



Testimony of Tom Porter
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before a
Joint Hearing of the
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
and
Senate Committee on Armed Services

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Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and distinguished Members of the Committees on Veterans' Affairs and Armed Services, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for this hearing on Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service.

I am Vice President of Government Affairs of Blue Star Families— the nation's largest grass-roots military family support organization. Blue Star Families was founded in 2009 by military spouses to strengthen and empower military and Veteran families to thrive as they serve. We are committed to connecting them with their neighboring individuals and organizations to create vibrant communities of mutual support because we firmly believe that we are all stronger when we take care of one another.

The families of our All-Volunteer Force make unprecedented sacrifices every day to serve our country. Our groundbreaking research is raising the nation's awareness of the unique challenges of military family life – both during and after service.

With the help of neighbors across the country, Blue Star Families is overcoming the isolation and alienation of frequent moves, deployments, and reduced support from the government. Our innovative programs are solving specific challenges for military and Veteran families, such as fighting economic insecurity with resources that foster spouse career development, address food insecurity, building family strength with rich family programming, and provide critical peer support for caregivers – whose numbers are only increasing.



With more than 275,000 members in our network, including in chapters and communities all over the world, Blue Star Families touches more than 1.5 million military family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, we seek to ensure that our military and Veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive, wherever their service takes them.

Blue Star Families has thirteen (13) chapters across the country, including in New England, Ohio, and Tennessee. Our chapters provide virtual and in-person support and a local presence where various programs, events, and services are provided to all members of the military community (military, veteran, guard and reserve families) to help them feel more welcome and engaged in their community. We help them make connections to civilian neighbors, institutions, organizations.

This past year, Craig Newmark, Founder of Craigslist, committed \$100 million to the support of Veterans by contributing to solutions for the most pressing challenges facing veterans and military families, including mental health and suicide prevention, housing and homelessness, and food insecurity. As part of his generous contribution, he also made a personal commitment to Blue Star Families to start twelve (12) new Outposts to assist military and Veteran families. Blue Star Families Outposts will build upon our existing Chapter structure, and allow us to partner with local organizations to bring events, programs, and resources to even more local Veteran and military-connected communities nationwide.

At Blue Star Families, we know that behind every statistic is a story, and it is my honor to share both data and stories with you. Today, I want to share with you five main areas of concern that relates to military to civilian transition and how this ensures success after service which are suicide prevention, toxic exposure, transiting, education benefits, and recommending service.

Suicide Prevention

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for veterans¹and “1.5 times more likely to die

¹ Howard, J. T., Stewart, I. J., Amuan, M., Janak, J. C., & Pugh, M. J. (2022). Association of traumatic brain injury with mortality among military veterans serving after September 11, 2001. *JAMA network open*, 5(2), e2148150-e2148150.



by suicide than nonveteran adults.”² Despite efforts to expand mental health care, Veteran families continue to face many barriers to accessing mental health services during these stressful events. There is a clear need for mental health support, and it is critical to increase the capacity of service providers throughout veteran communities. In addition, given the barriers to accessing mental health resources, and the tendency of Veteran families to turn toward informal support, we should also activate and encourage engagement with less formal mental health supports such as wellness centers, chaplains, and friends and families. These supports cannot and should not replace mental health care, but they can support and extend mental health if given psychoeducation about the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges and how to talk to someone about their mental health.

In 2022, Blue Star Families was awarded the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant through the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act*. Chairman Tester and Ranking Member Moran, we thank you for your leadership in passing this landmark law.

Blue Star Families developed our Upstream Solutions to Crisis program designed to provide supporters with the knowledge and skills necessary to provide effective assistance to Veterans and service members who may be experiencing mental health challenges or having thoughts of suicide. Through our 8-week sessions, participants gain valuable insights, resources, and strategies to help those in need and contribute to reducing the stigma surrounding mental health in the military community.

Blue Star Families has partnered with experts in the field such as PsychArmor (learning new skills), The American Red Cross (having hard conversations about mental health), Spiritune (self-care and music therapy), and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors - TAPS (safe messaging and best practices on suicide reporting), along with providing lock-boxes to every participant for gun safety in the program. Additionally, every participant develops a crisis plan in the event their loved one becomes suicidal so that they have a plan in place that they can follow if the situation arises.

