



**Testimony of Brooke Blaalid  
Associate Director of Policy  
before the  
House Committee on Veterans Affairs  
hearing on  
“Strengthening the Transition Assistance Program: Exploring Outcomes to  
Improve the Transition to Civilian Life.”  
June 24, 2025**

Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on “Strengthening the Transition Assistance Program: Exploring Outcomes to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life.”

Blue Star Families is the nation’s largest military and veteran family support organization, with nearly 380,000 families in our membership and impacting more than 1.5 million military family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, Blue Star Families seeks to ensure that our military and veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive, wherever their service or post-service life takes them, in order to ensure military readiness, retention, and recruiting.

Blue Star Families’ research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) — developed in partnership with Syracuse University’s D’Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and fielded since 2009 — is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and veteran families, providing millions of data points to date. Data from the MFLS and other research by Blue Star Families has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities.

Blue Star Families maintains a nationwide footprint through 13 strategically located chapters, offering both virtual and in-person support to active-duty, Guard, Reserve, and veteran families. These chapters serve as trusted local hubs — delivering innovative

programs, hosting community events, and providing essential services that foster connection and belonging. By building bridges between military families and their local neighbors, institutions, and community organizations, we work to ensure that those who serve and their families are fully integrated into the communities where they live.

The last two years marked a significant milestone in our efforts to enhance the well-being of veteran and military families. Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, demonstrated extraordinary leadership and commitment by pledging \$100 million to address urgent issues such as mental health and suicide prevention, housing and homelessness, and food insecurity. Blue Star Families is deeply honored to be among the beneficiaries of Mr. Newmark's generosity, which includes a direct investment in the establishment of three to five new chapters and 25 **Blue Star Families Outposts**.

These new outposts will build upon our existing chapter infrastructure and expand our reach into additional communities. Through partnerships with local organizations, we will bring programs, services, and trusted resources even closer to where veterans and military families live. This expansion represents the power of public-private collaboration to strengthen communities, improve mental health outcomes, and create a more connected and resilient support network for those who serve.

At Blue Star Families, we recognize that behind every data point lies a deeply personal story. It is an honor to bring both evidence and lived experience to this discussion as we examine veteran suicide prevention and highlight the impact of our community-based initiative, *Blue Star Support Circles | Upstream Solutions to Crisis*. Our work is grounded in both rigorous data and the real-world voices of those affected — and we believe both are essential to informing effective policy solutions.

## **Veterans Transition Experiences**

The enduring collaboration between Blue Star Families and IVMF over the past decade has provided invaluable insights into the experiences of military and veteran families. Our annual MFLS has served as a powerful tool, unraveling the intricate tapestry of the transition and post-service life for veterans and their families.

One consistent and sobering revelation from the survey is the persistent challenge veterans face during their transition. In the most recent 2024 MFLS, approximately half of the veteran respondents described their overall transition as "difficult" or "very difficult."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Blue Star Families. 2025. "2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report."  
[https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSE\\_MFLS24\\_Comp\\_Report\\_Full-v2.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSE_MFLS24_Comp_Report_Full-v2.pdf)

This statistic underscores the profound and complex nature of the hurdles encountered by veterans as they navigate the shift from military to civilian life.

The Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is intended to serve as a foundational resource for service members as they prepare to separate from military service and reintegrate into civilian life. However, recent data indicates that TAP is underutilized and inconsistently effective among the veteran population.

According to the 2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, only 28% of veteran respondents reported using TAP resources and finding them helpful, while 23% reported using them but not finding them helpful, and a notable 49% did not use TAP resources at all during their transition.<sup>2</sup> Under current DoD policy, service members are eligible to begin TAP up to 12 months prior to separation, or up to 24 months prior to retirement, providing a meaningful window of opportunity to prepare for civilian life.<sup>3</sup> Despite this flexibility, the low engagement rates suggest a need to improve both awareness and relevance of the program to better meet the evolving needs of transitioning service members and their families.

While the actual timing of participation in TAP may vary among service members, the VA strongly advocates for an early engagement with the program. The rationale behind this encouragement lies in the belief that early participation equips transitioning service members with the necessary tools, information, and skills to make a successful and smoother transition into civilian life.

Insights from our 2023 MFLS shed light on the perceived preparedness of veterans for the military-to-civilian transition. We found that when veteran respondents have more time to get ready to separate from the military, they feel more prepared for a successful transition. Yet retired veteran respondents generally report more time to prepare than non-retired veterans with non-retired Veterans reporting "I did not or was not able to prepare for my transition."<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, a significant proportion of all veterans respondents, regardless of retirement status, had "less than a year before separating" despite the DoD and VA recommendations. Some of this may be due to unit mission and staffing demands, but it is important to consider from a sustainability perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Vergun, David. 2023. "Military Well Prepared for Civilian Transition." U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3561651/military-well-prepared-for-civilian-transition-official-says/>.

