

- Is not satisfied with the status quo. Organizations easily become comfortable with their approaches to family support and, in particular, activities assumed to consistently produce positive results. Vibrant organizations take risks in questioning their own good works, with the goal being to keep focused on what is good for military families rather than solely focusing on what is assumed to be good for the organization.
- Is committed to intentionally addressing community issues. Although our main focus in this article has not been on research dimensions of program development, those programs we have described all have an empirical element targeted on assessing program process and program results. Intentionality is enhanced when organizations invoke systematic looks at their processes and the yield from their efforts.
- Is guided by desired program results. The programs described here have specified “end of the day” results.
- Places more effort on *outreach* than on marketing. There is a not so subtle difference between outreach and marketing, mainly that outreach moves to where people are, where they live, and where they associate.
- Values partnerships. Complex issues, such as supporting military families with a combination of civilian and military resources, require complex solutions. A primary vehicle for this is partnership and collaboration.

- Sees community members as partners and community assets rather than as clients and beneficiaries of agency/organization services. Capacity building is about resilience and in particular capturing the resilience possessed by military families.

We now turn to describing several contemporary family support initiatives that align with this community capacity approach and provide examples of innovative supports for families facing the challenges of military life. Each serves as an example of a formal support initiative geared toward building informal networks.

#### COMMUNITY CAPACITY-BUILDING PROGRAM RESPONSES

Each of the prevention programs described in this section is an example of formal organization efforts to strengthen families and their informal networks. The nexus of formal and informal networks is of particular importance, especially to the extent they coalesce around a common issue that is of significance to all, for example, neighborhood safety or family violence (Mancini, Nelson, Bowen, & Martin, 2006). We believe that these programs represent the next phase of community support for military families, one that accounts for changes in the nature of military service itself and of the increasing integration of military families into civilian communities. Several new programs have incorporated this capacity-building response. This section highlights four such programs (two for active duty and two for Guard/Reserve families) that provide examples of ways in which such programming can be and is being implemented. Our intention was to describe the overall program and then to demonstrate the application of the community collaboration model in the context of that particular program. Given that these are “formal” programs, heavy emphasis has been given to the “formal support network” part of the model. As much as possible, we attempted to include indicators (or potential indicators) of other aspects of the model in our program description.

##### *4-H/Army Youth Development Project*

Army Child and Youth Services began partnering with National 4-H Headquarters in 1995 for the purpose of improving youth development programs at all Army installations (<http://www.4->

[hmilitarypartnerships.org](http://hmilitarypartnerships.org)). It should be noted that this initiative has developed into a model program of cooperation between Federal agencies and in 2006 received the U.S. Department of Agriculture Honor Award for Excellence. Of particular importance is the participation of Land Grant Universities in program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

The underlying philosophy of this partnership includes recognition of the needs and assets of both National 4-H and Army Child and Youth Services; the potential for having a much larger impact on children, youth, and families than either organization might have independently; a commitment to child and youth programming that is developmentally sound; and activating complex formal organizations with common goals to focus on building family resilience. This stated philosophy represents the idea that sharing formal support networks at the national level can be translated into increased community capacity at the local level and thus better outcomes at the family and individual level.

How does this happen? In the overall partnership model, the Army provides the means of delivering youth development programming through its major command and installation-level professionals, National 4-H provides a mechanism for placing and leveraging resources, and the Land Grant Universities provide the consultation on program and staff development. For example, a pivotal resource in the partnership is the 4-H Army Youth Development Specialist (YDS). The YDS is actually a 4-H youth development professional “on-loan” from a land grant university. Their primary role involves identifying, organizing, connecting, and delivering program-oriented resources to Army professionals providing youth development programs. Additionally, they ensure ongoing training to those professionals who work with Army youth. In the fall 2007, there were 20 specialists in the project; all were on assignment from their home university and Extension system to this worldwide project. When working in the United States and its territories, YDSs are intentional about brokering and supporting connections between local installation and 4-H staff. An outcome example of these connections is the fact that over 400 4-H clubs (a well-known aspect of Extension) have been established on Army installations worldwide.

