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Background

Strong families are at the heart of a ready National Guard force, and communication is a key to creating strong ties between and among families, service members, and the force. As one captain in the Utah National Guard put it, “We know that if the families are taken care of, the Soldiers and Airmen can better focus on their missions down range.” UTNG Family Programs is the umbrella for a variety of programs and services designed to improve and maintain high levels of family readiness by enhancing the well-being of military families through information, education, programs, and resources.

The purpose of this study is to find out what prevailing attitudes and behaviors exist among service members in the Utah National Guard which influence their participation in Family Programs, and to reveal any relationships with known variables in the UTNG population, such as rank, age, family type, and years in service.

In September, 2012, a team of from the Center for Community and Communication at the University of Utah approached UTNG Family Programs at the recommendation of the UTNG public affairs office. We decided early on that a well-designed survey would best meet some of the initial needs of UTNG Family Programs. UTNG Family Program leaders expressed concern that too many service members don’t share their information with Family Programs and thus are not able to fully participate in the important resources that Family Programs has to offer.
In October 2012 we began discussions with Family Readiness Support Assistants about why they thought some service members might not be participating in the programs and communicating program benefits to their families. Based on those initial discussions, we developed the survey, which consists of 15 items. In accordance with our memorandum of understanding with UTNG Family Programs and the Institutional Review Board guidelines, the survey was delivered to Family Programs in early February, 2013. They distributed it and we collected the data online. The survey was open for three and a half weeks.

This survey was made available online and a link was provided to UTNG Family Programs, who sent it out with a cover letter to the various command leaders via email. Three hundred and eighty service members completed the survey, which took about four minutes to complete. Respondents were not asked to provide their names or any personally identifiable information.

This study is only a start to figuring out how the Utah National Guard can best support its service members’ families. To date, no scholarly literature exists that addresses the way programs designed to meet the needs of military families in fact measure up to their important charge, especially in light of the unique circumstances of National Guard families.
Reflection

This project was much bigger than I was willing to admit early on. Initially, our three-man team planned on concluding the survey analysis by the end of 2012. That did not happen, and I continued alone on the project in 2013. While a great learning experience, it was sometimes overwhelming. Four things surprised me:

1. Workload – There is an enormous amount of sheer work—to include long stretches of hard thinking—that goes into a study. Writing several dozen pages was the easy part. Figuring out what to write was the hard part. Asking the right questions seems to be where the big money is.

2. Statistics – I sometimes think I am smart. Then I try to understand a logistic regression. Two semesters of statistical methods has given me a familiarity with some of the more basic statistics tests and how to run them in SPSS. But I have been frustrated at how complex it all is.

3. Design – A classic chicken-or-the-egg problem. I realized after it was too late that my survey was inadequate. But without a survey, I never would have known how to design this project.

4. Communication – Keeping in touch with Family Programs was tough, and I assume that they probably got impatient waiting around for a product that they had long ago given up on. Keeping a client motivated and invested was hard.

So this reflection might help someone else embarking on a similar journey. I present it, as Soldiers are wont, nay, required, to do after any major exercise: in the form of an After-action Review.

After Action Review

According to Army doctrine, “AAR’s are a professional discussion of an event that enables Soldiers/units to discover for themselves what happened and develop a strategy (e.g., retraining) for improvement” (US Army Combined Arms Center, 2011, p. 2). Well, a lot happened, and I will be as concise as possible. The AAR guide asks reviewers to consider four things:

Review what was supposed to occur.

- The entire point of the project was to give UTNG Family Programs some information to discover why more Servicemembers don’t participate in Family Programs.
- We were to develop a survey and analyze the results.
- Finally we were to publish a report on the results.

Establish what happened.

- We, and during the second semester, I, got it all done. So I have to deem the project a success. Most of the critiques are in terms of degree, not kind.
We were consistently later in each phase than we had anticipated. This was originally conceived as a single-semester project. It was a year-long one all along.