Over the last year we have made significant strides for our program by successfully conducting and completing seven cohorts with a total of 50 participants which is a testament to the sustained demand and relevance of our initiative—with an additional two cohorts currently in process. Our sessions have been instrumental in empowering

² DeAngelis, T(2022). Veterans are at higher risk for suicide. Psychologists are helping them tackle their unique struggles. *American Psychological Association*. 53 (8), 56.
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/preventing-veteran-suicide>



supporters with the knowledge and skills needed to recognize signs of mental health distress, offer appropriate support, and connect individuals with the resources they require; and have been statistically shown to increase participants' sense of social support, comfort in talking to a friend or loved one in times of mental health crisis, and likelihood of utilizing critical resources as well.

Our program has undergone third-party evaluation metrics through the University of Alabama and found significant and outstanding results in both qualitative and quantitative data.

- 97% of participants reported that "Seeing a mental health professional is a sign of strength"³
- 90% of participants reported that "when people talk openly about their mental health, I think they are brave"⁴
- 93% of participants reported that "when people talk openly about their mental health, I think they are helping to end the stigma"⁵
- 73% of participants reported that "Nothing would prevent them from talking about suicide with others"⁶
- 90% of participants are taking time to focus on their self-care each week⁷
- 100% of participants think suicide can be prevented some or all of the time⁸

Participant quote: "I realize I'm not alone."⁹

One participant who participated in our program shared how she initially felt isolated and overwhelmed in her role. Through the support of our community and program, she realized that she wasn't alone in her struggles. She found solace in connecting with others who shared similar experiences and challenges. With this newfound sense of belonging, she gained the strength to overcome adversity and continue supporting her loved one.

Participant quote: "In this community we were able to create small pods of connectedness."¹⁰

³ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁴ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁵ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁶ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁷ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁸ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁹ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

¹⁰ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.



Our program fostered a sense of connectedness within a diverse group of participants within the military and Veteran community. These small pods of support allowed participants to come together and view their roles from a fresh perspective. As they shared their experiences and provided mutual support, they discovered new ways to cope with the challenges they faced.

Participant quote: "Helped us identify what is big and what is little. Gave us a way to organize the issues we face into terms we can understand."¹¹

Participants learned to categorize and prioritize their challenges, differentiating between major concerns and minor issues. This allowed them to approach their roles with a clearer perspective, addressing the most crucial matters first and, in turn, reducing stress and anxiety.

With these powerful outcomes, Blue Star Families is making strides in creating a safety net of peer support that is able to identify and support Veterans and service members experiencing mental health crises. This has led Blue Star Families to receive funding for 2024 as well.

Toxic Exposures

The *Honoring Our PACT Act* was passed into law in August 2022 after years of advocacy by many veterans and military family support organizations, finally providing extensive VA benefits and healthcare for the millions who suffered toxic exposures during their deployments. Before the law was passed, the VA was disapproving approximately 80% of disability claims by Veterans with toxic exposures, like from burn pits. Following passage of the new law, the VSA is APPROVING the same percentage - an incredible turnaround that is having enormous positive impacts within the military and Veteran community.

I can personally attest to the value this new law has for my family. I just retired on October 1st following 27 years of reserve and active Navy service around the world, which included deployments to the Middle East and Afghanistan. I was diagnosed with asthma as a result of toxic exposure following my deployments, and later diagnosed with rhinitis and sinusitis - all three covered presumptive illnesses under the PACT Act. Once I applied for the new benefits with the user-friendly VA website - [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT), I attended one quick VA exam and approximately three months later my disability rating was approved. I am now receiving benefits and am a new VA health care recipient. My family will receive DIC should I pass away as a result of my exposures, and that is a critical benefit for many

¹¹ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.



military and Veteran families. Further, VA disability benefits can make a significant difference in military families' livelihood after they transition to civilian life.

Impressively, Veterans and their survivors have filed more than one million claims for toxic exposure-related benefits under the PACT Act. As of September 30, VA has processed more than 610,000 of these claims, granting 77.4% of them and awarding more than \$2.46 billion in earned benefits to Veterans and survivors.

While VA is doing a commendable job reaching out to encourage application for PACT Act benefits, including enrollment in VA healthcare, the Department of Defense must do more to inform the approximately 200,000 service members who transition out of the military each year. They and their families need to be fully educated about their new benefits and why they should enroll in the VA, even if they are not suffering any symptoms at the time. With all of those who have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan presumed to be exposed to burn pits and other toxins, commanders need to ensure their service members and their families know where to turn for healthcare and benefits.

