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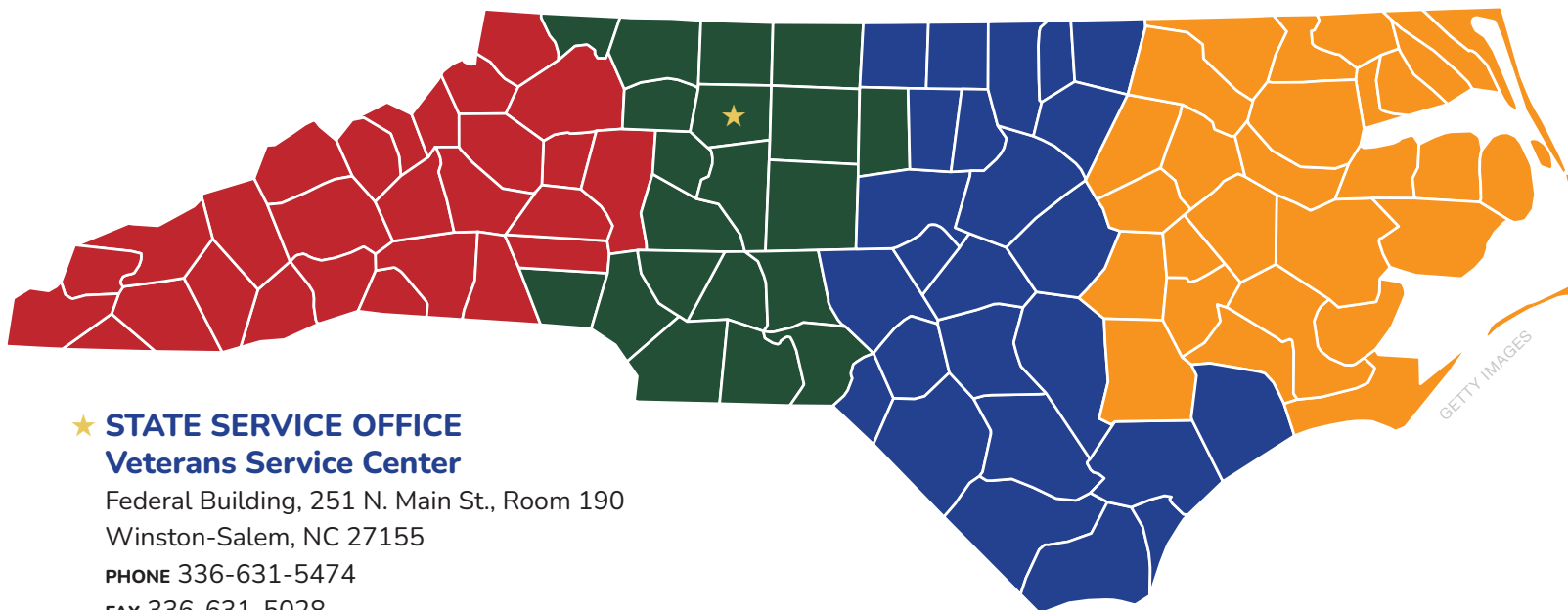
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NC4VETS

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DIVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH, DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, AND SUBSTANCE USE SERVICES AND THE GOVERNOR'S INSTITUTE

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NC DMH/DD/SUS DIRECTOR KELLY CROSBIE



My father's military service during Vietnam was the single most defining event in my family's life. Like many veterans' children, I

was incredibly proud of my dad's service and would name him as my hero every time we wrote that essay in school. But what I didn't understand—what I had no words for—was his deep sadness, his anxiety and paranoia, his isolation, his anger.

I didn't realize then that the war had shaped him into the man he became—the father and husband he was. I've been told that the man who went to Vietnam was not the same man who came back. He was in his early twenties, with a young wife and children, trying to balance the weight of his experiences with the responsibilities of work and family. But he didn't have the tools to cope with his emotions or nightmares.

As I grew older, I learned to name his behaviors and symptoms. I began to understand that what I had experienced

wasn't necessarily 'normal.' My own anxiety, my hyper-vigilance, my tendency to see the world as threatening and fearful—these were things I learned from him. His trauma became my trauma. It became our family's trauma.

