PowerUp is inspired by and celebrates you and your work.
The Military Family Readiness System as Professional Practice

By: Brigitte Scott, Ph.D.

The Department of Defense Instruction 13422.22 for Military Family Readiness is a policy articulating requirements for military family readiness services as well as for family service providers working across DoD. The policy is internal to DoD, but with massive implications for the larger civilian community of providers supporting military families. The policy designates the Military Family Readiness System (MFRS), which is a support system comprising all family service providers working with military families at federal, state, and local levels. The MFRS provides families with easy access to an integrated support system to help them navigate the unique challenges of military life. The MFRS increases family readiness, in turn increasing the retention, resilience, readiness, and quality of life for service members and their families.

As an integrated support system, the MFRS includes providers from several domains of family well-being: career, social, financial, health, and community. These domains represent distinct professional fields that may not often, or easily, coalesce. Yet the MFRS progresses and creates the most impact when providers come together across fields, programs, agencies, and communities. This first issue of PowerUp highlights several examples of how an integrated system of support can play out in professional practice. Getting to know local and regional programs and agencies, taking steps to build your professional network of fellow providers, and drawing inspiration from successful programs and practices are all great starting points. Another consideration is to adopt a posture of curiosity and connection in our work. If you are unsure if you work with military families, consider the statistics from the newly released 2021 Demographics Profile of the Military Community. There are over 2 million active duty, National Guard, and Reserve service members with over 2.5 million family members spanning every state in the country. Even if there is no installation near you, there are likely National Guard and Reserve personnel residing in your community who can be called to active duty at any time. Military families are a part of most communities, but they are families first—therefore their military-connected status may not always be obvious. Military families serve too, so your awareness of providers and support programs across the domains of family well-being is a crucial aspect of an integrated support system. Connecting with local and regional providers, programs, and resources will advance the MFRS in tangible ways for the military families you serve.

The MFRS is a complex system that is continually in process because it is being conceptualized, built out, and put into practice each and every day as you work with military families and each other. PowerUp is inspired by and celebrates you and your work—the powerful providers of the OneOp community who are essential to the MFRS.

FURTHER READING:

“It’s a long story, but I’ll try and shorten it a bit.” Dr. Ron Avi Astor didn’t know much about military families when he received a call from school districts in Southern California to help them with school bullying issues. At the time, he was working as a professor in Urban Social Development at the University of Southern California School of Social Work and Rossier School of Education. Since the 1980s, Astor and his colleagues had been working on addressing school safety issues successfully in several countries, including Israel, Chile, and Canada. They had unlocked something crucial to sustained success, and governments and schools all over the world were taking notice.

Previous school safety interventions involved the creation of evidence-based programs. While the programs themselves were of high quality, Astor and his colleagues noticed: “[The] programs actually failed when they got into the field and they were spread out. They were good when they were in a research study and you had a lot of money and people supporting it.” But once the project was done, they would become unsustainable because they didn’t have the capacity, people, or enough money to continue them—even when the programs were promoted widely by the government and schools.

So Astor and his colleagues set out to develop a different approach—one that caught the attention of several military-connected school districts in Southern California and prompted them to request his help on what they perceived as a school bullying issue. “[The schools] were talking about bullying and being targeted, even weapon use, substance abuse issues, suicide prevention, but what I didn’t realize is that the cultural issues . . . being brought up over and over by kids or teachers or administrators I was meeting with [were] around military family culture and its conflict with civilian culture.”

When Astor began to work with these school districts, he became aware of a tremendous lack of understanding about military families (including veterans) and military family culture and experiences, including his own lack of understanding. He observed that “the civilian culture—the teachers, the principals who were not [from] military families or veteran families—didn’t even know [a military culture] was there.”

The questions Astor began to ask included: What does it mean to be a military family? What does it mean that a child’s parent(s) served, that they’ve been around the world to different places? Who has been thriving? What are the socioeconomic factors affecting these families? Answering these questions was key to understanding the full picture.

Lifting Up Voices
Astor wanted to frame the school bullying and military family culture issues around the broader topic of school safety, and within the broader region of Southern California since it was a regional issue. He saw an opportunity to address the concerns of the school district while acknowledging and honoring
military families and veterans as distinct cultural groups. He did this through an empowerment approach, centering the voices of the people and the community versus simply diagnosing an issue and developing an evidence-based program around that diagnosis. This approach had the effect of lifting up the voices of all parents, teachers, administrators, and particularly the kids, without singling out military kids.