_Determine what was right or wrong with what happened._

- Right 1: I was in near constant communication with various members of the community team. While I didn’t always hear back from them, I was confident that they knew what my progress was.
- Right 2: Weekly meetings with Dr. Anderson forced me to stay current in the project and develop good questions to ask.
- Right 3: Plugging away at statistical problems made all the difference. I am no stats whiz, but I am confident that the basic analyses included in my report tell a story that others can explore further, if they wish.
- Wrong 1: I didn’t have more specific research questions beforehand. This weakness cannot be overstated.
- Wrong 2: I didn’t spend enough time with my community partner.

_Determine how the task should be done differently next time._

**Improvements:**

1. From Wrong 1, I would try to find similar studies before designing a survey. Then, work through the questions and what they might lead to ahead of time instead of hoping you might find something worthwhile.
2. From Wrong 2, I would advise researchers to spend more time, in an ethnographic role, with community partners. It would help build a context for the literature review and research questions.
3. Engage in better communication with one dedicated point of contact, to include constant updates and tracking of deliverables. Agree on deliverables and delivery dates ahead of time.
4. Review the literature ahead of time.
5. I wish that I had asked more questions to measure attitudes about whether UTNG FP was beneficial. In fact, I needed better measures all around. This gets us to a discussion of definitions. When we use the term, “Family Programs,” we are not sure the respondent knows what we mean. Rather, we have no way of knowing that how the respondent interprets Family Programs is how the researcher interprets it. Indeed, throughout this project, I have realized how enormous the scope of Family Programs is. It is unlikely that the average Servicemember grasps it all, or is familiar with it all. Thus, when one respondent indicates dissatisfaction with Family Programs, s/he might only refer to one aspect, when in fact s/he is very satisfied with another aspect, but is unaware that the other aspect is within the scope of Family Programs.
6. Perhaps weekly meetings with other students would help, giving project managers a chance to shares best practices and concerns with other students doing similar things.
Method and Findings
**Executive Summary**

Our study was designed to find out, directly, what Soldiers and Airmen in the Utah National Guard know about Family Programs; and indirectly, why family members don’t participate at higher rates in various programs.

**Key descriptive findings**

- Over 330 respondents completed the survey.
- 81% male, 19% female;
- 10% E1 – E4, 72% E5 – E9, 18% Officers
- 13% single, 79% married, 8% divorced or separated
- 30% M-day, 63% Full-time
- 81% are not active or are only slightly active.
- 74% of respondents specifically remember providing information to Family Programs, most of them at regular unit drill.
- 69% of respondents agreed that Family Programs was designed to meet their unique needs.
- 32% thought that participation was mandatory.
- 27% of respondents agreed that Family Programs facilitates gossip.

**Key relationships**

The perception that Family Programs is designed to meet the needs of Servicemembers was correlated positively to active participation in the programs ($r = 0.40, N = 336, p = 0.00$), and negatively to facilitates gossip, ($r = -0.41, N = 336, p = 0.00$). There was no significant correlations to age, sex, time in service, or rank.

Servicemembers who actively participated in Family Programs were more likely to believe that the program is designed to meet their needs.

Respondents were consistent in their belief that providing information and participating were either both mandatory or both voluntary. Officers were more likely to believe that participation in Family Programs is mandatory. There was a similar relationship between rank and familiarity with Family Programs, with officers tending to be more familiar, and significantly so ($b = 0.36, t = 2.86, p < 0.05$).
Method

We began our investigation by interviewing Servicemembers and civilian workers in UTNG Family Programs to get a sense of what the major theories were from those working closest with Servicemembers. The FRSAs gave us some ideas that we used to draft more formal questions to ask service members themselves. We recorded notes in Google docs and used them to draft questions. But we needed people in the organization to share their thoughts with us. Lt. Col. McIntire sent out the following invitation at our request:

*Three fellows from the Center for Communication and Community at the University of Utah would like to have informal, confidential phone conversations with service members about their participation in Family Programs. The conversations are part of a larger research study the Center is conducting in partnership with the UTNG. Some of the things they might ask are:*

1. Do you participate in FP activities? Why or why not?
2. Have you supplied FP with your spouse’s/parents’ contact information?
3. Do you think FP is an important aspect of your readiness?
4. Do you know other service members who do not share their contact information with FP? What reasons do you suspect that they don’t?

