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Meeting the Needs of National Guard and Reserve Families: The Vital Role of Extension

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Abstract: National Guard and Reserve soldiers and their families face unique challenges related to deployment and reintegration. This article considers the distinct role Extension can play in supporting these families and their communities. Using Michigan as a case example, the study employed representative data from the State of the State Survey to explore residents' perceptions of the family-related issues and post-deployment needs of Michigan National Guard and Reserve soldiers and their families. Findings suggest that Extension can assist National Guard and Reserve families by preparing communities to respond to deployment, providing direct supports to families, and providing information to policy makers.

Introduction

Extension has a long-standing tradition of serving military families. Programs were developed during World War I to improve wartime food production (Jones & Roueche, 2007). These efforts were expanded during World War II with support for "victory gardens," education about food conservation, organization of scrap metal drives, and assistance to the military in considering requests for draft exemptions for those engaged in agricultural occupations (Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, 2001).

Extension's relationship with the military has continued to evolve to meet the changing nature of global conflicts and increasingly diverse military personnel. The changing nature of the military is reflected in recent shifts in deployment patterns, with National Guard and Reserve members now making up 40-50% of the military forces deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, a much greater percentage than in the past (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2009). For instance, less than two decades ago, during Operation Desert Storm, members of the Reserve Component comprised only 25% of deployed personnel (Department of Defense Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1992, 1991). This shift, only to be exacerbated by the surge in troops to Afghanistan, has important implications for families and children because the civilian communities in which they reside may not offer important services or have an understanding of military culture or the multiple stresses of deployment.

Extension professionals are well positioned to support military families and have been doing so for nearly two decades through providing military family support with innovative programs such as Operation Military Kids (OMK) (Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009; Kraft & Lyons, 2009), program evaluation, and research (USDA NIFA, 2010). Military youth are enrolled in 4-H Clubs worldwide, and 107,731 youth are involved through Operation: Military Kids (USDA NIFA, 2010). Extension has a clear commitment to serving military families, and this partnership remains strong (Carroll, Robinson, Orthner, Matthews, & Smith-Rotabi, 2008; Cotton & Meisenbach, 2009).

This article explores the unique role of Extension in supporting National Guard and Reserve soldiers and their families. National Guard and Reserve military members live in almost every county of every state. Serving the needs of National Guard and Reserve members is an excellent fit for Extension given that its mission encompasses outreach to meet key community needs. Extension specialists also work in all regions of every state. Although states have unique needs and characteristics, the case of Michigan is presented to illustrate how the issues that exist within a state can be met in part through the efforts of Extension. Using representative data from the Michigan State University Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR State of the State Survey (SOSS)), family-related issues and post-deployment needs are explored (IPPSR, 2008). Implications of these data are considered, with focus upon the characteristics of the Extension system that position professionals to assist military families and communities through difficult transitions.

National Guard and Reserve families across the country are required to deal with the challenges of deployment and reintegration at markedly high rates, especially since so many National Guard and Reserve forces have been called upon to participate in the war on terror overseas (National Governors Association, 2008). Considering that the Army National Guard and Air National Guard combine to form a force of over 473,493 soldiers, these issues affect many families and communities (National Guard Bureau, n.d.).

The Case of Michigan

While National Guard and Reserve families live in every state and territory, this article examines the case of Michigan with the goal of providing implications for Extension professionals across the United States.

Unlike states such as Texas, Florida, Arizona, or Virginia, Michigan does not have a large military base, and therefore it lacks the traditional infrastructure to address the needs of soldiers and their families (e.g., access to commissaries, health care facilities, and social support). Even though there is no military base, the Michigan National Guard and Reserve force operates with 19,151 members (National Governors Association, 2008), and these soldiers and their spouses and children account for 44,581 Michigan residents (National Governors Association, 2008).