Listening to the voices and experiences of the community is what Astor appreciates so much about the community empowerment approach. "What we like about [the approach] is it’s not a top-down, ‘here’s a program and try to implement it; if you do it wrong, you won’t get results.’ It’s really listening to the voices of the ground-level people who are there. What that does is [capture] the variation in region around issues of culture . . . [as] every school is a little bit different." All parties in the individual schools and communities can then work together on the solutions, and in a way that makes sense for everyone. Depending on the issue, those involved may determine they need more resources, people, or training/retraining, or to develop more community partners.

It was critical to the team that these methods could be sustained after the project was over. “One of our rules was we were not going to do anything that couldn’t be sustained afterward...when we leave, this has to continue without us.” So they determined that each school needed its own data (and a way to interpret it), its own voice, its own way to connect with community partnerships, its own solutions, and ways to communicate with each other and exchange ideas.

**Connecting Resources**

The University of Southern California was the catalyst that helped coordinate things at the regional and the school level. When things would go well, the project team would capture those successes and create guides that could be used after the project was over. The project team ended up creating six guides: four were directly related to military family culture, and the other two were about welcoming practices and the mapping and monitoring process they used. It took about seven years to develop the guides and build the capacity of the schools to continue this part of the process after the project was over.

A significant part of the project involved using the information gathered from the annual school climate survey to find the “resource deserts.” The project team then arranged for NGOs and other partners to connect parents, students, and school personnel directly to the resources they identified as a need in the annual survey. Overall, the project connected school communities to almost 400 NGOs. Some schools would be visited by NGOs with financing expertise, others would create a partnership with the local YMCA—all based on what the students, parents, and staff had identified as important in the annual survey and follow-up conversations. The magic happened once these partnerships began, because the project team got out of the way and enabled the connections to continue on their own.
Building Capacity

Large structural changes, such as hiring hundreds of new professionals, were needed to ensure that these approaches would be sustainable. As Astor pointed out: “Capacity building was a big piece in our minds. You need people to run these programs. You need people to continually educate. You need people to have these connections with the NGOs; it doesn’t happen unless you have people who are designated to do that.”

Besides sustaining the work and positive outcomes the schools had already begun to see, these hires had an added benefit—helping the schools take a more direct ownership over school climate. Rather than taking a clinical psychology or psychiatry approach by referring families to professionals, these hires allowed the schools to actively “make the place feel better” and give the kids a sense of feeling seen, heard, and supported. Embedding hundreds of new staff members into the schools was not an easy concept to sell, considering the cost and complexity. It wasn’t a simple service that someone could provide or a self-contained program that could be implemented. As Astor said, “It changes the place itself.”

These changes have continued, though as Astor admits, those involved in keeping everything running likely no longer know how it all began. He’s okay with that—it is what the project was designed to do.

Creating Lasting Change

When asked what advice he has for other people in communities across the country, Dr. Astor shared several ideas:

- Change the way you think about and address solutions to school or community issues - go beyond “just providing a lot of resources to a group who you think don’t have those resources or have those skills.” This means taking community approaches to community problems, which means paying attention to all the diverse cultural groups in the community.

- Be flexible in adapting the structures you have when you hear from the families and avoid treating the voices of the military families and kids, and the civilians in the community as a needs assessment.

- Be intentional about your community building. Who are you trying to bring together? How can you bring them together in a way that builds understanding? During this project, the community employed solutions like bringing together the civilian and military families and kids to work together to create a community garden on school grounds and host big celebrations for the kids and volunteers who worked together. They also hosted other events which were intended to connect people to resources. “The goal there was really to impact the civilians so they understand. That obviously impacted the military families, too. They came away with resources [and] ideas.”

- Consider partnerships with local school districts. “The easiest, most flexible places to [create change] is the school because actually nobody owns the civilian schools. You could do a lot by partnering with them.”

