

## Empirical Evidence of the Connections between Military Family Readiness and Mission and Military Readiness: Version 2 07 April 2025

### Aim

This brief presents empirical evidence that links family well-being to overall mission readiness and military lethality.

### Background

The well-being of military families is essential to the Department of Defense (DoD). Years of research have demonstrated a robust connection between family well-being and military mission readiness. To strengthen mission readiness, the DoD provides a range of programs and services designed to enhance family well-being.

A 2019 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine<sup>1</sup> highlights that military family members can do the following:

- Provide essential support to Service members throughout their careers.
- Influence whether Service members remain in the military.
- Affect Service members' ability to deploy or remain in theater depending on how Service members and their families cope with challenges.
- Raise a significant number of future military recruits.
- Experience psychological or physical challenges when their Service member struggles which create additional costs for the DoD.

The Military Family Readiness System delivers assistance and services that support individual, couple, family, and community well-being. These efforts improve the quality of life for, resilience of, and overall functioning of military-connected families. These positive results, then, can directly contribute to warfighters' abilities to focus on their mission, increase the readiness of warfighters' units and installations, and help the U.S. Armed Forces maintain combat effectiveness and lethality.

### Approach

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse) researchers conducted a literature review of recent peer-reviewed journal articles and gray literature to examine the connection between and among military family well-being, mission readiness, military readiness, warfighter capability, and lethality.

## 1. Service Members Must Be Available for Training and Deployment

**Implementing supports for Service members and their families, such as financial literacy courses, spouse education-assistance programs, spouse career services, and new parent-support interventions, enable Service members to focus on training and deployment.** When Service members are deployed or are in training, spouses and extended family members manage household responsibilities, child care obligations, and financial matters at home, so Service members can fulfill their mission demands.<sup>1,2</sup>

**Military families provide essential care for wounded, ill, or injured Service members, which can ensure continued service or a successful transition to civilian life.** Family caregivers manage medical appointments, rehabilitation, and emotional support, and their assistance can reduce strain on military healthcare systems.<sup>3</sup>

**Spousal, family, and community support significantly increase military retention.** Service members who have supportive spouses or partners are more likely to remain in service. For example, retention rates increase by up to 1.98 times for senior officers.<sup>4-8</sup>

**Service members and family challenges, such as frequent relocations, child care shortages, spousal unemployment, financial strain, marital stress, and social isolation, may negatively impact Service members' readiness to deploy.** Many stressors, including those listed, can affect a Service member's morale, willingness to reenlist, and ability to focus on his or her mission.<sup>5,9-12</sup>

**Marital satisfaction is a key predictor of military retention.** Service members in stable marriages are more likely to remain in the military, while relationship strain can contribute to separation from service.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

## 2. Service Members Must Be Mentally, Physically, and Emotionally Fit

**Healthy family functioning allows Service members to stay mission-focused during deployment.** Establishing and maintaining strong family relationships can reduce stress and distractions for warfighters and can enable them to fully engage in their mission.<sup>16</sup>

**Family stressors such as relationship conflict, divorce, and caregiving burdens are significant risk factors that can negatively impact Service members' mental health and suicidal tendencies and, in turn, mission readiness.** Divorce or separation is linked to approximately 15% of military suicides, while family relationship problems are present in over 25% of military suicides.<sup>16-18</sup>

**Family well-being directly impacts Service members' performance during deployment.** High levels of family tension, communication breakdowns, and unresolved conflicts are associated with Service members' reduced focus and decreased effectiveness in operational environments.<sup>1,19</sup>

**Access to quality military child care enhances mission readiness by reducing parental stress.** Having access to reliable child care increases warfighter readiness by allowing warfighters to fully engage in their combat missions because they do not have concerns about their children's well-being.<sup>1,20</sup>

**Social supports, such as offering programs that include recreational opportunities, providing community involvement, and increasing personal support networks for single Service members, increase warfighters' mental health and well-being and, consequently, increase overall mission readiness.** Ensuring Service members' strong mental health can play a key role in their commitment to remain in service and can directly influence their fitness to serve and their readiness to deploy and the U.S. Armed Forces overall lethality.<sup>21</sup>

