



**Testimony of Lindsay Knight, PhD**  
**Chief Impact Officer, Blue Star Families**  
before a  
**Joint Hearing of the**  
**House Committee on Veterans Affairs**  
**and**  
**Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs**  
**February 24, 2026**

Chairmen Moran and Bost, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Takano, and distinguished Members of the committees, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Blue Star Families' critical 2026 priorities.

Blue Star Families is the nation's largest military and Veteran family support organization. Its research-driven approach builds strong communities with a focus on innovative and data-informed solutions. Our goal is to enable military-connected families to thrive in the communities they call home. Since its founding in 2009, BSF has delivered more than \$336 million in benefits, counts over 440,000 members, and supports more than 1.5 million people annually through an expansive network of chapters and outposts – 33% of our membership base is comprised of Veterans, Veteran spouses, and Veteran family members.

Blue Star Families envisions a world where every military and Veteran family feels welcome and thrives by connecting to a vibrant network of support in communities where they live and serve to strengthen our nation.

The United States military is the most talented and committed fighting force the world has ever known. But the strength of that force rests not only in those who wear the uniform, it rests in their families, the quiet pillars who uphold our nation's promise of security, stability, prosperity, and freedom. Military families carry the weight of service alongside their loved ones, and too often, their sacrifices and challenges go unseen.

Blue Star Families was created to change that. From the start, we have built our work by going directly to military and Veteran families: asking about their lives, listening closely, and

responding in ways that matter. That approach has guided our growth from a small grassroots network into the nation's largest nonprofit dedicated to military and Veteran families.

## **Chapters & Outposts**

Blue Star Families maintains a robust nationwide footprint through strategically located regional Chapters. Our 14 Chapter locations, which we expect to expand to 24 by the end of 2027, offer both in-person and virtual support to active-duty, Guard, Reserve, and Veteran families. Chapters serve as trusted local hubs, delivering innovative programs, hosting community events, and providing essential services that are vital to fostering connection and belonging. In 2025, Veterans and their family members made up 22% of attendees at our chapter-based caregiver events and 11% of our chapter-based outdoors programming. By actively building bridges between military and Veteran families and their local neighbors, institutions, and community organizations, we ensure that those who are serving and have served feel a sense of belonging in and support from their local communities.

With the generous support of Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, Blue Star Families has established a growing network of 20 Outposts—with a goal to expand to 48 by the end of 2027. Outposts are trusted local organizations that receive small grants from Blue Star Families, and in return bring Blue Star Families-aligned programs, best practices, and support to military and Veteran families in locations where Chapters are not yet present. Outpost organizations are as diverse as the needs of military and Veteran families and we're proud to include organizations specializing in arts and culture, workforce development, mental health and wellness, and even a locally owned grocery store among our Outposts. These incredible partners work with Blue Star Families to ensure that families feel seen, supported, and connected in their own communities.

## **Programs**

Blue Star Families' suite of national programs supports the wellbeing and belonging of military families from first duty stations through life as a Veteran family. Our programming—which includes coffee connections and one-off drop-in events, career and workforce development for military and Veteran spouses, outdoor engagement for family resiliency, childhood literacy, museum access, caregiver support, and suicide-prevention efforts—is built on the premise that a holistic support system and upstream solutions to crises are the best ways to improve quality of life and increase positive outcomes for military and Veteran families.

As our Veteran membership has grown, so has Veteran participation in our national programs. Veterans and Veteran spouses account for over 20% of our participating members in Blue Star Careers. A resounding 51% of participants in our Blue Star Caregivers program identified themselves as Veteran spouses. All of our participants in our Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide

Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP), “Support Circles,” consist of Veterans or Veteran-connected supporters and family members. Blue Star Families is here for all of our military-connected families — active-duty, Guard, Reserve, and Veteran.