Education

Blue Star Families' research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and Veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS)—developed in partnership with Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and fielded since 2009—is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and Veteran families, and has elevated more than 100,000 of their voices. Data from the MFLS and other Blue Star Families research has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities.

In the 2022 MFLS survey fielding, a majority (62%) of Veterans said they used their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits themselves, 9% said a spouse used them, and 11% said their child used them.¹² Of those that didn't use them already, 11% of Veterans plan to use them in the future, 2% plan for their spouse to use them, and 7% plan to have their children use them.¹³

Blue Star Families applauds Congress for improving education benefits for military-connected students and refusing to make cuts to the Post-9/11 GI Bill over the last decade. We also express our profound appreciation for passing long-sought

¹² Blue Star Families. (2023). 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Unpublished raw data.

¹³ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Unpublished raw data.



legislation to close the 90-10 loophole and curtail the abuse of the benefits by bad-acting schools.

Military and Veteran families continue to serve and sacrifice at home and abroad, and continuing our investment in their education benefits both provides an incentive for them to serve longer, while also providing a critical draw for those we need to attract to military service. We ask that Congress continue to stand against any cuts or reduction in education benefits for military and Veteran families.

Transition

Transitioning from uniform to civilian life is a critical period for service members and their families, which is why it is extremely important that the Transition Assistance Program is a comprehensive, family-centered, and outcome-based program that delivered well in advance to service members and their family members before leaving service.

In a GAO report from 2022, over 90% of transitioning service members participated in the TAP counseling pathways.¹⁴ Additionally, the report found that “nearly 25% of servicemembers who needed maximum support didn't attend a mandatory 2-day class.”¹⁵ However, our 2021 MFLS tells a different story, with over half (58%) of veterans reporting that they did not attend TAP or any government-sponsored transition assistance programming.¹⁶ Furthermore, 41% of these veterans reported that they and their families disagreed that they were well-prepared to successfully navigate the transition from military to civilian life.¹⁷

There are evaluation gaps in services and servicemembers' and dependents' accessibility to services. It is a positive step that spouse employment has been incorporated into TAP. However, child-friendly courses are also key to ensure dependents' accessibility. Our perception is that there are actually few literal barriers to participation for military spouses; instead it seems that there is a culture of non-attendance among transitioning spouses that must be overcome.

One of the biggest challenges that spouses indicate they face in our research has to do

¹⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022). Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104538>

¹⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022). Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104538>

¹⁶ Blue Star Families. (2022). 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Unpublished raw data.

¹⁷ Blue Star Families. (2022). 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Unpublished raw data.



with mental health challenges and the impact they have on integration into civilian society, marital issues, and several others. It is our understanding that TAP includes some classes about identifying PTSD and other mental health challenges, but not necessarily classes about how to manage these challenges and their consequences. Specifically, we believe that robust marital support programs will help military spouses.

Recommending Service

In view of the current challenges with recruitment in the armed forces, only 37% of military family respondents to the 2022 MFLS said they would recommend that a young family member join the military.¹⁸ Challenges to families were most often cited by military-connected family respondents as a reason to not recommend military service.

While “good benefits” and “economic stability” are top reasons for recommending military service, “poor military leadership,” “challenges for families,” and “financial sacrifice” are cited by active-duty family respondents as top reasons they were unlikely to recommend military service.

The top challenges listed for families were: Military spouse employment (48%), amount of time away from family as a result of military service (45%), military pay (40%), BAH/off base housing concerns (40%), and relocation and PCS issues (37%).

Female active-duty service member respondents who were likely to recommend service for reasons such as good benefits, positive opportunities, and job skill acquisition, while those who were unlikely to recommend service focused on challenges to families, poor leadership, and both racial and gender discrimination.¹⁹

Male active-duty service member respondents who were unlikely to recommend service noted a lack of leadership and politics (both past and present), as well as a general need for improvement, while those who were more likely to recommend service mentioned reasons similar to their female counterparts such as good benefits and economic/job stability.²⁰

¹⁸ Blue Star Families (2023). 2022 Military family lifestyle survey comprehensive report. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf

¹⁹ Blue Star Families (2023). 2022 Military family lifestyle survey comprehensive report. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf

²⁰ Blue Star Families (2023). 2022 Military family lifestyle survey comprehensive report. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf



Members of the Committees, thank you for inviting me here today to provide views on behalf of Blue Star Families. I am happy to answer any questions.