*These conversations would take between six and ten minutes. The fellows would record demographic information about the service members, but not their names. Again, all conversations will be held confidential in accordance with scientific research ethics.*

*If you’d be willing to help, please contact ### and give a phone number, along with best times to call.*

Within two days we had a list, and each of us contacted four or so service members. Again, we recorded notes in Google docs to compare answers. The respondents tended to be full-time and higher ranking enlisted Servicemembers.

Nevertheless, we found several themes that we expected, as well as a few ideas that were new. For example, at least two service members thought that participation was mandatory, and at least two others indicated that they thought Family Programs was mainly for service members with spouses or children.

Once we felt that the qualitative data was representative, we again got together as a team to draft a survey. The
process went fairly quickly. Google Hangout proved to be a highly valuable tool, as we could video conference and edit documents in the same window.

The draft survey items then went into Qualtrics.com on Jeremy’s recommendation. Its interface is simple, clean, and easy. It also allowed for us to shared a preview, which we did. Within a week we got feedback from the UTNG Family Programs leadership. They provided some recommendations, mostly in terms of style.

At the beginning of the new semester, I was on my own. After a brief phone meeting with UTNG Family Programs leadership, we made a few more changes to the survey, began the IRB approval process, and made the survey live by the second week of February. It remained open for three and a half weeks. I sent an email “cover letter” to Lt. Col. Baxter to include in his email to the various commands:

The Center for Communication and Community at the University of Utah and Utah National Guard Family Programs is conducting a study to find out what attitudes and behaviors exist among Servicemembers in the Utah National Guard that might influence their participation in Family Programs. The Center for Communication and Community will compile the answers from this survey, analyze the data, and report findings and recommendations to Utah National Guard Family Programs.
This survey will take about four minutes to complete. At no point will you be asked to provide your name or any personally identifiable information. The Center for Communication and Community alone will collect and analyze the data. There will be no follow up on this survey.

Participation in this study is voluntary. There may be no direct benefit to you for participating. You can choose to not take part. You can choose not to finish the questionnaire or omit any question you prefer not to answer without penalty.

By completing this online questionnaire, you are giving your consent to participate.

The Center for Communication and Community appreciates your time and participation.

Lt. Col. Baxter forwarded the email to the state public affairs officer, Lt. Col. McIntire, who then sent it to the various Major Commands (MACOMs) in the UTNG. As a Servicemember, I received the email request to complete the survey within a few days.

Once the survey was closed, we had nearly 400 responses. It was less than the 750 we had hoped for, but still gave us quite a bit of power. The survey results were downloaded into a .sav format to be analyzed using IBM’s SPSS statistical package.
Findings – Descriptives

Below are histograms of responses for each question.

How familiar are you with Family Programs?

How actively have you participated in Family Programs activities?
How easily do you think Family Programs can contact you?

- Not Easily: 50
- Somewhat Easily: 100
- Easily: 150
- Very Easily: 100

Do you specifically recall providing your contact information to Family Programs?

- Yes: 300
- No: 100
The most common answers for “Other” were: during mobilization (7), at FRG meetings (4), and at Yellow Ribbon ceremonies (4).
Family Programs is designed to meet my unique needs.

Participation in Family Programs entails an obligation to volunteer for various activities.
Participation in Family Programs is a requirement for Servicemembers.

Family Programs is designed for Servicemembers with children.
Family Programs is for married Servicemembers.

I enrolled in Family Programs at enlistment/SPR.
Family Programs is designed mainly to support families of deployed Servicemembers.

Family Programs has enough information to easily get in touch with my emergency point of contact.
As far as you are aware, is providing your contact information to Family Programs

What is your age? (use the slider to indicate your exact age)-In Years
How many years have you served in the military? (Use the slider to indicate the exact number of years... - Years in the Guard/Military

What is your Guard status?

- M-Day (Traditional Guard)
- AGR/ Tech
- ADOS
- Other
How many combat deployments have you served?
Findings - Insights

Aside from merely describing the set of Servicemembers who participated in our survey, we also wanted to develop some empirically-based avenues for further exploration. Remembering that our fundamental question was, Why don’t more Servicemembers participate in Family Programs?, we tailored our survey to explore a wide range of possible answers. In that sense, the data analysis could easily become a data-mining expedition. However, I limited the exploration to those variables that seemed more relevant based on initial conversations with Family Programs leadership and Servicemembers. These early conversations we had early on with Family Programs leaders gave us several avenues of inquiry. Namely:

- How do attitudes about what Family Programs is designed for (married couples, families with children, etc.) affect how valuable Servicemembers deem it to be?
- Does the idea that Family Programs facilitates gossip have any merit? If so, does it correlate to age, sex, time in service, or rank, or Guard employment status?
- Do different sub groups in the Guard believe Family Programs to be mandatory or voluntary? Do they correctly interpret their own levels of activity?