### **Blue Star Family Applied Research and Evaluation**

Blue Star Families' research highlights the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and Veteran families. Our flagship effort, the 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, most comprehensive survey of military and Veteran families, totaling over 113,000 respondents to-date and providing millions of data points. In our most recent national survey, the 2025 MFLS, which fielded between May 14 and June 30, 2025, there were 6,127 total respondents. Of those, 33% (n=2,034) identified as Veterans and 13% (n=812) as spouses or domestic partners of Veterans.<sup>1</sup> This rigorous scholarship, alongside other Blue Star Families’ research, is currently used at every level of government to inform policy decisions impacting our military-connected communities. In partnership with members of Congress, our MFLS data has provided clarity on the scope and size of the Veteran suicide crisis, and led to over 40+ Quality of Life wins in the 2025 NDAA for active duty service members and families. Since 2009, our research has gathered honest, trusted feedback from 150k+ active duty and Veteran connected families—filling the gap left by DoD and VA surveys and influencing systemic change. This research has resulted in Blue Star Families publishing more than 70 reports since 2009.

In addition to extensive in-house evaluation, in 2025, Blue Star Families worked with QV Health Solutions (QVHS) to determine the long-term cost savings of a select number of evidence-based national programs that deliver substantial health and economic value while improving family wellbeing. As we have three years of data on the outcomes and impact of our SSG Fox SPGP, we included this pilot in the analysis.

Blue Star Support Circles | Upstream Solutions to Crisis, generously funded by the VA’s Staff SSG Fox SPGP, was evaluated for long-term cost savings and will be extensively discussed in a succeeding section as a critical 2026 legislative priority.

Blue Star Families honors the deeply personal stories behind our data, bringing both evidence and lived experience to supporting the military and Veteran quality of life. Our 2026 legislative priorities center the Veteran with a whole-family approach to the military transition and upstream solutions to Veteran mental health crises.

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<sup>1</sup> Blue Star Families. 2026. “2025 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.” [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/2025-MFLS\\_Findings\\_Full-Report.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/2025-MFLS_Findings_Full-Report.pdf)

## 2026 Legislative Priorities

### **Transition Assistance Program and the *Building Readiness and Integration for Dependents Going to Civilian Environments Act***

MFLS data has provided valuable insights into the transition into post-service life for Veterans and their families. One sobering revelation is the persistent challenge Veterans face during their transition. In the 2025 MFLS, 58% (n=1,066) of Veteran respondents described their overall transition from military to civilian life as “difficult” or “very difficult,” and 44% (n=805) found it more difficult than expected.<sup>2</sup>

The Department of Defense’s (DoD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is intended to serve as a foundational resource for service members as they prepare to separate from military service. Recent data indicates that TAP is underutilized and inconsistently effective. According to the 2024 MFLS, 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 during their transition.<sup>3</sup> Low engagement rates suggest a need to improve both awareness and relevance of the program to better meet the evolving needs of transitioning Veterans and their families.

Recent MFLS data demonstrates that preparedness for the military-to-civilian transition is linked to Veterans’ sense of belonging and financial wellness, highlighting potential long-term impacts of transition experiences. 68% (n=494) of Veteran respondents who had felt prepared for their transition also said they felt a sense of belonging to their current community, compared to 38% who felt unprepared (n=316).<sup>4</sup> Of Veteran family respondents who reported a “difficult” transition process, 39% (n=523) indicated they were currently “just getting by” or “finding it difficult to get by” financially.<sup>5</sup> Enhanced transition support has broad implications, extending beyond the individual well-being of service members to the long-term health and stability of Veteran families.

### **Families’ Experiences with Transition**

The transition from military to civilian life is not just a personal journey for the service member—it is a profound change experienced by the entire family. Military spouses and children

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<sup>2</sup> Blue Star Families and Institute for Veterans and Military Families. 2026. “2025 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Veteran Families in the 2025 MFLS; Community, Transition Needs, and Family Financial Situation.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</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)

<sup>5</sup> Blue Star Families and Institute for Veterans and Military Families. 2026. “2025 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Veteran Families in the 2025 MFLS; Community, Transition Needs, and Family Financial Situation.”

are significantly impacted by the shifts in identity, support systems, organizational structures, and oftentimes financial stability that occur when a service member separates from service.