<sup>4</sup>Blue Star Families. 2024. "2023 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report." [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/BSF\\_MFLS\\_Comp\\_Report\\_Full\\_Digital.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/BSF_MFLS_Comp_Report_Full_Digital.pdf)

The quality of the military-to-civilian transition experience has a measurable impact on how veterans perceive their service — and critically, whether they would recommend military service to the next generation. The 2023 MFLS revealed a statistically significant difference in veterans' likelihood to recommend military service based on their transition experience. Veterans who reported a smooth transition were more likely to recommend service to a young person in their family ( $M = 6.90$ ,  $SD = 3.18$ ,  $n = 766$ ) compared to those who experienced a difficult transition ( $M = 6.13$ ,  $SD = 3.41$ ,  $n = 1,080$ ).<sup>5</sup>

These findings illuminate the broader implications of transition support — not only for individual well-being but also for the long-term sustainability of the All-Volunteer Force. Improving the transition experience may be a key factor in restoring confidence in military service and strengthening future recruitment pipelines.

This underscores the importance of effective transition programs and support mechanisms in not only facilitating a smoother shift to civilian life, but also in influencing veterans' perceptions of the overall value and benefits of military service. Early engagement with programs like TAP could support a smoother transition for veterans. By initiating the transition preparation process well in advance, veterans may be better equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to face the unique challenges associated with post-service life and, in turn, contribute positively to the perception and recommendation of military service to future generations.

## **Families' Experiences with Transition**

The transition from military to civilian life is often framed as an individual journey for the service member; however, in reality, the entire family undergoes this transition. Military spouses and children are deeply affected by the shift in structure, identity, and support systems that accompany separation from service.

Findings from our 2024 MFLS highlight this reality, with more than 60% of respondents reporting that they experienced the military-to-civilian transition as a military spouse.<sup>6</sup> These spouses often shoulder the emotional and logistical burden of the transition while supporting their service member and managing the needs of the household.

Moreover, additional research underscores the potential long-term consequences of this transition on family well-being. Military spouses who have undergone the transition have been shown to experience poorer mental health outcomes and diminished family relationship quality over time. Specifically, studies have identified increased symptoms of PTSD, declines in marital satisfaction, and greater work-family conflict from baseline to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Blue Star Families. 2025. "2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report." [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSE\\_MFLS24\\_Comp\\_Report\\_Full-v2.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSE_MFLS24_Comp_Report_Full-v2.pdf)

follow-up.<sup>7</sup> These outcomes suggest that the transition process can introduce or exacerbate stressors that affect the entire family unit — not just the service member.

Military spouses play a vital and often underrecognized role in sustaining the well-being and stability of the military family unit, particularly during and after the transition to civilian life. They frequently serve as the primary caregivers for both children and veterans — especially when physical injuries, psychological trauma, or service-related health conditions are present. This caregiving role becomes even more critical when veterans are managing the aftereffects of combat exposure,<sup>8</sup> which can introduce complex challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or chronic pain.

Families in which the service member has been exposed to combat are significantly more likely to encounter difficulties during the reintegration process. These difficulties may include strained family relationships, disrupted communication, and an increased caregiving burden for spouses, all of which can undermine long-term family functioning and well-being.

Reintegration plays a foundational role in shaping how military families adapt to life after service.<sup>9</sup> The military-to-civilian transition requires the renegotiation of roles, routines, and family structures, as families shift away from the predictability and institutional support of military life. The success of this transition varies widely and is influenced by how effectively each family member — particularly the spouse — adapts to these new demands and responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

While the health and well-being of spouses play a critical role in the successful transition of service members, many spousal support services are discontinued at the point of separation — precisely when families may need them most.<sup>11</sup> Although TAP resources are technically available to spouses, they are often insufficiently marketed or tailored to their unique needs.<sup>12</sup> This gap in outreach and support leaves many spouses underprepared for the challenges of military-to-civilian transition.

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<sup>7</sup> Corry, Nida H., Rayan Joneydi, Hope S. McMaster, Christianna S. Williams, Shirley Glynn, Christopher Spera, and Valerie A. Stander. 2022. "Families Serve Too: Military Spouse Well-Being after Separation from Active-Duty Service." *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping* 35 (5): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2022.2038788>.