Furthermore, I hoped to find something useful beyond what Family Programs leaders may have considered. Advanced statistical analysis allowed me to look for correlations and patterns that might otherwise be hard to detect, such as:

- Are there any patterns in age, sex, rank, and Guard status that would help Family Programs tailor its messages?
- Do interactions among key variables appear in the data, such that we could identify moderating variables?

Perceived Effectiveness or Value

The lone measure we had about how Servicemembers valued Family Programs was, “Family Programs is designed to meet my unique needs,” a six-point scale. The highest ranking was “Strongly Agree” and indicated a high satisfaction with Family Programs. The analyses I ran convinced me that we need more and better measures of satisfaction, discussed later in the “Next Steps” section. Nevertheless, the data suggest some important relationships. I frequently refer to this variable as “perceived benefit” or perceived value,” with the understanding that such an interpretation has limits.

The perception that Family Programs is designed to meet the needs of Servicemembers was correlated positively to active participation in the programs \( (r = 0.40, N = 336, p = 0.00) \), and negatively to the degree to which they believe it facilitates gossip, \( (r = -0.41, N = 336, p = 0.00) \). There was no significant correlations to age, sex, time in service, or rank.

The data do not support any hypothesis that the above mentioned variables, such as what Servicemembers thought Family Programs was designed for, correlated to its efficacy. In other words, what
Servicemembers believed it to be designed for, whether it was for married couples or Servicemembers with children, didn’t seem to affect whether they thought it worked for them.

**Gossip**

I also tested the means of all key variables against the gossip variable, and found no significant relationships. I found one interaction between age and sex on the gossip variable, which is discussed below under Age.

**Voluntary-Mandatory**

The final major theme that emerged in our initial interviews centered on the question of whether Family Programs was mandatory or voluntary. There was a strong, negative correlation between the belief that “participation in Family Programs is a requirement for Servicemembers” and “providing your contact information to Family Programs is mandatory,” \( r = -0.29, N = 336, p = 0.00 \). This indicates that respondents consistently thought that providing information and participating were either both mandatory or both voluntary.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between rank and perceptions about whether Family Programs was voluntary or mandatory. The relation between these variables was significant, \( \chi^2 (2, N = 332) = 5.26, p = .02 \). Officers were more likely to believe that participation in Family Programs is mandatory. There was a similar relationship between rank and familiarity with Family Programs, with officers tending to be more familiar, and significantly so (\( b = 0.36, t = 2.86, p < 0.05 \)).

The only relationship I found among the major demographic variables and the mandatory-voluntary issue was with rank, discussed in the Rank section.

**Patterns and Interactions**

An interaction, according to Hayes, is “when two things are combined they have a different effect than the sum of their parts” (Hayes, 2005, p. 429). It describes what happens when the effect of one variable, say age of the Servicemember on another variable, like perceived value of Family Programs, depends on a third variable. This third variable is called a moderator, and so interaction and moderation describe the same phenomenon. I discovered several interesting interactions, described in the following sections.
I have grouped interactions and other findings based on more advanced statistical tests in terms of the major demographic variables:

- Age
- Sex
- Rank
- Marital Status
- Number of Dependent Children
- Years in (military) Service
- Guard Status
- Number of Combat Deployments
Age

One of the questions was whether Servicemembers thought that Family Programs facilitated gossip. While more respondents said they disagreed (to some degree) with the statement that Family Programs facilitate gossip, a linear regression revealed no correlation on those answers with age, which was measured as a continuous variable. As such, age as a continuous variable did not interact with sex to affect whether what respondents thought of the gossip potential. But when we grouped Servicemembers into five age groups (18 – 24, 25 – 34, 35 – 44, 45 – 54, 55 and up) and tested the interaction between the new variable and sex, an interaction emerged.