Military spouses are critical to the stability and well-being of the military family. This is especially true during and after the shift to civilian life. Spouses are frequently the primary caregivers for both children and the Veteran, a responsibility that increases significantly if the Veteran experiences service-related issues such as physical injuries or psychological trauma. This caregiving role becomes even more critical when Veterans are managing the aftereffects of combat exposure,<sup>6</sup> which can introduce complex challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and chronic pain. This can lead to difficulties such as strained relationships, communication breakdowns, and an increased caregiving burden for spouses, all of which negatively impact long-term family wellbeing.

Reintegration plays a foundational role in shaping how military families adapt to life after service.<sup>7</sup> The military-to-civilian transition requires the renegotiation of roles, routines, and family structures, as families shift away from the institutional support and demands of military life. The success of this transition varies widely and is influenced by how effectively each family member adapts to these new demands and responsibilities.<sup>8</sup>

The successful transition of a service member is significantly influenced by the health and wellbeing of their spouse. However, many support services for spouses cease at the time of separation, which is often when families require them most.<sup>9</sup> Although TAP resources are available to spouses, they are often insufficiently marketed to spouses or tailored to their unique needs.<sup>10</sup> This gap in outreach and support leaves many spouses underprepared for the challenges of military-to-civilian transition.

Successful military-to-civilian transitions depend on comprehensive support strategies that recognize the unique needs of Veteran family members, not just in their capacity as caregivers, but as individuals navigating a significant transition themselves. A true measure of a successful transition extends beyond the Veteran's employment or access to benefits. It is reflected in the

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<sup>6</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>7</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>8</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>9</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>10</sup> Ibid

family's stability, wellbeing, and connection to their community as they establish their new life as a Veteran family.

Blue Star Families calls on Congress to enact the *Building Readiness and Integration for Dependents Going to Civilian Environments Act* sponsored by Sen. Alex Padilla (D-CA) and Reps. Sanford Bishop (D-GA) and Jen Kiggans (R-VA). The measure would establish a three-year pilot project at four US military bases, including one OCONUS, where national organizations serving the military and Veteran community, selected by the DoD, would coordinate the extension of military transition services to military families.

Under the program, the participating organizations would identify military families who are within two years of transitioning to civilian life and provide those families with resources, training, and neighborhood connection support on an ongoing basis. Programming would include peer-led support groups, resilience workshops, and a digital resource hub focused on emotional wellness, practical life skills, and community reintegration for spouses, children, and caregivers. They would track the progress of those families, and a comprehensive report on the program would be submitted by the DoD to Congress within six months of completion of the pilot.

### ***Blue Star Support Circles | Upstream Solutions to Crisis and the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Program***

Addressing Veteran suicide is a moral duty to those who have bravely served and sacrificed for our country. The persistent, high rate of suicide among Veterans is a stark indicator of the profound, often hidden, difficulties they face when transitioning to civilian life. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), suicide is the second-leading cause of death among Veterans under the age of 45 years old,<sup>11</sup> who are “1.5 times more likely to die by suicide than their nonveteran” peers.<sup>12</sup> In the 2025 MFLS, 11% of veteran respondents reported having seriously considered suicide within the last year, and 25% of Veteran respondents reported having a friend or family member who expressed suicidal thoughts, had a suicide attempt, or died by suicide in the 12 months prior to survey fielding.<sup>13</sup> These figures underscore the immediate necessity for sustained and coordinated efforts. We must address the complex factors contributing to Veteran suicide and ensure that every Veteran receives timely, effective, and compassionate support.

