



Blue Star Families

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**Testimony of Brooke Blaaid, Associate Director of Policy, Blue Star Families
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
"Everyday Heroes: Supporting the Veteran Caregiver Community"
Wednesday, September 25, 2024**

Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano, thank you for holding this critically important hearing on "Everyday Heroes: Supporting the Veteran Caregiver Community."

I am the Associate Director of Policy at Blue Star Families – the nation's leading grass-roots military family support organization, with over 300,000 members and impacting more than 1.5 million military and Veteran family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, Blue Star Families seeks to ensure no matter where their service takes them, our military and Veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive. This approach ensures military readiness and enhances retention and recruiting efforts.

With thirteen chapters strategically located across the country and a robust and secure digital presence, Blue Star Families provides both virtual and in-person support, creating a consistent and reliable presence that resonates with military, Veteran, guard, and reserve families. Our chapters are unique and serve as vital hubs where innovative programs, events, and services are offered, fostering a sense of community and connection. By providing opportunities to engage with civilian neighbors, institutions, and organizations, we aim to integrate military families seamlessly into their local communities.

For well over 10 years, Blue Star Families has recognized caregivers in military families as a vital member of the military community and provided them with personalized and intimate programming and reliable resources. While our programs continuously innovate

and adapt to evolving caregiver needs, the one thing that has remained constant is that Blue Star Families is a trusted ally and supporter for ALL caregivers.

The term “Military caregivers” is currently defined as those caring for an active-duty or Veteran service member who has serious injuries or illnesses,¹ likely caused by military service. This definition falls short of fully capturing the scope of caregiving for today’s military family. “Military caregivers” are disproportionately wives caring for a spouse or partner with a military-connected injury, or sometimes adult children or battle buddies.²

Amending the term and referring to them instead as “caregivers in military families” allows for the inclusion of caregivers of all kinds.³ A caregiver in a military family may care for children with special needs, other family members with chronic conditions, aging parents and grandparents, battle buddies, and many others.⁴

Additionally, a significant yet often overlooked group of caregivers, commonly referred to as Hidden Helpers, has gained attention through the work of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation. These are children and youth who live in homes with injured or ill service members and Veterans.⁵ Despite their young age, they take on caregiving responsibilities, often without realizing the extent of their role.

It is estimated that 2.3 million Hidden Helpers across the United States provide essential care and support to their loved ones.⁶ These young caregivers manage tasks ranging from assisting with daily activities to providing emotional support, all while balancing school and other personal commitments.

Despite their critical contributions, many Hidden Helpers do not see themselves as caregivers. Instead, they view their actions as simply doing what is best for their family

¹ Strong, J. (2018). Military Caregivers. *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 46. 156-163. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-018-0657-6>

² Ramchand, R., Tanielian, T., Fisher, M.P., Vaughan, C.A., Trail, T.E., Batka, C., et al. (2014). *Hidden Heroes: America’s Military Caregivers*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR499.html.

³ Blue Star Families. (2021). *Special report: Caregiving in military families*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/BSF_RCI_Caregiving_Report_2021.pdf

⁴ Blue Star Families. (2021). *Special report: Caregiving in military families*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/BSF_RCI_Caregiving_Report_2021.pdf

⁵ Elizabeth Dole Foundation, Wounded Warriors Project, Hidden Helpers. (n.d.). *What you need to know about hidden helpers*. Hidden Heroes. <https://hiddenheroes.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/EDF-HiddenHelpers-Programs.pdf>

⁶ Malick, S., Sandoval, M., Santiago, T., Jacobs Johnson, C., Gehrke, A., & Metallic, E. (2022). *Hidden helpers at the frontlines of caregiving: Supporting the healthy development of children from military and veteran caregiving homes* (No. 0cb41ff18c0a4064abd0dca2b83008a7). Mathematica Policy Research. https://hiddenheroes.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Hidden_Helpers.pdf

members.⁷ Blue Star Families 2021 Special Report on Caregiving also found this to be true of adult caregivers.⁸

Caregivers in military families often have to balance caregiving responsibilities with the unique demands of the military lifestyle. This lifestyle brings its own set of challenges, frequently prioritizing military service obligations and daily job demands over family and caregiving needs. These challenges can include separations from the service member due to deployments or training, leading to periods of isolation from family and friends.