The graph below shows that for the youngest group of male Servicemembers, the 18 to 24-year-olds, Family Programs isn’t viewed as a facilitator of gossip. But for middle-aged males, it is. As they move into the older age groups, males are less likely to view Family Programs as a gossip mill. The same general pattern is evident for females, though the spike in negative attitudes is not as pronounced, and in all but the youngest age group, females are less likely than males to think that Family Programs promotes gossip.
Sex

Independent samples $t$-tests showed no significant differences between sex and perceived value, or between sex and the gossip question. Neither marital status nor having children moderated the effect. Thus, the data suggests that males and females in the UTNG perceived Family Programs in very similar ways.

Rank

There was no statistical evidence to suggest that Servicemembers differed according to rank on perceived value or gossip.

But rank is a tricky thing to use as a variable, since it is so highly correlated to age and time in service. One logical break point in rank, however, is between junior enlisted personnel and non-commissioned officers, given the stark contrast in responsibilities between the two groups.

I sorted the ranks along those lines (omitting, for a moment, officers). A chi-square test showed a significant difference on perceptions of whether Family Programs participation was mandatory or voluntary. Junior enlisted Servicemembers (E1 – E4) were more than twice as likely to (2.09) to believe that Family Programs participation was voluntary, even though both junior and senior enlisted personnel believed it was voluntary.
**Marital Status**

There were no significant correlations between marital status and perceptions of value or attitudes on the gossip issue. However, level of active participation seemed to moderate perceived value.

The graph below shows that for single Servicemembers ($N = 43$) moderate activity in Family Programs reduces perception of value, but for married Servicemembers ($N = 263$), the value held a nearly constant relationship to activity. Divorced and separated Servicemembers fit the married pattern, though there weren’t enough in the sample to draw any conclusions.

![Graph showing estimated marginal means of Family Programs by marital status and level of active participation.](image-url)
Dependent Children

There were no significant correlations between whether Servicemembers had dependent children and their perceptions of value or attitudes on the gossip issue.

However, Servicemembers with dependent children were more likely to participate in Family Programs ($b = 0.36, p = 0.03$). They were also more likely to believe that providing information to Family Programs was mandatory ($b = 0.21, p = 0.03$). These effects should be considered fairly large.

Years in (military) Service

Years in service (including military service prior to joining the UTNG) was strongly correlated to age ($r = 0.84, N = 333, p = 0.00$), so analysis of this variable is problematic, as any finding might also be a result of age.

However, Servicemembers with more years in military service tend to participate Family Programs more actively ($r = 0.19, N = 333, p = 0.001$), while age alone did not explain the difference. In fact, controlling for age, the predictive power of years in service increases ($r = 0.21, p = 0.001$).

Guard Status

The employment status in the UTNG was correlated to two key variables. M-day, or traditional Guard, Servicemembers agreed more with the statement, "Family Programs is not suited for every Servicemember" ($r = 0.03, N = 334, p = 0.02$), and less likely to agree with the statement, "Family Programs was designed to meet unique needs" ($r = -0.13, N = 335, p = 0.01$) than their full-time counterparts.

Guard status was not correlated to either the gossip issue or to activity levels in Family Programs.

Number of Combat Deployments

The number of combat deployments a Servicemember served did not correlate to perceived value, the gossip issue, or level of active participation.

Those with more combat deployments were significantly more likely to believe that providing information was voluntary ($r = 0.17, N = 335, p < 0.01$).
**Survey**

The following survey is part of a research study, conducted by The Center for Communication and Community at the University of Utah and Utah National Guard Family Programs. The purpose of the research is to find out what attitudes and behaviors exist among Servicemembers in the Utah National Guard which might influence their participation in Family Programs. The Center for Communication and Community will compile the answers from this survey, analyze the data, and report findings and recommendations to Utah National Guard Family Programs.

This survey will take about four minutes to complete. At no point will you be asked to provide your name or any personally identifiable information. The Center for Communication and Community alone will collect and analyze the data. There will be no follow up on this survey.

Utah National Guard Family Programs' mission is to enhance the readiness and well-being of military families through information, education, programs, and resources. Among its various components are Family Readiness Support Assistance, Youth Programs, Community Covenants, and Family Assistance Centers.