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<sup>11</sup> Office of Suicide Prevention. (2024). *2024 National Veteran suicide prevention annual report*. US Department of Veterans Affairs. [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2024/2024-Annual-Report-Part-2-of-2\\_508.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2024/2024-Annual-Report-Part-2-of-2_508.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> DeAngelis, T. (2022). Veterans are at higher risk for suicide. Psychologists are helping them tackle their unique struggles. *American Psychological Association*. 53 (8), 56. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/preventing-Veteran-suicide>

<sup>13</sup> Blue Star Families, “2025 Military Family Lifestyle Survey.” Unpublished data, 2026.

In 2022, Blue Star Families was awarded funding by the VA under the SSG Fox SPGP, established under the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019*. We extend our gratitude to Chairman Moran and members of the committees for your leadership in developing and enacting this landmark legislation, which honored Veterans' sacrifices and prioritized comprehensive Veteran suicide prevention. Through the SSG Fox SPGP, Blue Star Families has facilitated two innovative upstream solutions to the Veteran mental health crisis: Blue Star Support Circles and the Combat the Silence Campaign.

The Combat the Silence Campaign tackles the persistent stigma surrounding mental health among military and Veteran populations, seeking to normalize conversations about mental health, encourage help-seeking behaviors, and increase awareness of available resources. From October 1, 2024, to March 31, 2025, the campaign significantly extended awareness and engagement across military-connected communities, reaching an estimated 5.6 Million people through broadcast media, social media, and Blue Star Families' YouTube channel. The Emmy Award-winning Combat the Silence campaign raised awareness, reduced stigma, and connected military families to supportive resources.

Through the SSG Fox SPGP, Blue Star Families also operates Blue Star Support Circles | Upstream Solutions to Crisis. Through this innovative, community-based suicide prevention program, we prioritize Veterans who are at risk of suicide by ensuring their friends and family members can recognize and understand signs, and intervene before a Veteran's struggle becomes a crisis.

We recognize that Veterans and their family members act as critical extensions of the mental health care ecosystem in the Veteran community. By equipping these trusted individuals with appropriate education, enabling them to recognize mental health signs and symptoms and engage in supportive dialogue, they can play a meaningful role in early identification and intervention, significantly enhancing our collective response.

While this non-clinical approach does not replace critical clinical mental health care—it is a critical approach in strengthening the communities that Veterans are embedded in, and (now) a proven way to get resources into the hands of those communities and support networks to preempt crises. Blue Star Families firmly believes that empowering loved ones to step in to support Veterans can address a growing mental health concern before it becomes a suicide crisis.

This program offers facilitated, non-clinical, closed-group cohorts for Veterans and Veteran supporters. Over eight weeks, participants engage in virtual sessions designed to foster peer-based connections, deliver evidence-based training, and provide resources and referrals. The program empowers participants to effectively support Veterans.

Blue Star Families has partnered with experts in the field such as PsychArmor, American Red Cross, Spiritune, Veterans Yoga Project, and Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), to provide world-class, relevant and actionable strategies and techniques to recognize, address, and intervene before an issue becomes a crisis. In addition to education and peer support, participants receive tangible tools—such as lockboxes for lethal means safety—and work with facilitators to develop personalized crisis plans.

To date, 181 individuals, including 43 Veterans, have completed an eight week cohort. Our program was externally validated by the University of Alabama, and participants demonstrated though pre- and post-surveys statistically significant improvements in their capacity to help others experiencing suicidal thoughts and their self-efficacy to intervene. Our participants showed a marked improvement in participants' attitudes towards suicide prevention (from 4.3% to 13%), increased confidence in discussing suicide (from 55.3% to 73.9%), enhanced knowledge of appropriate language and resources, and significantly imparted skills to mitigate risk factors for loved ones who might be having thoughts of suicide. Additionally, the share of participants indicating that all firearms were stored locked and unloaded increased from 30% to 43%, suggesting improved safe storage practices among firearm owners.

The BSF Support Circle program is creating a shift in how people think about suicide prevention, increasing what they feel they can do to prevent suicide, and provides participants with a valued sense of community and support for families of veterans regarding suicide awareness and prevention.