<sup>8</sup> Pflieger, Jacqueline C., Cynthia A. LeardMann, Hope S. McMaster, Carrie J. Donoho, and Lyndon A. Riviere. 2018. "The Impact of Military and Nonmilitary Experiences on Marriage: Examining the Military Spouse's Perspective." *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 31 (5): 719–29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22321>.

<sup>9</sup> O'Neal, Catherine Walker, and Justin A. Lavner. 2021. "Military-Related Stress and Family Well-Being among Active Duty Army Families." *Family Relations* 70 (4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12561>.

<sup>10</sup> Elnitsky, Christine A., Cara L. Blevins, Michael P. Fisher, and Kathryn Magruder. 2017. "Military Service Member and Veteran Reintegration: A Critical Review and Adapted Ecological Model." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 87 (2): 114–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000244>.

<sup>11</sup> Graham, Emily. 2024. "The US Military Does Not Adequately Prepare Members for Transition from Service." <https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1251&context=lerner>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

These findings reinforce the need for holistic transition support strategies that include spouses and family members — not only as caregivers, but as individuals with their own unique transition-related needs. Recognizing and addressing the unique role of military spouses and the broader family unit is essential to a comprehensive approach to transition support. A successful transition is not solely defined by the veteran’s employment or benefits access, but also by the family’s ability to remain connected, stable, and supported as they navigate the shift to civilian life.

## Family Support Circles | Transition Together

Throughout TAP training, the potential psychological impacts of transitioning from military to civilian life are largely overlooked.<sup>13</sup> Many service members report a profound sense of loss — of family, community, and purpose — following military separation.<sup>14</sup> However, TAP often approaches transition as a career shift rather than a transformation of identity, leaving veterans underprepared for the emotional challenges that may arise.<sup>15</sup>

During the separation process, veterans and their families consistently report feeling overwhelmed and stressed, despite the availability of numerous resources.<sup>16,17</sup> A primary challenge lies in identifying their specific needs and navigating the complex landscape of programs and organizations to find appropriate support.<sup>18</sup>

In the 2024 MFLS, veteran respondents identified “discussions with peers” — including conversations with colleagues, neighbors, and friends — as one of the most frequently used and effective methods for seeking and obtaining information about available resources with 42% reporting this method was helpful.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to understanding which resources are utilized during the military-to-civilian transition, it is equally important to examine how those resources are discovered. Among veteran respondents who reported using resources during separation (n=610), the majority (54%) indicated that they identified these resources through peer-to-peer interactions, underscoring the critical role of informal networks in facilitating access to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Wounded Warrior Project. 2025. “Strategies for a Smoother Transition from Military Service.”

<https://newsroom.woundedwarriorproject.org/Strategies-for-a-Smoother-Transition-from-Military-Service>

<sup>17</sup> Markowitz, Fred E., Sara Kintzle, and Carl A. Castro. 2022. “Military-To-Civilian Transition Strains and Risky Behavior among Post-9/11 Veterans.” *Military Psychology* 35 (1): 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2022.2065177>.

<sup>18</sup> Kleykamp, Meredith, Jeffrey B Wenger, Elizabeth Hastings Roer, Matthew Kubasak, and Travis Hubble. 2024. “Federal Programs to Assist Military-To-Civilian Employment Transitions.” RAND.

[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1363-12.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html).

<sup>19</sup> Blue Star Families. 2025. “2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.”

[https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSF\\_MFLS24\\_Comp\\_Report\\_Full-v2.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSF_MFLS24_Comp_Report_Full-v2.pdf)

support services.<sup>20</sup>

Given the clear gap in emotional, psychological, and overall family support during the transition process — and the demonstrated value of peer-to-peer connections — there is a critical need for programs that center community, identity, and shared experience. Blue Star Families' *Family Support Circles | Transition Together* program directly addresses this need by offering structured, peer-based support for families navigating the military-to-civilian transition. This innovative initiative recognizes that the transition is not just a professional shift, but a profound personal and familial transformation. By equipping participants with psychoeducation, peer connection, and practical tools, the program provides an upstream, community-rooted model that complements TAP and strengthens the overall transition ecosystem.

## **Core Components of the Program**

### *Family Transition Workshops*

As part of a comprehensive approach to military-to-civilian transition, Family Transition Workshops can offer vital support to service members and their families by fostering emotional wellness, strengthening interpersonal dynamics, and encouraging a proactive outlook on civilian life. These workshops could include the following core components:

- **Mindfulness and Stress Management:** Introduce evidence-based techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation to help families reduce stress and manage the emotional uncertainty that often accompanies transition.
- **Strengthening Communication:** Provide practical exercises aimed at enhancing communication among spouses and family members. These sessions help cultivate empathy, patience, and understanding as familial roles and expectations evolve post-service.
- **Goal Setting and Vision Building:** Support families in identifying and articulating shared goals for their civilian lives. This may include developing a “family mission statement” to promote unity, purpose, and a positive forward-looking perspective.