When viewed through the lens of the community capacity model, one can track how the formal

support networks established at the national level generated social capital, which created win-win opportunities for both organizations (e.g., increased trust between both organizations, more resources and training for both Extension and Army staff). The result was increased community capacity at the local level (e.g., increased staff competence, acknowledgment of shared responsibility for resilience of youth and families) and assumedly better outcomes for individuals and families (e.g., increased skills in decision making, technology, science, math, environmental stewardship, community service). Specific examples of increased community capacity related to this program include development of a 4-H 101 course designed to facilitate increasing 4-H clubs on installations; development of joint Army/4-H local action plans for programs; installment of Army-wide Character Education Program; design and test of prototype youth technology labs, which are oriented toward youth development programming; provision of numerous Extension faculty with professional development opportunities related to supporting military families; development of Army Child and Youth Services evaluation tools and staff training modules on child and youth issues; coordination of Youth Leadership Forums Army wide; in 2004, launch of an "Operation: Military Kids (OMK)" initiative to support Guard and Reserve families (see following section); facilitation of state-level action plans to meet the needs of military families regardless of their contiguity to Army installations; expansion of the capacity of computer labs on installations to support professional development of Army staff, as well as youth development curricula requiring technology; provision of technical assistance to secure accreditation for Army School Age Programs; development of a mentoring program for Army Child and Youth Technology Specialists; and coordination of technology initiatives across all Army Regions.

#### *Operation: Military Kids*

The U.S. Army officially launched another partnership in April 2005 under the auspices of the previously discussed 4-H/Army Youth Development Project. Unlike the 4-H/Army Youth Development Project, OMK has been implemented to support military-affiliated children, youth, and families wherever they may live. OMK focuses on community connections and uses formal

networks to promote and strengthen informal networks to the benefit of National Guard and Reserve families experiencing deployment. Specifically, at the national level, OMK has convened five separate preexisting formal networks (National 4-H, American Legion, Army Child and Youth Services, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and the Military Child Education Coalition) in an effort to establish social capital (in the form of joint ownership and shared resources), which is then leveraged by state teams (comprising state-level representatives of the same five organizations) to increase community capacity at the local level (i.e., city, town). There are currently 34 states participating in this effort (OMK, 2007).

In the OMK program, increased community capacity is demonstrated via a range of opportunities that have been offered to youth and families, including but not limited to recreational, social, and educational programming; assistance with school-related issues; single-day or weekend camps; networking with other youth and families also experiencing deployment; special recognition events; and transportation assistance. As discussed in the previous model, participation in these opportunities is intended to result in positive youth and family outcomes. For example, in local communities across the country, more than 14,000 citizens volunteered their time to attend trainings designed to increase their awareness of deployment issues facing military children and families, thus equipping them to provide support to those families throughout the deployment cycle. This formal support activity (i.e., trainings) fostered informal supports as citizens became more aware of issues and formed friendship and support networks. Additionally, over 10,000 "Hero Packs" were distributed to youth in 36 states in acknowledgment and appreciation for the sacrifices they have made during their military parent's deployment. The packs include tools to help you connect with deployed parents as well as information on local support programs. Again, such formal supports assist in fostering informal connections as youth realize they are not alone.

#### *The AF Community Readiness Consultation Model*

The Airman and Family Readiness Center (A&FRC) is the focal agency on AF bases for addressing the support needs of AF total force

members and families. These centers have provided avant-garde leadership among AF agencies in implementing new community-based service delivery strategies and assessment tools, which are aligned directly with the community capacity framework reviewed earlier (Bowen, Martin, Liston, & Nelson, 2008). A new Community Readiness Consultant (CRC) model is being implemented in A&FRCs in an effort to expand outreach efforts to units (typically at the squadron level). The aims are to foster a sense of community, promote individual and family adaptation, and to ensure individual and family preparedness for the demands associated with military life. This new service delivery strategy is both strengths based and results focused.

