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## Ready to Serve: Opportunities for Cooperative Extension to Support Military Families

Rachel A. Brauner

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, rbrauner@ag.tamu.edu*

Andrew B. Crocker

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, abcrocker@ag.tamu.edu*



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# Ready to Serve: Opportunities for Cooperative Extension to Support Military Families

RACHEL A. BRAUNER<sup>1</sup> AND ANDREW B. CROCKER<sup>1</sup>

AUTHORS: <sup>1</sup>Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.

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**Abstract.** The issues families in the military experience have been exacerbated by 20 years of continuous war. Families in the military across all the service branches are families first, sharing similar struggles as their civilian counterparts. Like many families, families in the military have day-to-day concerns about health, financial management, parenting and building positive relationships. Cooperative Extension is positioned to bridge the gap between building support systems and providing quality education, services and care to service members and their families—but are we ready to serve?

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## INTRODUCTION

The well-being of families in the military is essential to the Department of Defense (DoD) and its goals for service readiness (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). Historically, DoD programs and resources were designed for the service member, but research shows family-related factors play an important role in service member's readiness. When reviewing strictly active-duty components, there are more family members "enlisted" than service members (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2019). In the 2011 *Health Related Behaviors Survey* (Barlas et al., 2013), service members reported that conflicts between military obligations and family/personal responsibilities and separation from family or friends were among the top three stressors of military life. Data from the 2002 *DoD Health-Related Behaviors Survey of Active Duty Personnel* also shows service members who worried about the well-being of their families experienced occupational stress, which was significantly related to both mental health problems and work performance (Hourani et al., 2006).

## MILITARY FAMILIES ARE FAMILIES FIRST

Military families are families first in that they face similar challenges such as food insecurity, finances, family relationships, mental health, and childcare similar to their civilian counterparts. To help families address these issues, military life provides access to services and benefits including social support services, such as healthcare, housing and financial assistance, childcare, and other aid. (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). Reliance on these services, however, can also create risk, especially if the family moves away from an installation or the service member is no longer active duty. Research suggests the need for multicomponent support programs that integrate civilian and military support systems and draw upon the resources of the community (Martin et al., 2004). One approach to support families in the military and to strengthen both formal and informal networks outside of the installation is through Cooperative Extension.

A model derived from Huebner et al. (2009) utilizes informal and formal networks that lead to overall family well-being and adaptation. Examples of formal networks include state-level veterans commissions, community support centers, schools, civic groups, and mental health service providers. Other formal support systems that are not traditionally recognized are land-grant institutions and Cooperative Extension (e.g., military programs, human sciences, 4-H Youth Development, and community development).

## MILITARY AND EXTENSION IN TEXAS

Within the United States, 67% of active component service members are stationed in just 10 states, one of which is Texas (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2019). Texas is an example of a state with large military populations located near urban areas; the state offers a vast array of military and nonmilitary service providers and has a great concentration of active and veteran populations (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). According to the 2020 Texas Military Preparedness Commission Biennial Report, the military contributes over \$123 billion to the Texas economy, and the state is home to over 227,000 uniformed and DoD civilian personnel who are based at 15 military installations and Army Futures Command centers.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service (AgriLife Extension), like its Cooperative Extension System counterparts, collaborates with public and private organizations to deliver impactful educational and applied-research programs that address critical issues. Since 2008 AgriLife Extension, through contracts and funding from the United States Department of Agriculture-National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA), provides educational programs about drug and alcohol abuse and suicide prevention for military personnel and families, DoD civilians, reserve components, and retirees at Joint Base San Antonio. Many of the educational programs under the grant are designed by the Department of the Army and are required for military personnel to complete annually. Grants, contracts, and niche programming aside, Cooperative Extension has a yet untapped opportunity to serve families in the military through practical, applicable education that establishes them as important members of the communities in which they live, work, and play.

### IS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION . . . READY TO SERVE?

DoD is aware of Cooperative Extension through its partnerships with USDA-NIFA. For example, the DoD Office of Military Family Readiness Policy provides grants and contracts to land grant institutions via USDA-NIFA to support families and providers in the military. The Military Families Learning Network, funded by this DoD/USDA-NIFA initiative, invites military family service providers and Cooperative Extension professionals to participate in online professional development opportunities where they can exchange experiences, resources, and research to enhance professional impact and professional growth in the military family support arena.

While DoD is familiar with Cooperative Extension through federal and state partnerships, it may be unfamiliar with local Extension efforts where on-the-ground programming is being conducted. This is where local branches of Cooperative Extension would benefit from working with state military installations to build community coalitions and partnerships with on/off-post resources. For example, Cooperative Extension's work with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education Program could help support the one in eight military families who reported food insecurity in the 2019 Military Family Support Programming Survey.

The Department of Defense spends \$1.5 billion annually on health costs related to obesity for service members and their families (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, 2020), providing an excellent opportunity for Cooperative Extension to educate families about nutrition and physical activity. Military installations generally have ample space where a Cooperative Extension-led garden with fresh fruits and vegetables could easily pair with healthy cooking demonstrations that partner with the culinary services on the installation.

In addition, approximately 1.5 million family members make up the active-duty component of the DoD, of which over 600,000 are 18 years of age and younger (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2019). This is where Cooperative Extension's parenting, childcare, and 4-H programs could also partner with family support programs and providers on the installation. The 4-H Military Partnership is a model program that creates opportunities and provide support for military-connected youth whether they live on or near an installation, in civilian communities, or on overseas installations where they can engage in intentional learning experiences to help them thrive. This partnership program works with installation family support programs to provide a safe and nurturing environment for military connected children and youth.

### FUTURE NEEDS AND STRATEGIES

The previous examples related to food insecurity, healthy lifestyles, and opportunities for youth capture a few program areas that all Cooperative Extension Systems offer in some form or fashion, but endless opportunities

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may exist at the state and local levels to engage with families in the military. Cooperative Extension is known for creating high-quality educational information; but to continue to be successful and to create positive change with innovative programs, families in the military need to be considered in programming efforts.

Cooperative Extension professionals may need education and training related to military prevalence in their communities, military culture, how to reach and serve military audiences, and a variety of other topics that will continue to evolve over time. Nevertheless, Cooperative Extension has been building, growing, and engaging new audiences and communities and meeting their unique needs for decades. As Harder (2019) expressed in a recent *Journal of Extension* commentary, the best opportunities lie in the area of public value and partnerships (para. 1, pg. 2). We, within Extension simply have to decide that we are ready to act on those opportunities and serve.

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