My dad needed help. His family needed help. We ask so much of our military members and their loved ones. War and service change lives in ways that cannot be undone. The least we can do is honor their sacrifices to the fullest extent possible.

That means ensuring they have access to a trauma-informed, empathetic, and easy-to-navigate system of mental health and substance use care—one that supports not only active military and veterans but also their families. That's part of our mission every day at the Department of Health and Human Services.

GOVERNOR'S INSTITUTE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR DR. SARA MCEWEN



The Governor's Institute is proud to stand alongside the many organizations and individuals dedicated to supporting North Carolina's Service Members, Veterans, and their Families. For over 30 years, our mission has been to advance health and well-being by focusing on substance use disorder and addiction medicine, while fostering innovation, education, and collaboration across the healthcare and behavioral health fields.

We recognize that the challenges faced by service members and veterans often extend to their loved ones. Families play a pivotal role in providing care and support, and they too need resources and recognition for their efforts.

Through the Governor's Institute's partnerships with state and community organizations, we strive to address the unique needs of this population by training healthcare providers to better understand military culture, promoting programs like the NC Governor's Working Group, and bridging the gap between evidence-based research and practice. This includes education on best practices, the development of tools for healthcare professionals, and strengthening collaboration among key stakeholders to ensure North Carolina remains a national leader in supporting its military community.

Thank you for taking an interest in the stories and initiatives that highlight this vital work.

NC4VETS

At NC4Vets, our mission is to connect service members, veterans, and their families with federal, state, and local resources to ensure access to services and supports that facilitate health and wellbeing. While we do not provide direct care, our commitment is to create the shortest path to the best services available, supporting those in military service and those returning from service to our country and ensuring that NC remains the nation's most veteran-friendly state.



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Leo William Sliney and Samantha Sliney found a solution to their childcare challenges by hiring a nanny. The children, from left, are Leo William Sliney, Jr., Alek and Drew McKenna. A fourth child is due in June, Samantha says. (Photo courtesy of the Sliney family.)

FINDING CHILDCARE FOR SERVICE MEMBERS IS A GROWING PROBLEM

As more daycare centers close in North Carolina, military families search for solutions to find – and pay for – means to support school-age dependents.

FAYETTEVILLE – Among the many challenges facing military families today is how to take care of their children, and organizations such as NC4VETS, which is part of the North Carolina Governor’s Working Group, are helping in the search for solutions.

The collective mission of the NCGWG is to

focus on the needs of active-duty members, veterans and their families. And a conference in January – the North Carolina Military Community Childcare Summit 2025 – brought together thought leaders from the military, government and civilian worlds to discuss what is being done to address the childcare challenge.

“We used to have base nurseries,” recalled Heidi Welch, a 34-year Department of Defense veteran who spoke about the continuing evolution of the military childcare solution. But now there are educational programs for what one speaker called “the

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precious cargo” of those children.

A huge number of military families face the childcare challenge. 46% of active-duty spouses have children under 6 living at home, according to a 2021 survey from MilitaryOne Source.

“Child development centers not having the capacity to support dependents, leaving us struggling to find not only safe childcare but also affordable care. This puts undue stress on both the service member as well as spouses,” one survey respondent said.

How children are taught and cared for is among the most worrisome challenges for families, whether one or both spouses are active duty.

“The top concern for active-duty spouses continues to be military spouse employment with military pay, time away from family due to service, housing affordability, and children’s education rounding out the top five concerns,” reports the latest Military Family Lifestyle Survey from Blue Star Families, an organization focused on supporting the U.S. military.

(The survey has been conducted annually since 2009.)

But many of those can’t find – or can’t afford – care.

The challenges facing military families are worsened by the fact that across North Carolina finding childcare and also care that is affordable is costing the state’s economy more than \$5 billion a year, according to a recent study from the N.C. Chamber.

More than 200 daycare centers across the state have closed since the COVID pandemic in 2020, adds a report from EdNC.

And a study from the NC Rural Center says the data classifies North Carolina as a “childcare desert.”

TOP 5 REASONS NOT CURRENTLY EMPLOYED ACTIVE-DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS WHO NEED CHILDCARE IN ORDER TO WORK:

- Child care is too expensive, 64%
- My service member’s daily work schedule is too unpredictable, 51%
- My service member’s daily work schedule is too long, 44%
- Child care is unavailable or the wait-list is too long, 43%
- My take-home pay would be so low that working does not seem worth the effort, 40%

“On average, five families compete for every one licensed childcare spot in North Carolina, qualifying the state as a childcare desert, according to the North Carolina Early Education Coalition,” the report says.