Please take a moment to answer the following questions.

Q1 How familiar are you with Family Programs? (not familiar, slightly familiar, familiar, very familiar)

Q2 How actively have you participated in Family Programs activities? (not familiar, slightly familiar, familiar, very familiar)

Q3 How easily do you think Family Programs can contact you? (not familiar, slightly familiar, familiar, very familiar)

Q5 Do you specifically recall providing your contact information to Family Programs? (yes, no)

Q4 Where did you enroll in Family Programs? (SRP, Drill, Other)

Q6 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. (strongly disagree, slightly disagree, disagree, agree, slightly agree, strongly agree)

A(1) I have had multiple opportunities to provide my family contact information to Family Programs.

B(2) Family Programs is designed to meet my unique needs.

C(3) Participation in Family Programs entails an obligation to volunteer for various activities.

D(4) Participation in Family Programs is a requirement for Servicemembers.

E(5) Family Programs is designed for Servicemembers with children.

F(6) Family Programs is for married Servicemembers.

G(7) I enrolled in Family Programs at enlistment/SRP.
H(8) Family Programs keeps my personal information confidential.
I(9) Family Programs keeps my family information confidential.
J(10) Family Programs facilitates gossip.
K(11) Family Programs is not suited for every Servicemember.
L(12) Family Programs is designed mainly to support families of deployed Servicemembers.
M(13) Family Programs has enough information to easily get in touch with my emergency point of contact.

Q7 As far as you are aware, is providing your contact information to Family Programs (mandatory, voluntary)
Q8 What is your age?
Q9 What is your sex?
Q10 What is your pay grade?
Q11 What is your marital status? (single, married, separated, divorced)
Q12 How many dependent children do you have?
Q13 How many years have you served in the military?
Q14 What is your Guard status? (M-day, AGR/ Tech, ADOS)
Q15 How many combat deployments have you served? (0, 1, 2, 3, more than 3)

Data collected from the survey will be kept confidential and will never be identifiable with you.

If you have questions, complaints or concerns about this study, you can contact Rich Stowell at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns which you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at irb@hsc.utah.edu.

You may also contact the Research Participant Advocate (RPA) by phone at (801) 581-3803 or by email at participant.advocate@hsc.utah.edu.
Next Steps

This study, though a year-long and often difficult one for a novice researcher, is only a beginning. Family Programs is a huge enterprise, and its impact on Utah National Guard families is likely to become more important in the future. In the last ten years the Army and the National Guard have made significant investments in promoting and maintaining family readiness, and studies like this will help local leaders improve those programs.

From a researcher’s point of view, studies will benefit from the following:

1. Better measures: We need to figure out how to measure a Servicemember’s perception of Family Programs. We will likely need to measure smaller components of Family Programs, too. We will need to distinguish among how well the program was designed, whether it fit the circumstance, how timely the service was, and how well it promoted well-being on a number of factors. We can measure all these things along various axes: satisfaction, outcome, and performance.

2. Definitions: When we use the term, “Family Programs,” we are not sure the respondent knows what we mean. Rather, we have no way of knowing that how the respondent interprets Family Programs is how the researcher interprets it. Indeed, throughout this project, I have realize how enormous the scope of Family Programs is. It is unlikely that the average Servicemember grasps it all, or is familiar with it all. Thus, when one respondent indicates dissatisfaction with Family Programs, s/he might only refer to one aspect, when in fact s/he is very satisfied with another aspect, but is unaware that the other aspect is within the scope of Family Programs.

3. Qualitative interviews: Researchers will find out much more from going deep with families who have experience with Family Programs, good or bad. These interviews should be recorded and shared with Family Programs leaders.

4. Grants: There are opportunities to do in-depth research of this type through federal and state grants. The NIH, in a quick search, has multiple grants available currently. A minimal investment in time by researchers or by the UTNG might lead to the identification and award of a substantial grant that fits the needs of Family Programs.