### **3. Service Members Must be Resilient**

**Military family well-being is directly linked to mission readiness.** An increased quality of life and well-being for Service members and their families helps to secure retention of Service members, ensure warfighters can focus on training and their mission, and increase warfighters' readiness for combat.<sup>1,4,18</sup>

**Strengthening parenting skills and enhancing positive family communication can help increase military family resilience and Service members' mission readiness.** Implementing programs that disseminate effective parenting and coping strategies can help families manage military-related challenges, such as learning how to decrease stress, increase focus on training and deployment needs, and improve overall mission readiness and effectiveness.<sup>19,22</sup>

**Establishing and maintaining a shared family sense of mission can enhance all family members' adaptation to military life.** When families' principles and beliefs align with military values and purpose, Service members experience greater support and reduced work-family conflict.<sup>23</sup>

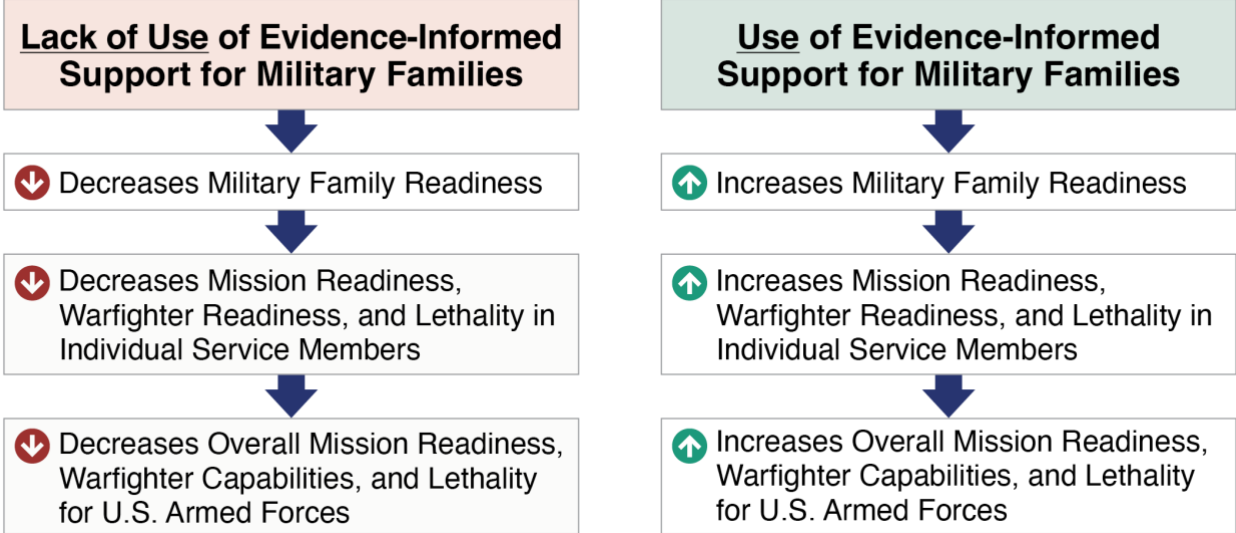
**Military Service members and their families who have strong support networks experience better mental health and resilience.** Peer connections, base community resources such as Family Support Centers or Child Development Centers, and social-support systems can mitigate stress and improve family stability.<sup>24</sup>

**Resilient families are knowledgeable, resourceful, and proactive in managing military-life challenges.** Being aware of and using available resources, being financially prepared, and learning about and using problem-solving skills can contribute to overall family and mission readiness.<sup>25</sup>

**Family-military role conflicts such as frequent relocations, which can cause disruptions in education for children and employment for spouses, can be major stressors for Service members and negatively affect mission readiness.** Experiencing struggles with balancing military duties and family responsibilities can lead to increased stress, lower job performance, and retention challenges for Service members. These concerns can result in a decrease in warfighters' capabilities and the general mission readiness of the military.<sup>1,26</sup>

**Strong family communication improves Service member focus and performance.** Understanding and using open and effective communication can reduce stress and enhance coping strategies for all family members and can help deployed Service members concentrate on their mission and be more lethal.<sup>16</sup>

# How Military Family Readiness Connects to Mission Readiness, Warfighter Capabilities, and Lethality



The following section provides three real-life examples that highlight issues surrounding child care, relationships, and single Service members. These scenarios illustrate how providing support for Service members and military families can directly impact mission readiness, warfighter readiness and capabilities, and lethality.