Veteran suicide prevention is not only a moral imperative—it also saves VA healthcare resources. The economic analysis that we conducted with QVHS in 2025 projects that Support Circles generate healthcare and economic costs savings 17 times greater than program costs—a \$13,247 net cost savings per cohort participant.<sup>14</sup> Participants show measurable PHQ-9 depression improvements, reducing MDD-related healthcare costs (estimated \$6,429 annually per person) and preventing costly emergency visits and psychiatric hospitalizations. For Veterans with severe depression completing crisis response plans, a 76% reduction in suicide attempts translate to \$14,681 in avoided attempt-related healthcare and productivity-related economic costs per prevented attempt.<sup>15</sup>

Notably, among the 100 grants awarded by the VA in 2022, Blue Star Families' program was the only one selected to utilize a holistic approach to readiness for Veterans and their families. Through participation in Support Circles, Veteran family members learn to identify and respond to the health, environmental, and historical factors that put Veterans at greatest risk. By

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<sup>14</sup> QV Health Solutions, "Value Analysis of Blue Star Families Programs: Quantifying Health and Economic Impact." Unpublished Analysis, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

supporting those closest to our Veterans, we are expanding the reach of our nation's suicide prevention strategy and building a stronger, more resilient support network for our Veterans.

### ***Current Status / Funding***

As we enter Year 4 of the SSG Fox SPGP, our focus sharpens on engaging at-risk veterans who are experiencing or are at risk for a mental health crisis. Building upon the previous years' successes, this year we will work even more closely with our local chapter and outpost locations to identify veterans who may be disconnected from the support they need. These individuals may not yet be connected to clinical services or may face significant barriers to access, including geographic isolation, financial hardship, or lack of awareness about available resources.

Our program offers a peer support, non-clinical model that empowers veterans to help themselves while providing them with the tools, resources, and training to intervene with others they may know who are in crisis. This model aligns with social determinants of health, recognizing that veterans' well-being is shaped by a combination of social, environmental, and economic factors. By addressing these broader determinants, such as social isolation and lack of community support, our approach helps reduce barriers to care and supports veterans in creating meaningful connections.

Blue Star Families appreciates the extensive work your two committees have done to extend the program past the original three-year pilot legislation through 2026, and we call on you both to work together to extend the program for at least another three years, and then to work toward a long-term authorization for the most successful programs.

### **Pass the Major Richard Star Act (H.R. 2102/S. 1032) - End the Wounded Veteran Tax**

Blue Star Families is a new and committed member of The Military Coalition, comprising 35 organizations representing more than 5.5 million members of the uniformed services—active, reserve, retired, survivors, Veterans—and their families. It remains a top priority of ours to finally pass the *Major Richard Star Act*.

As many of you know, the bill will allow 52,000 combat-injured medically-retired Veterans to receive their earned retirement pay and disability compensation without offset. The DoD is responsible for retired pay, and the VA is responsible for disability compensation. These are different payments for different purposes and not “double dipping.” Reducing DoD retirement pay due to a combat injury breaks faith with those who serve our country now and those who will in the future.

The *Star Act* has 315 House and 77 Senate cosponsors. That is three quarters of Congress, and it could pass today if brought to the floor on each side of the Capitol.

A key finding in our MFLS tells us that the percentage of our active-duty family survey respondents who are willing to recommend military service has nosedived from 55% in 2016 to 37% (n=866) in 2025.<sup>16</sup> For the health and well-being of our All-Volunteer Military Force, we need to set an example by taking care of those who need it most by passing the *Major Richard Star Act*, and other measures to improve the lives of our military and Veterans.

Chairmen Moran and Bost, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Takano, and distinguished Members of the committees, thank you once again for inviting Blue Star Families to provide our priorities, views, and research. I am happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>16</sup> Blue Star Families and Institute for Veterans and Military Families. 2026. “2025 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Veteran Families in the 2025 MFLS; Community, Transition Needs, and Family Financial Situation.”