Ron Avi Astor

Professor of Social Welfare

Ron Avi Astor holds the Marjorie Crump Chair Professorship in Social Welfare at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs with a joint appointment in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. His work examines the role of the physical, social-organizational and cultural contexts in schools related to different kinds of bullying and school violence (e.g., sexual harassment, cyber bullying, discrimination hate acts, school fights, emotional abuse, weapon use, teacher/child violence). This work documents the ecological influences of the family, community, school and culture on different forms of bullying and school violence. This work has been used worldwide. Astor’s studies have included tens of thousands of schools and millions of students, teachers, parents and administrators. Over the past 20 years, findings from these studies have been published in more than 200 scholarly manuscripts.
Besides the guides, Astor and various members of the team involved in this project have written many articles, books, chapters, a course module on the needs of military families, and have even influenced policy. They have met with and shared their findings at White House conferences, with First Lady Jill Biden (Second Lady at the time), and with generals and many others at the Department of Defense. They have also shared their findings with universities, particularly universities that specialize in educating future teachers.

In 2021, years after the project concluded, Astor and his colleagues published their findings on a follow-up evaluation, citing large reductions in bullying behaviors (victimization, weapon use) and substance use by both military-connected and civilian students. They even found increases in reports of a positive school environment. “When you get capacity or you get resources, all of those resources benefit everybody. That was a big selling point to the civilian communities because it wasn’t just another program, [and it] didn’t stigmatize the military families.”

Astor and his team provided a shining example of how communities can come together to support all families, and how important it is to see military families and veterans as distinct cultural groups when addressing serious and complex issues. The success of this program and the longevity of the outcomes also point to how more education about military families and veterans as cultural groups is necessary across the Military Family Readiness System—in all communities.

As Astor put so well, “the crux of the problem sometimes is not just lack of services, it’s also the relationship with those in the community who don’t know who [military families] are.” A little understanding and connection can go a long way in addressing complex issues and the results can lift up both military families and civilian families alike.
Cultivating a Community of Support

By: Hannah Hyde & Maggie Lucas

Somewhere nearby is a quaint, small farm with a weathered red barn, a coop of chickens producing farm-fresh eggs, and a farmer preparing to sell artisanal cheeses at the local farmer’s market. Within a nearby community is a military veteran apprenticing at the local dairy farm in preparation for starting their own small-scale dairy farm in the future. And scattered throughout major cities and suburbs are urban farmers with their backyard beehives and balcony herb gardens, bringing a little more nature back to the concrete jungle.

For some, a farmer’s quiet and slower-paced life is the dream. For others, having a hobby to bring in extra income or better care for their mental and physical health adds immense value to their lives. Cooperative Extension has long advocated for agriculture programs that are accessible and worthwhile ventures for anyone, including active-duty service members, veterans, and individuals with disabilities. Among many other areas of interest, Cooperative Extension has a wide range of programs available across the country that focus on farming, agriculture, and supporting local communities.

Cooperative Extension has many agricultural programs that support and benefit individuals, families, and communities.

Farm Ops is part of the Cornell Small Farms Program working in partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension across New York State. Farm Ops supports military service members and veterans who are curious about agricultural vocations through virtual and in-person workshops, courses, and resources. Through Farm Ops, individuals embrace agriculture through whichever method works best for their lifestyles. Going beyond crops and raising animals, Farm Ops also offers information and resources that might be of interest to urban farmers. For example, one workshop’s attendees explore the array of agriculturally-produced woven cloth from various parts of the world, learn how to weave with upcycled materials and develop their own weaving techniques. Other workshops include home-scale maple syrup production and learning how to grow and use herbs.

Veteran, former Marine, and Farm Ops contributor Dean Koyanagi spoke about the program and its impact on individuals and the community in a 2018 Extension Out Loud podcast episode. Koyanagi noted that Farm Ops’s online courses have complemented on-base Transition Assistance Programs and helped active-duty service members get a head start on their career post-service. Further, Koyanagi recognized that Farm Ops couldn’t and shouldn’t be “all things for the veterans,” stressing the importance and ability of support agencies to be able to refer clients across programs and supports. There are exceptional programs like Farm Ops across the country making a positive impact on local communities.

Cooperative Extension ensures that evidence-based resources are available at local, state, and national levels.