## Example 1: Childcare for Service Members and Military-Connected Families

### Child Care for Service Members and Military-Connected Families

#### **Lack of use of evidence-informed support for military families**

Service members and their families cannot find or maintain adequate, affordable, quality child care where they are living.



#### **Decreases military family readiness**

- Increased stress for the Service member and/or family as they move due to a deployment or Permanent Change of Station (PCS) and cannot afford to pay for child care or find a child care provider for their children.
- Decreased family income and financial stability as spouses who do not have child care are not able to work and must stay at home with children.



#### **Decreases mission readiness, warfighter readiness, and lethality in individual Service members**

- Decreased focus and reduced ability to make decisions.
- Increased fatigue and difficulty with sleeping.



#### **Decreases overall mission readiness, warfighter capabilities, and lethality for U.S. Armed Forces**

- Increased potential for accidents.
- Decreased numbers of deployable warfighters.

#### **Use of evidence-informed support for military families**

Service members and their families are able to find and maintain adequate, affordable, quality child care where they are living.



#### **Increases military family readiness**

- Decreased stress for the Service member and/or family as they deploy or PCS because they know their children will be cared for.
- Increased family income and financial stability as spouses with children are able to find work while their children receive quality care.



#### **Increases mission readiness, warfighter readiness, and lethality in individual Service members**

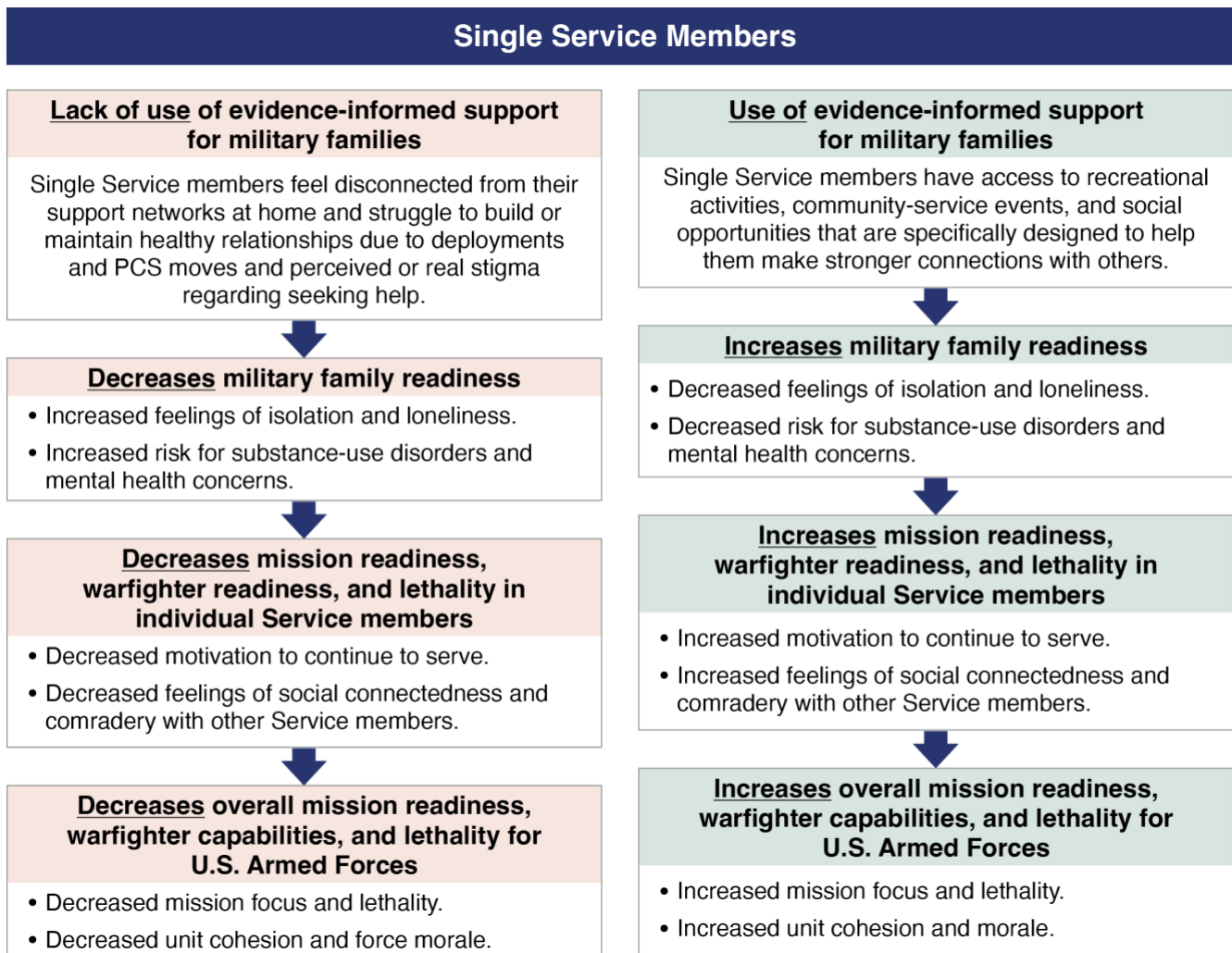
- Increased focus and improved ability to make decisions.
- Decreased fatigue and difficulty with sleeping.