5. Center for Communication and Community: The new Center at the University of Utah is a great place to begin. This study is one of the first carried out by the Center, and that relationship should not be allowed to wither on the vine. Utah has one of the largest veterans populations in the West, is next to a VA regional center, and is home to a thriving ROTC program. It is considered a vet-friendly campus. Both the Center and the UTNG would do well to strengthen the budding relationship seeded by this project.
Literature

There is simply no longer any question that in an all-volunteer force, Family readiness equates to readiness of the force itself (Army Community Services, 2007, p. 5).

Utah National Guard families might separate at any moment. Among other things, the attacks of 9/11 altered the mission of the National Guard and the challenges that soldiers and their families face. Army (and National Guard) leaders readily admit that combat stresses are not borne by soldiers alone. “Healthy families keep soldiers alive on the battlefield,” according to Lt. Col. Larry Ingraham of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. He maintains that family stress can result in poor combat performance, and negatively affect their ability to recover from physical and psychological wounds after battle (Operation READY, 2002, p. 1). The Army has long recognized the needs of active-duty families, but only recently have had to grapple with many of the same challenges for reservist families. Since 9/11, National Guard units have had to deploy and fight alongside active duty units in prolonged operations and at equivalent rates. Yet, families of Guardsmen have not had access to the many resources available to families on military bases, or are as familiar with programs designed to help them cope with the stresses of a family member in combat (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008, p. 223).

Military Families

The US military has long been committed to provide the kinds of support to families of service members that are necessary in helping them cope with the unique demands of soldiers (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003, p. 41). Such programs are designed to improve “readiness,” a term ubiquitous in the military literature that refers to a service member’s unit’s, or family’s ability to meet the mission requirements of an extended overseas deployment. Readiness reflects emotional, financial, physical, and mental well being. The Army has made it a unit responsibility to monitor and promote the readiness of its members and their families” (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003, p. 34).

Researchers have identified four distinct phases during which readiness and well being can be measured: pre-deployment, deployment, reunion, and post deployment (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services, 2007). Theses phases also mark
points at which readiness is a greater risk. For example, pre-deployment can be a time marked by marital stress as families work toward getting financial affairs in order, update a will, and have conversations with children about why their parent is leaving. Deployment and reunion are phases in which “many soldiers have reported that it is stressful to have to renegotiate roles, responsibilities, and boundaries with their spouse” (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008, p. 222).

After deployment, moreover, many soldiers deal with the emotional scars of combat. Families bear these burdens, as well. The American Psychological Association Military Deployment Services Task Force recognized that service members and families have recently endured “unprecedented” challenges (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services, 2007, p. 4). Faber, et al. (2008, p. 223) refer to “ambiguous presence” a state in which a returned service member is described as physically present but psychologically absent.

Spouses, in particular, must learn to handle the stress associated with deployment or threat of deployment. During a deployment, they experience extreme worry about the safety of their service member spouse (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). Spouses also have to contend with role redefinition, and the strain that comes with having a partner absent for a long period. A study by the Defense Manpower Data Center found relationships between deployment and couples’ overall marital satisfaction (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2010).

Researchers have noted that most families of deployed service members rise to the occasion and adapt successfully to this stressful experience (Park, 2011) (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services, 2007, p. 17). Nevertheless, there is ample concern that young families and those experiencing their first military separation are at risk of a variety of deleterious issues (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services, 2007).

Children are those most at risk. The APA cited an increase in child maltreatment and neglect rates (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services, 2007, p. 29). Chartrand, et al. (2008) found an increased negative behavioral symptoms trouble with school work compared to their peers. In short,
“Having a primary caretaker deployed to a war zone for an indeterminate period is among the more stressful events a child can experience” (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services, 2007).

Children of deployed service members also struggled with uncertainty and loss, boundary ambiguity, and depression (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). Children are often the least prepared to deal with changes in routines and questions from peers about the status of their deployed parent. Huebner (2010) cites as a major source of stress the need for children to constantly adjust to new roles and responsibilities during the deployment cycle.

The Army’s Answer

In the face of these very real challenges to the well being and readiness of soldiers and families, the Army has recently created a number of programs. The scope of these programs is vast, and my purpose is not to catalogue them all. However, just a brief description of a few of the more prominent programs demonstrates the Army’s commitment to helping improve family readiness.