A second challenge for Michigan is the economic climate. Michigan has ranked high in unemployment in comparison to other states for the past few years, with the current unemployment rate at 12.4% (November 2010, seasonally adjusted; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). When unemployment is prevalent, financial strain can be exacerbated for military families, and deployment can compound the situation. Military families often lose the non-deployed members' income, as they may stay home to manage the home and family (National Leadership Summit on Military Families, 2010). In addition to the work challenges, the deployed family member may face upon return home, the at-home partner also may find it difficult to re-enter the workplace.

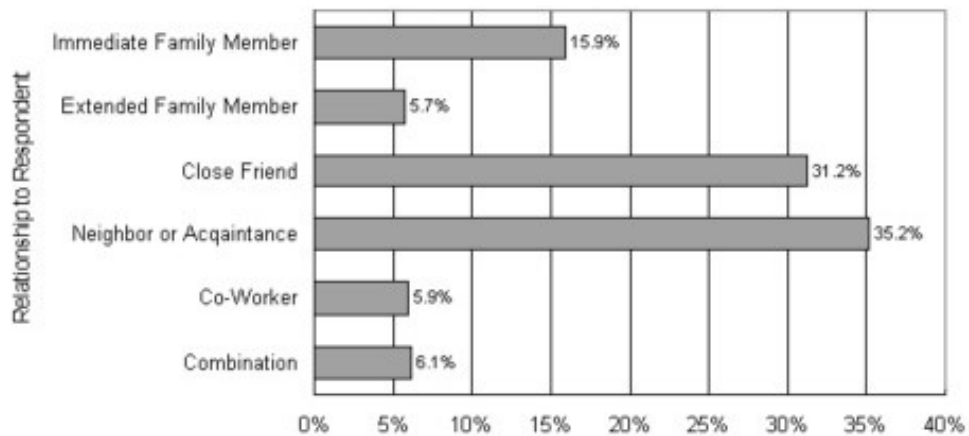
Findings from the Michigan State of the State Survey (SOSS)

Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research conducted its 50th State of the State Survey (SOSS) in 2008. The SOSS is conducted four times a year and aims to provide an understanding of the public mood and citizen perceptions regarding important issues in the state. Surveys are conducted by telephone with adult residents of Michigan. This particular round of the SOSS reached 953 adult residents and included 19 questions related to the Michigan National Guard (MI NG). The data generated from these questions provided information regarding Michigan residents' relationships to members of the MI NG as well as their perceptions about the needs of these soldiers and their families. For further information about methodology, see <http://ippsr.msu.edu/SOSS/DEFAULT.ASP>.

Relationship to Deployed Soldiers

Almost one in three (29.4%) adult residents knew a member of the MI NG who had been deployed since January of 2001. Just over 15% of adult Michigan residents surveyed reported that a member of their *immediate family* had been deployed to a combat zone (such as Iraq or Afghanistan) since January of 2001. Another 5.7% had experienced the deployment of an extended family member. Figure 1 illustrates these data in more detail. Such findings suggest that National Guard and Reserve deployment has widespread effects on Michigan families and communities.

Figure 1.
Respondents Reporting a Relationship to Deployed National Guard Member



Family Issues

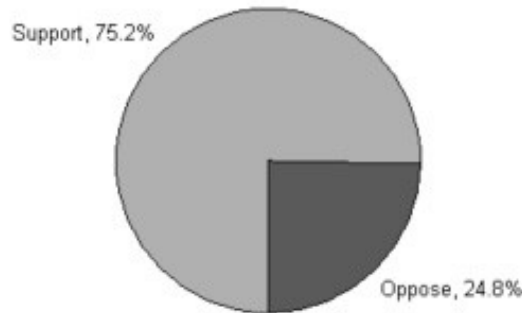
Michigan residents expressed their concern for National Guard and Reserve families facing the challenges of deployment. An overwhelming majority (96.5%) of respondents felt that both parents in a family should not be deployed simultaneously. More than two-thirds (68.7%) of those interviewed also expressed opposition to deployment of MI NG members who were single parents. These views may reflect the perception that families should be allowed to care for their members. Yet this stance also places a great deal of responsibility on the family members of National Guard and Reserve soldiers. For instance, 59.9% of those interviewed believed that family members should be responsible for providing social and emotional support to children of deployed parents. Although family-based care may be preferable to other options, taking on the responsibility of another's children during the course of a lengthy deployment could represent a challenge for other family members.