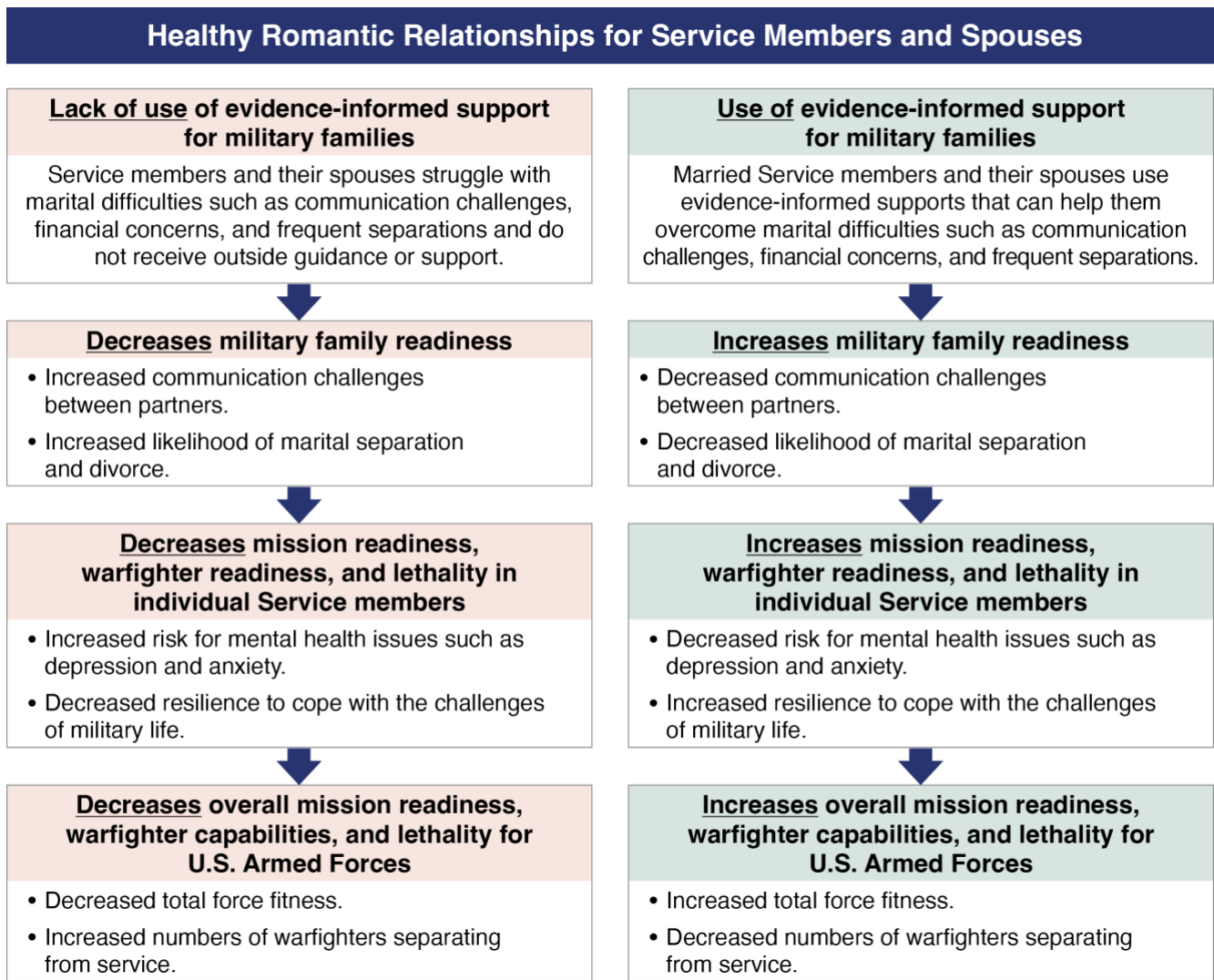
#### **Increases overall mission readiness, warfighter capabilities, and lethality for U.S. Armed Forces**