These workshops reflect an upstream, family-centered model that acknowledges the broader impact of transition and empowers military families to navigate change with confidence and resilience.

### *Peer Support Groups*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

Peer support groups are a vital component of promoting mental health, fostering resilience, and enhancing social integration during the military-to-civilian transition. These groups — organized separately for service members, spouses, and children — create safe, inclusive environments where participants can share experiences, express concerns, and receive guidance from trained peer facilitators. Tailored group sessions may include:

- **Managing Role Changes:** Assist spouses in navigating evolving family dynamics and responsibilities as the service member reintegrates into the home, helping to reduce tension and promote stability.
- **Building New Routines:** Provide practical strategies and peer-driven insights on creating consistent daily routines that reflect new employment, education, or community schedules — strengthening a sense of predictability and support across the household.
- **Coping with Change:** Equip children and adolescents with age-appropriate tools to process and adapt to the changes associated with a parent's separation from service, ensuring their emotional well-being is not overlooked.

By leveraging the power of shared experience and trusted peer connections, these groups serve as a critical supplement to formal services, addressing the emotional and relational dimensions of transition often missed in traditional programs.

### *Community-Building Activities*

The loss of established social networks following separation from military service can lead to feelings of isolation for both service members and their families. To address this challenge, community-building activities are essential for fostering connection, belonging, and resilience during the transition to civilian life. Suggested initiatives include:

- **Social Events and Family Outings:** Organize family-friendly outdoor experiences and community gatherings to encourage exploration, recreation, and bonding. Initiatives such as “outdoor adventure boxes” can promote accessible engagement with nature, while community service projects create opportunities for families to connect with neighbors and strengthen local ties through shared purpose.
- **Buddy Program:** Establish a peer mentorship initiative that pairs transitioning families with those who have successfully navigated the shift to civilian life. This informal model provides practical guidance and emotional support, helping families build confidence and connection through shared lived experience.

These community-based efforts promote social integration and reduce the sense of disconnection that often accompanies transition, reinforcing the importance of relational support as a core component of successful reintegration.



## *Resource Navigation Hub – Blue Star Neighborhood*

One of the persistent challenges facing families after separation from military service is the lack of awareness and access to available resources. To address this gap, the Blue Star Neighborhood would serve as a centralized Resource Navigation Hub, offering streamlined access to nonclinical wellness tools, practical support, and community connections. Key components of the program include:

- **Digital Resource Portal:** A user-friendly, centralized platform where families can access a wide range of resources, including:
  - Financial planning tools to support long-term stability.
  - Employment workshops and webinars to assist with career transitions.
  - Continuing education opportunities for spouses and veterans.
  - Self-care resources, including toolkits that promote holistic wellness through exercise, nutrition, and sleep hygiene
- **Community Support Networks:** The Neighborhood would also help families locate and engage with local veteran-serving organizations, recreational activities, and community groups — strengthening social ties and fostering a sense of belonging in their new civilian environments.

By consolidating critical information and reducing the complexity of navigating post-service life, this model empowers military families to access the tools and support they need to thrive.

The military-to-civilian transition is one of the most critical — and vulnerable — periods in the life of a military family. While existing programs like TAP provide important career-focused resources, they often fall short in addressing the emotional, relational, and identity-based challenges that service members and their families face during this time. As our research and experience show, families are not just passive observers of transition — they are active participants who also carry the weight of change.

Blue Star Families' *Family Support Circles | Transition Together* program fills a crucial gap by offering a comprehensive, upstream approach rooted in community, peer connection, and proactive wellness. Through family transition workshops, peer support groups, community-building activities, and a centralized resource navigation hub, this program meets families where they are — emotionally, socially, and geographically.

We urge Congress to act this year to improve the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) by formally including families as a core part of the transition process. Successful reintegration is not solely about securing employment or accessing benefits — it is about strengthening family resilience, preventing isolation, and ensuring the long-term

well-being of those who have served and the loved ones who have served alongside them. By modernizing TAP to be family-centered, Congress has the opportunity to make a lasting investment in the health, stability, and continued success of our veteran families.

On behalf of Blue Star Families and the communities we serve, thank you for your commitment to bridging the gap and ensuring that every veteran and their family has access to the resources, support, and hope they need to thrive.

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you once again for the opportunity to share the work and insights of Blue Star Families in support of our nation's veterans and their families.