CRCs from the A&FRCs are the key components of this practice strategy. CRCs assist unit commanders in meeting their responsibilities for the health, welfare, and readiness of unit members. Although unit outreach has been an important program component of A&FRCs since their inception, the nature of unit outreach shifts under the new model from a product focus to a market focus. Instead of attempting to fit the needs of unit members and families into preexisting program areas and services (product focus), CRCs are assigned to units and work in partnership with unit leaders to identify priority needs that compromise readiness and retention. Service action plans are developed in response to these needs (market focus). Although CRCs work within the scope of the mission and core requirements of their agency's mandates, they are trained to help unit commanders locate community resources for priority needs that fall outside the organizational boundaries of their centers. They are also trained to design service action plans that capitalize on the availability of formal and informal community resources, including unit members and families, extended family members, friends, and neighbors—networking and collaboration between formal and informal networks of social care are cornerstones in this community-based approach to practice.

The work of CRCs in units is informed by a six-step unit outreach process: engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and sustainment. The AF has committed significant resources in training CRCs in this six-step model, which is framed and informed by a results management (RM) approach to the design and delivery of support services (Orthner & Bowen, 2004). RM focuses the efforts of

agencies on clearly defined and anticipated results. A key aspect of the RM approach is the identification of community partners who will play a role in helping to achieve desired results. In addition, the AF has sponsored the development of assessment tools that are used to inform, monitor, and evaluate service action plans. One such tool is the Unit Assets Inventory (UAI; Bowen & Martin, 2006).

Authorized by unit leadership and completed voluntarily by all unit members, the UAI is a 62-item, self-administered, Web-based assessment tool that examines respondents' perceptions about sources of informal and formal support in their lives (a support profile, nine dimensions) and about their success in adapting to life challenges and meeting AF responsibilities (a resiliency profile, eight dimensions). The online tool takes about 12–15 min on average for respondents to complete. Importantly, the 17 dimensions on the UAI correspond to the community readiness model that provides a conceptual foundation for the CRC practice strategy (Bowen, Orthner, et al., 2001).

The UAI has a number of features that both promote unit member readiness and support the work of the CRC. First, after they complete the inventory, respondents are able to go directly to an easy-to-interpret summary profile of their responses, which is available only to the person completing the inventory. Second, CRCs are able to view and download a summary group profile that aggregates the responses across a particular unit. An advanced selection tool allows CRCs to generate profiles for specific respondent subgroups with at least 10 respondents. This feature is extremely flexible and easy to use. Next, a number of resources are provided for CRCs, including promising practices, useful Web links, and publications that correspond to each UAI dimension. Last, an online tool, the practice exchange, allows CRCs to exchange ideas and suggestions for strengthening unit-based outreach and the design and delivery of unit-based programs and services.

The CRC carefully reviews UAI summary data in preparation for a meeting with unit leadership. A key objective is to work with unit leadership to codevelop a unit service action plan that focuses on those issues in which the CRC will play a role. This plan specifies desired results; identifies key partners; indicates services and support that will be provided to the unit; and specifies everyone's roles, responsibilities, and activities. The Web site has a link for downloading, completing, and

managing the unit service action plan. A similar tool, the Personal Assets Inventory, has recently been implemented for the spouses of unit members.

This development and implementation of this service delivery strategy parallels the community capacity model and was developed in tandem with it. A major focus of this strategy is to strengthen the interface between the formal and the informal networks of social care as a means to promote the readiness and resiliency of total force members and their families. It is a research-informed approach to determining individual and family needs and assets, directly translatable to prevention and intervention efforts, and amenable to planning activities of formal network leadership. Current efforts involve working to promote a *community of practice* among CRCs across the AF.

#### *Essential Life Skills for Military Families*

Supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Administration for Children and Families, a new curriculum has been developed that specifically addresses the family strengthening needs of Reserve Component military families. This curriculum is called "Essential Life Skills for Military Families" (ELSMF) because it focuses on both the relational and the practical skills that Reserve Component families often need to help them cope with the uncertainties and challenges related to military life and deployments (Carroll, Robinson, Orthner, Matthews, & Smith-Rotabi, 2008). The curriculum was built in partnership with academic colleagues at universities, family support leaders in the North Carolina National Guard, and local Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences agents. The program is administered through East Carolina University and is offered through the local agents of the Cooperative Extension Service. The availability of this program through a local and widely available agency is a key aspect of this program because members of the National Guard and Reserve Components come from widely distributed communities.