Post-Deployment Needs and Responsibilities

Respondents recognized that MI NG members would require multiple supports upon returning home from combat. The greatest need identified was employment assistance (37.2%), which is not surprising in the current economic context. Michigan residents also recognized the importance of attending to both physical (e.g., burns, head trauma) and emotional (e.g., post traumatic stress disorder, depression) injuries. The federal government was identified as the responsible care-giving system for both physical (93.8%) and emotional (78.5%) injury. Consistent with this response, 87% of those interviewed felt that tax dollars should pay for all medical and rehabilitative services related to physical injury, and 85% felt that tax dollars should fund services for emotional injury. Finally, 75.2% of respondents supported a tax increase to be used specifically to support NG members and their families (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Respondents' Position Regarding a Tax Increase to Support National Guard Members and Their Families



Disconnect in Responsibility Between National Level and Family Level

In looking at these survey findings, public perception based on the SOSS survey results indicates that the responsibility for addressing issues related to National Guard and Reserve deployment rests at the national and family levels. However, there appears to be a disconnect between these two levels, and neither is equipped to address the complex needs of NG soldiers and their families on its own. The 2009 National Leadership Summit on Military Families recommended shared responsibility between the family support community and families themselves. Extension is a key component of this "family support community." It also appears that state and community system resources are being overlooked. Again, participants in the Leadership Summit expressed concern that many families often are unaware of supports in spite of available resources and growth in program opportunities (National Leadership Summit on Military Families, 2010). Additionally, there is a need to coordinate and build capacity in states and communities in order to bridge multiple sources of support.

Extension has an important role to play in this coordinating and capacity-building effort. The Extension system provides a presence within all counties across the country, which allows it to reach the dispersed population of National Guard and Reserve families. Extension provides research-based information to promote the welfare of families, and it has proven its commitment to serving military families (Carroll et al., 2008). Extension also is well suited to build capacity through community and economic development initiatives.

Recommendations for Extension Based on the Michigan Findings

Work with Communities

National Guard and Reserve veterans reside in every county of the state of Michigan, and many of these service members are or have been deployed in war zones. This is surely true in the majority of states, due to the widespread deployment of National Guard and Reserve troops nationwide. In response, Extension professionals must focus on preparing local communities to respond to deployment needs before, during, and after it occurs. Suggested areas of focus include the following.

- Offer professional development opportunities for community-based education professionals (e.g., family life educators) to become familiar with issues pertaining to National Guard and Reserve culture and the experience of deployment.

- Advocate for the needs of National Guard and Reserve members and their families among community service providers such as medical workers, mental health professionals, and child care staff. Community service providers should understand how family dynamics and individual behaviors change in response to the increased stress associated with the deployment and reintegration of a family member. Extension professionals may refer to the article by Gorman, Ames, Blow, and Anderson (2006) for a concise overview of this issue. Service providers also should be made aware of symptoms associated with physical injuries (e.g., Traumatic Brain Injury), mental health conditions (e.g., post traumatic stress disorder), and other negative outcomes (e.g., grief reactions) that military service members and their families may be experiencing. In addition, Extension professionals can inform community service providers about existing resources that are in place for military families (e.g., TriCare: <<http://www.tricare.mil>>; Military OneSource: <<http://www.militaryonesource.com>>) to facilitate referral or collaboration when necessary.
- Work to empower schools, faith groups, and other community organizations to respond to the needs of military families. These organizations may find concrete suggestions helpful in supporting their members who belong to National Guard and Reserve families. For example, Extension professionals could suggest that school libraries purchase books and other materials related to the experiences of military children and their families. Community organizations could be encouraged to assist military families during deployment by providing concrete assistance (e.g., child care, home repair, transportation) as well as emotional support.
- Engage National Guard and Reserve families and/or their children in 4-H Youth Development clubs and out-of-school time experiences.
- Encourage teenage youth of National Guard and Reserve members to share their voice through Speak Out for Military Kids (SOMK) and similar programs.
- Take advantage of public education opportunities to inform community members about life as a member of a National Guard or Reserve family.
- Create avenues for current and past members of the military and their families to be recognized and heard within their communities. Extension professionals could partner with the Veteran's Administration, the local American Legion post, or other veteran organizations to offer community events or media coverage to inform the public about the military experience.