These caregivers face the same military lifestyle challenges as their non-caregiver peers, but their issues are often intensified. For example, the stress of frequent moves not only disrupts the family routine but also complicates access to consistent medical care and support services for their loved ones.⁹ The service member's absence can leave caregivers solely responsible for managing the household and caregiving duties, adding to their emotional and physical burden.

Furthermore, typical stressors of military life, such as financial instability and the pressure of adapting to new environments, carry different and more profound meanings for caregivers. The need to find new healthcare providers and support systems with each move is daunting, and the isolation felt during a service member's absence is more pronounced for those already under the strain of caregiving.

Sustaining programs that support their well-being and self-care are essential, as they play a pivotal role in maintaining caregivers' health and happiness and the overall resilience of our military community.

Our enduring partnership with the Veterans United Foundation remained steadfast in supporting the Caregivers Empowering Caregivers (CEC) Program, an integral program within Blue Star Families. This partnership enabled us to expand and enhance our program, which is focused on providing crucial resources, support networks, and education to empower caregivers.

Dedicated to the principles of self-care, resource sharing, and community building, we offer a platform for caregivers to connect, share experiences, and develop strategies for

⁷ Malick, S., Sandoval, M., Santiago, T., Jacobs Johnson, C., Gehrke, A., & Metallic, E. (2022). *Hidden helpers at the frontlines of caregiving: Supporting the healthy development of children from military and veteran caregiving homes* (No. 0cb41ff18c0a4064abd0dca2b83008a7). Mathematica Policy Research. https://hiddenheroes.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Hidden_Helpers.pdf

⁸ Blue Star Families. (2021). *Special report: Caregiving in military families*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/BSF_RCI_Caregiving_Report_2021.pdf

⁹ Blue Star Families. (2021). *Special report: Caregiving in military families*. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/BSF_RCI_Caregiving_Report_2021.pdf

self-care. We equip participants with the tools and resources to manage their caregiving responsibilities while prioritizing their own well-being.

In 2022, the Blue Star Families of Dayton & Southwestern Ohio Chapter embarked on an inspiring initiative to strengthen community bonds and support students within Franklin City Schools and Lakota East Schools. This initiative led to the creation of the Purple Star & Hidden Helper Club, a beacon of togetherness and understanding for students with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

The program started modestly with just six students but quickly expanded, eventually welcoming over 40 students. This diverse group included children of active-duty service members, Guard/Reserve members, Hidden Helpers, and civilian students. The club's growth highlighted its significant impact and the importance of such support systems within schools. Throughout the school year, these students gathered monthly, focused on the noble cause of fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support among students.

This initiative is an excellent model of the importance of community-level stewardship, which supports military-connected children and fosters a broader sense of empathy and understanding among all students.

In that same community in April 2023, during the Month of the Military Child, an extraordinary vision board activity took place, filled with laughter, creativity, and the delightful aroma of pizza. This special event was designed to foster new friendships, deepen existing bonds, and promote a greater understanding of military culture.

For the Hidden Helper students, this initiative was significant. These students face the daily challenge of balancing their academic pursuits with caregiving responsibilities at home, creating a life filled with unpredictability and stress. The event offered them a cherished moment of respite and camaraderie, allowing them to relax and connect with peers who understood their experiences.

The event fostered a sense of belonging and solidarity among the students. As they crafted their vision boards, they shared their dreams and aspirations, discovering common ground and building a network of mutual support.

This is the story of the Purple Star & Hidden Helper Club, where every journey is shared, and no one walks alone. Through events like these, the club continues to foster a supportive and understanding community, celebrating the resilience and strength of military-connected children and their caregivers.

In 2023, Blue Star Families offered in-person Caregivers Empowering Caregivers programming in four of our Chapter locations nationwide. These in-person programs invite up to 20 caregivers in each location to be part of a cohort that meets four or more times during the year. These face-to-face interactions offer a secure environment for caregivers to come together, establish connections, and allocate dedicated time to prioritize their personal self-care journeys.