Like civilian families, military families are diverse and sometimes have a family member with a disability. Although these families are often connected to DoD’s Exceptional Family Member Program, Cooperative Extension is also able to provide assistance through programs across the nation. USDA’s National AgrAbility Project is headquartered at Purdue Extension in Indiana. With chapters nationwide, AgrAbility provides support and evidence-based information to better the lives of farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural workers with disabilities. Over the past 32 years, AgrAbility has provided services to individuals with disabilities from various backgrounds and communities, and continues to support the individuals, families, and communities they serve.
“When I put my hands in the dirt, it changed me. It gave me a sense of calmness and set me on the right track.”
- Davon Goodwin, AgrAbility participant

Davon Goodwin was 21 years old when he joined the US Army to fulfill a greater mission he felt in his life. Shortly thereafter, he deployed to Afghanistan where a bomb exploded under his truck, leaving him with damaged L1 and L2 vertebrae as well as a traumatic brain injury resulting in severe narcolepsy. When Goodwin returned home, he felt hopeless and lost until he found his love of farming.

However, even with his newfound passion, there were setbacks. His narcolepsy hindered his daily work, yet he still felt hesitant to admit he needed help. By chance one day, an elderly woman joined him on the farm as he worked. While this wasn’t a U-Pick farm, he quickly discovered that farming takes a community, and that his burden wasn’t his to carry alone. He began engaging more in his community, which led him to connect with NC AgrAbility. By giving Goodwin a snooze alert and anti-fatigue mats, AgrAbility was able to put confidence back into Goodwin’s career. In 2018, he began his own farm that has a focus on creating a community through connecting the farm to the local people. Farming takes a village, and luckily, Goodwin has found his.

Exploring connections as a powerful provider.

There are many programs and projects throughout the country that have the potential to greatly impact the lives of the families they serve. As professionals, having knowledge of and connections to various resources throughout your community can make a tremendous difference in the life of an individual. How are you cultivating a community of support for military families?
Marine Master Sergeant Eric Snipes has been deployed and even been in combat, but the most difficult thing he has ever done was telling his commanding officer about his drinking problem. In Joint Base San Antonio's video series “The Things We Carry,” Snipes shares his experience with alcoholism and his road to recovery. That road included his commanding officer, his family and other military resources, as well as non-military resources like counseling and Alcoholics Anonymous.

Snipes’s story demonstrates the complexity of military family resilience and readiness. His recovery and continued resilience are the product of resources drawn from his installation and his wider community.

To continue to help service members like Snipes and their families, we need to connect military and community resource providers. Making these connections isn’t always easy and it doesn't happen automatically. It takes practice.

Here are a few steps to get us started.

**Set a goal**
Often our connections to other providers are the product of happenstance. By setting a goal, we are deciding not to leave all of our potential connections to chance. Instead, we are choosing one area of focus and committing to making connections related to that area.

Be sure to choose a goal that you really care about and that others can help you with.

**Find people and organizations who can help you achieve it**
Once you have your goal, you can start the search for others who can help you achieve it. Do some research to build a list of ten or more people and/or organizations you might want to connect with.

An Internet search can be a great jumping off point. You can also ask your colleagues and friends if they know anyone working on the same issue or with the same group of people. Using your existing network can be a great way to make new connections.

**Invite people to connect**
Once you have your list, choose five people to contact. While email isn’t everyone’s favorite communication tool, it’s a good place for an invitation to connect. If you can’t find an email address for someone, reach out by phone or social media.

When we think of a network of support, we often think of all the individuals and organizations as the sources of that support. But it's the connections between those individuals and organizations that enhances that support and helps people navigate to it. Making it our intention to create and strengthen those connections helps build a network of support for people like Eric Snipes and for everyone in our military and civilian communities.
Practicing Connection is an initiative from OneOp that emphasizes the crucial skills and practices of connection and collaboration. It’s a multi-faceted, open-ended exploration of the personal and collective practices that empower us to work together to help each other, our families, and our communities improve our resilience and readiness in a rapidly changing world.

Practicing Connection offers opportunities for you to think deeply, develop collaborative relationships, and grow personally and professionally in ways that facilitate the change you seek to make in the world.

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We believe that smart and connected people can change lives.

That’s why OneOp is committed to providing free online learning opportunities for family service professionals. Providers are powerful when they work together as a ready, knowledgeable, and networked community. This power transforms the military families they serve.

Be a powerful provider.