Provide Direct Supports

Survey data indicate that respondents valued the wellbeing of National Guard and Reserve families, but a great deal of responsibility is placed on these families for overcoming the challenges of deployment. This suggests a strong need to provide direct support to National Guard and Reserve families, and Extension could facilitate this in the following ways.

- Continue offering initiatives such as Operation Military Kids (OMK) <<http://www.operationmilitarykids.org/public/home.aspx>>, and expand the accessibility of the program (Ferrari, 2005; Huebner et al., 2009; Kraft & Lyons, 2009). The OMK initiative is meant to provide support to military children/youth and their families living in civilian communities, such as National Guard and

Reserve families. OMK offers recreational activities, access to educational resources, and the chance to connect with other children/youth and families with a deployed family member.

- Commit to offering programs such as the Essential Life Skills for Military Families (ELSMF) curriculum <<http://www.militaryfamilylifeskills.org/>> (Carroll et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2009) to military reserve families across the country. The ELSMF program offers a series of workshops to military reserve families to help provide both relational and practical skills for coping with deployment and other challenges of military life, particularly for those families living within civilian communities.
- Offer programming at Pre-Deployment and Reintegration Workshops in conjunction with National Guard and Reserve units. These workshops strive to provide experiences to soldiers and their families that enhance child, youth, and family resiliency. Programs offered could complement what is already being presented. Examples of such programs include financial management and family resiliency.
- Negotiate with local technical schools and trade unions to offer free or reduced-cost repair services (e.g., auto or household repair/maintenance) to families experiencing deployment.
- Provide resources and educational opportunities to military reserve families on topics such as family financial management, parenting, navigating the military health service system, job searches, college applications, and basic home repairs.

Establish Funding Priorities

Survey results from Michigan residents indicate there is clear public support for funding services and programs that help National Guard and Reserve families. Extension professionals can play a critical role in disseminating this information. For example, funding priorities could be established in the following areas.

- Ensure money is allotted within the Extension annual plan of work to support education and training efforts meant to prepare Extension professionals to work with military reserve families and their communities.
- Help inform policy makers and citizens to assist in sound decision making regarding resources for military families at the local, state, and national levels.
- Work with local, state, and national organizations to find new and creative ways to support National Guard and Reserve families and children under the current economic conditions. This need not be the creation of costly new programs, but improved coordination and administration of effective existing programs.
- Assist in identifying existing or untapped resources in local communities that can be tailored to meet the needs of National Guard and Reserve families.

Conclusion

Extension has a strong history of military partnership and is ideally situated to support National Guard and Reserve soldiers and their families as they face the challenges of deployment and reintegration. The study reported here used survey data from Michigan to explore public perceptions of family-related issues and post-deployment needs. Findings suggest there is both a need and a public motivation to help. Extension professionals can promote the wellbeing of National Guard and Reserve soldiers, their families, and the communities in which they live by preparing communities to respond to the effects of deployment, providing direct supports to soldiers and their families, and helping to inform policy makers at local, state, and national levels.

National Guard and Reserve deployment creates many challenges for soldiers and their families. However, neither federal government nor family-based services are the sole answer to this issue. To truly meet the needs of this population, there must be a shift toward community-level solutions and responsive public policies that link Federal and family-level initiatives. Continuing its strong history, Extension can play a vital role in this effort.

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