The Caregivers Empowering Caregivers Program had 12 in-person cohorts and served 126 caregivers and Hidden Helpers. Data collected through the program's post-event surveys revealed diverse participation: 36% were Veteran spouses, 27% were active-duty spouses, and 18% were Veterans. Furthermore, 45% identified as Black, Indigenous, people of color, or multiracial.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Every participant (100%) felt respected, able to connect with others, and comfortable expressing themselves. This inclusive environment fostered a sense of community and belonging among the attendees.

Quotes from Participants

The joy of seeing many military-affiliated caregivers taking some time out to relax, network, share experiences, and laugh brings great fulfillment to me. — Army Reserve Spouse

I loved being able to talk to others who “get it.” Being a caregiver and a military spouse can be so isolating and lonely at times. — Active-Duty Air Force Spouse

The survey also highlighted tangible outcomes from the cohort. Over 41 new peer connections were established, creating a supportive caregiver network. Additionally, 73% of participants were introduced to new resources that could aid them in their caregiving roles. This exposure significantly enhanced their understanding of available support, with 73% reporting a deeper knowledge of local resources. Moreover, 54% of participants learned how to navigate these existing resources better, empowering them to utilize the support systems effectively.

The Caregivers Empowering Caregivers cohorts provided a respectful and inclusive space for caregivers, facilitated meaningful connections, and increased awareness and understanding of valuable resources. This initiative by Blue Star Families has significantly impacted the participants, equipping them with the tools and networks necessary to support their caregiving journey.

Blue Star Families continues to demonstrate its unwavering commitment to military and Veteran families through innovative programs and dedicated support. By creating a

network of inclusive and empowering initiatives, we have made significant strides in ensuring that these families feel connected, supported, and empowered, no matter where their service takes them.

The success stories and positive feedback from participants underscore the critical impact of Blue Star Families' work. Whether it's through supporting Hidden Helpers, facilitating new friendships and resource awareness, or offering a platform for self-care and mutual support, Blue Star Families has shown that a strong, supportive community is essential for the resilience and well-being of military and Veteran families.

As we continue to evolve and expand our programs to meet the changing needs of our communities, Blue Star Families remains a trusted ally and steadfast supporter for all caregivers within military and Veteran families. Our dedication ensures that no military-connected family has to navigate their journey alone, reinforcing our role as a cornerstone of support and empowerment within the military and Veteran community.

Policy recommendations

- Extend the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' ***Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC)***¹⁰ for Legacy Participants and Legacy Applicants through Sept. 30, 2025.
- Develop accommodations through the Department of Education for Hidden Helpers in K-12 and Higher Education settings to allow for caring of family members.
- Develop tax credits for caregivers to promote financial stability.
- Promote work environments that are supportive of caregivers.
 - A national campaign to address the stigma associated with caregiving to ensure employers and others are supportive of caregivers.
- Continue to conduct rigorous evaluations of those initiatives designed to support military and veteran caregivers.¹¹
- Continue to conduct research that fully captures the breadth of caregiving and those who serve as caregivers.¹²

¹⁰ <https://news.va.gov/115526/good-news-for-veterans-and-caregivers/>

¹¹Ramchand, R., Dalton, S., Dubowitz, T., Hyde, K., Malika, N., Morral, A.R., Ohana, E., Parks, V., Schell, T.L., Swabe, G., Trail, T.E., & Williams, K.M. (2024). America's military and Veteran caregivers: Hidden heroes emerging from the shadows. RAND Corporation.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3212-1.html

¹²Ramchand, R., Dalton, S., Dubowitz, T., Hyde, K., Malika, N., Morral, A.R., Ohana, E., Parks, V., Schell, T.L., Swabe, G., Trail, T.E., & Williams, K.M. (2024). America's military and Veteran caregivers: Hidden heroes emerging from the shadows. RAND Corporation.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3212-1.html

Thank you for holding this important hearing. Please use Blue Star Families as a resource when you consider this or other matters of concern to military and Veteran families.