- Decreased potential for accidents.
- Increased numbers of deployable warfighters.

## Example 2: Single Service Members



### Example 3: Healthy Romantic Relationships for Service Members and Spouses





## Appendix A

### Definitions of Terms

**Lethality** is the military's capacity and ability to effectively neutralize or destroy an enemy target.<sup>27</sup> Critical to the military's lethality is the size of its force, and the size of the force can improve the military's capacity to deploy forces quickly and increase their ability to identify and interpret uncertainty. The DoD describes lethality as creating a military that is the most lethal combat force in the world. In addition, lethality requires that warfighters are able to perform under pressure and in extreme situations.

**Military family** is a term that includes the individual Service member, their spouse, and/or children. In some cases, the DoD may also recognize a Service member's parents as part of the military family. The DoD's definition of "military family" is important because it determines which individuals associated with a Service member currently qualify for programs and services.<sup>1</sup>

**Military family support** includes the programs, policies, practices, and procedures that are designed to assist Service members and their families in navigating the challenges and demands of military life. These supports are offered at various levels within the military, including at the DoD, the service branch, the installation, and the unit level, and they promote well-being and readiness for families and Service members. Implementing evidence-informed support based on research and data enhances the effectiveness of the military family-support system, which, consequently, leads to a positive and greater impact on military family readiness and warfighter mission readiness.<sup>1</sup>

**Military readiness** is the ability of the military to carry out its assigned missions and respond to challenges.<sup>28</sup> This is a top priority for the military as all Service branches are expected to be ready to respond to the President's orders immediately. One component of military readiness is "medical readiness," which demands that the military have a healthy force to care for Service members and their families and respond to disasters and other emergencies. The number of available Service members is another critical component of military readiness. The military builds and sustains readiness over time within military units, and the primary focus of the unit is the Service member.

**Mission readiness** is defined as the military's capacity to engage in combat and fulfill assigned missions and tasks.<sup>28</sup> One of the most important components of mission readiness is the military's ability to attract and retain high-quality military personnel.<sup>29</sup>

**Total Force Fitness** is a framework developed by the DoD to evaluate, support, and maintain a Service member's health, performance, and readiness to complete his or her mission. The framework includes eight domains of fitness, including physical, environmental, nutritional, financial, spiritual, medical and dental, psychological, and social. Increased levels of health

across all domains result in increased Service member readiness to deploy and successfully accomplish mission-essential tasks.<sup>30,32,33</sup>

**Warfighters** are Service members who are directly involved in combat or military operations.

**Warfighter capabilities** refer to the skills, equipment, and technologies that enable Service members to complete tasks or carry out missions under various conditions while meeting operational requirements. These capabilities ensure warfighters can effectively adapt to challenges and achieve mission success.<sup>29</sup>

## Appendix B

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