Operation READY was launched after the first Gulf War as a way to provide information about deployments to soldiers’ families (Operation READY, 2013). It is not an organization per se, but a mechanism to disseminate information about relevant programs to families. But the Army has codified various programs in its doctrine. Army Regulation 600-20 directs unit commanders to “establish and maintain personal and family affairs readiness” (Department of the Army, 2011, p. 47). All such efforts are conducted under the Total Army Family Program, which “includes those Family assistance services and related programs that "support quality of life, readiness, and retention and meet the Army’s obligation to Soldiers, civilian employees, and their Families by ensuring the effective interface between Family assistance and Family support” (Department of the Army, 2011, p. 47).

The backbone of the TAFP is the Family Readiness Group (FRG), a unit-level organization designed as a hub for all readiness activity. Unit soldiers are encouraged to participate, and the commander has ultimate responsibility for FRG activities, but FRG leadership goes to civilian spouses and family members. Commanders and leaders at all levels must establish and support Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) for all their soldiers and families (Operation READY, 2002). Readiness groups have a
number of resources at their disposal. Family Resource Support Assistants (FRSA) are full-time civilian employees who provide guidance and administrative support to FRGs leaders and unit commanders (Army Community Services, 2007, p. 5). Additionally, FRSAs maintain stability in FRGs as units experience transitions in membership and leadership. Each major command in the Utah National Guard (seven total) has a FRSA, while every unit, no matter how small, has an organized FRG. Family Assistance Centers are facilities operated by the Army that provide essential services and assistance to families of deploying service members. Utah has 14 locations that serve both Army reservists and National Guardsmen, and can “refer service members and their families to agencies that can provide necessary services.” They are also communication centers, helping to keep families in contact with their deployed service members” (Utah National Guard Servicemember and Family Support, 2012, p. 6)

The Army has also invested in the Yellow Ribbon Program to help families through the post-deployment phase; the Joint Family Support Assistance Program to extend services otherwise offered on active military installations to Guard and Reserve service members; and Army Community Covenant, designed to create formal partnerships with cities and towns to support Guardsmen and Reservists in those areas.

The Utah National Guard

The Guard is now a de facto active force. In the past, it has been a ready reserve force, but since 9/11 it has become an important component in the military’s operational force (National Guard Bureau, 2014). While it has proven up to the standard of the active Army, it also faces significant challenges. Given that it is a reserve force, manned by civilians who don the uniform only when mustered, the National Guard has to ensure that families are ready despite their distance—literal and figurative—from full-time Army programs. Utah has organized Servicemember and Family Support, an office to coordinator all programs designed to “enhance the readiness and well being of military families through information, education, programs and resources” (Utah National Guard Servicemember and Family Support, 2012).

Utah Servicemember and Family Support administers all the Army programs described above, in addition to Survivor Outreach Services, Employer Support for the Guard and Reserves assistance, and Youth Services. Though Faber et al (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008) assert that
reservists and their families “have rarely experienced deployments,” this is clearly not true; since 9/11 there have been over a quarter million deployments; 115,000 multiples (National Guard Bureau, 2014). According to the Utah National Guard, 15,000 service members have deployed. Moreover, about 75% of all Utah Guardsmen have deployed (McIntire). Unfortunately, throughout the Natinal Guard, only a minority of families indicated that they felt well prepared for deployments (Huebner, Impact of Deployment on Children and Families: Recent Research Updates, 2010).

Utah has received praise for its Community Covenant program (Joint Services Support, 2013), and Utah Family Programs is robust. Yet, Utah leaders expressed concern that more of their members don’t participate in Family Programs.

Conclusion

Bowen et al. (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003) have recognized that many of these programs address the diverse needs of families in diverse social contexts, and propose a community practice model for measuring the effectiveness of programs. They conclude that units can have a great impact on whether families participate in programs, and attach a great deal of significance to the “sense of community, which emerged as an important mediator between unit and community network support and family adaptation” (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003, p. 41). National Guard units, because of their geographic dispersion and part-time status, face an uphill challenge building such a sense of community. Spouses, children, and service members themselves regularly experience stresses and challenges largely unknown in the civilian sector. The Army and the Utah National Guard have implemented programs designed to mitigate the risks of military service to families, and to help recover from damage done if the risks cannot be avoided. The challenge for the Utah National Guard now is getting its members to partake of those resources.
Bibliography