The ELSMF curriculum includes five 3-hr workshops around key topics of interest to Reserve Component families. These include (a) Preparing Together for the Unexpected, (b) Making Ends Meet, (c) Facing Legal Challenges Together, (d) Fostering Family Resilience and Strength, and (e) Parenting Together and Apart. These topics were developed after conducting

focus groups with Military Reserve Component couples and in consultation with the family program leaders of the National Guard and Army Reserves. Each workshop is strengths based and built on the assumption of developing relationship assets that can promote family resilience. The workshops include content related to building relationship skills, including reflective listening, problem solving, companionship building, shared parenting, social support, and community engagement. But the emphasis on practical skills acknowledges the critical importance of helping couples identify and build competence in areas that are likely to be stressed before, during, and after separations. These include money management, legal issues, parenting while apart, and learning to adjust effectively to unexpected events that come into their lives.

The ELSMF program is intended to create a unique local partnership between a key community support organization (Cooperative Extension) and military families who may be coming to the course from different military branches of the National Guard and Military Reserves. This vital new link offers military families a local resource in both the formal and the informal systems. In formal support, these families not only learn practical and relational skills but also how to connect to their programs and agencies in their own community that they can call on at any time. For example, the skills they learn in money management can then be augmented through other financial management courses offered with Cooperative Extension or other community agencies to which they might be referred. The companionship skills can be further developed through activities for military families provided locally by their Parks and Recreation Program. And because these couples are learning these new skills together, they have the natural opportunity to form their own informal support network that can continue to be developed afterward or through support by National Guard Family Assistance Centers or local Military Reserve Centers. This capacity-building effort takes advantage of already existing services in nearly every community and creates a virtual military support network that includes families from all military branches.

#### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Perhaps the most significant recognition in studying and working with military families during the

past decade has been that these families are embedded in a larger community context. Although this is an obvious recognition to scholars familiar with the study of military families or the broader literature in work and family, military researchers and practitioners have only recently started to see the community and the power of both formal and informal networks that are endemic to a community perspective as a partner in support of military families. The four program responses that are reviewed in this article reflect this recognition and the value of assuming a community capacity-building perspective.

Clearly, building community capacity to support military families is on the agenda of a number of local, state, and national organizations. Those we have highlighted are either already operating at a national level or are designed to eventually be exported nationwide (e.g., the North Carolina marriage project). These initiatives all have accessed existing resources and delivery systems, some in the civilian sector (4-H and Family and Consumer Sciences, Cooperative Extension, USDA) and others in the military sector (Army Child and Youth Services and AF Airman and Family Readiness Flight). These initiatives are informed by research and are also generating new research, either on military families or on military family support systems. A constant theme in these initiatives is the value of establishing and maintaining community connections, including those between military and civilian communities. Stated program goals for each of them include reinforcing a sense of shared responsibility and collective competence and are considered as natural artifacts of connecting people with people and people with formal organizations. The exchange of information and the social capital that accrues from it are also evident; these initiatives are rich in either curriculum or generated data that are directly aligned with prevention and intervention. Consistent with the community capacity model, each initiative is oriented toward producing observable results rather than only stimulating program activities. Partnership and collaboration, whether it is between military and civilian proponents or between formal organizations and informal associations, is a common element among the initiatives we examine here.

A community capacity approach has clear merit for strengthening community support systems for military families and service members. This community-oriented approach addresses

the changing context of military service and military family life as it seeks to connect potentially isolated families to areas of support. Rather than relying strictly on military-sponsored support—a decidedly top-down approach—this model provides a framework for helping families to help themselves in the context of their own community.

In summary, the community capacity model and the programmatic examples suggest new and viable ways to support military families in the changing context of post-9/11 military service. In order to most effectively support service members, researchers, educators, and policymakers should continue to explore and refine these concepts. We believe these ideas hold great merit for supporting families—both on and off military installations.

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