“Even when families find available childcare, affordability is another challenge. Affordable childcare should cost no more than 7 percent of a family’s income, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ standard. Using that standard, only 12.4 percent of North Carolina families can afford infant care.”

A nanny may be an option

Samanta Sliney, who is married to a Special Forces officer and has transitioned from an Air Force Judge Advocate General role to the National Guard as well as a Pentagon civilian role, says the couple found a “nanny” option for their children.

“We have always used a nanny for our children. We landed on that option after our first because the Child Development Center (CDC) hours on base were not conducive to our work schedules,” Sliney says.

“We also felt this option provided more consistency for the kids. In 2023, the DoD rolled out a nanny pilot program that provided federal subsidies for dual working military families to offset the cost of care. We were one of the first families to use the program at Fort Bragg and have been using

that ever since.”

Employment for spouses is a challenge

If and when childcare options are found, military families face the challenge of paying for it.

Starting a new business is one option to provide needed money for family, says Kathleen Kent of Fayetteville who is married to a career-focused Army Major Brian Kent.

“It definitely has helped our finances at times and I appreciate how I can do more marketing when I want to do more business, but can take a break and focus on family when we’ve got a lot going on, whether that’s in our personal lives or because of Army demands,” she says.

“Part of the reason I initially started my business is because I was frustrated that I couldn’t find many opportunities to use my master’s in English. I love teaching, but it’s hard to get plugged in to college communities and snag a spot as an adjunct instructor while moving every couple of years. So I decided to figure out a way to be self-employed.”

A 2021 survey of spouses from MilitaryOne source found:

- 64% of civilian spouses are in the labor force (employed or unemployed/actively seeking work).



- 21% of civilian spouses are unemployed.
- Unemployed spouses spend an average of 19 weeks looking for work.

What about special needs children?

Military families with special needs children face challenges as well in care and education.

Help may be on the way. A new pilot initiative seeks to link Exceptional Family Member Programs, augmenting a 'Wrap-Around Care' initiative launched last fall at Camp Lejeune.

A Special Needs Inclusion Coordinator position was created to lead special education and early intervention services across seven installations in the Camp Lejeune area. A candidate has not yet been selected to fill the post, as of the deadline for this publication.

Kimberly Gipson, family care program manager for Marine & Family Programs at Marine Corps Community Services Lejeune-New River, told the North Carolina Military Community Childcare Summit 2025, that the position had been funded.

According to a Pentagon definition, such a coordinator "works to ensure that students with special needs are included in the classroom and can succeed academically and socially. They provide training and support to teachers, parents, and other

staff members."

Responsibilities include:

- **Develop programs:** Design and implement policies, programs, and strategies to create inclusive learning environments
- **Support staff:** Provide training and guidance to teachers and other staff members on how to modify their teaching methods and materials
- **Support students:** Ensure that students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are being met and that accommodations are in place
- **Coordinate with others:** Work with families, childcare providers, and community partners to ensure that students receive the support they need
- **Monitor progress:** Use assessment data to set goals and monitor students' progress
- **Manage resources:** Identify and manage resources to support students with special needs

Provision of services for special needs children is required under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

EFMP is a "mandatory enrollment program that works with other military and civilian

agencies to provide comprehensive and coordinated community support, housing, educational, medical, and personnel services to Families with special needs. Soldiers on active duty enroll in the program when they have a Family member with a physical, emotional, developmental, or intellectual disorder requiring specialized services so their needs can be considered in the military personnel assignment process. The overall goal of EFMP is to help Families accompany the Service member to the right duty locations, not to exclude them."

A program also is available at Fort Liberty.

'Wrap-Around Care' initiative

The coordinator position joins the launch of another pilot program at Camp Lejeune. "Wrap-Around Care" focuses on before-and-after school care. John Primary School was the site for the launch in 2024.

Wrap-Around Care is a collaborative solution developed between Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) and Marine Corps Community Service's (MCCS) Family Care Program using Johnson Primary School as a pilot site to bridge the gaps in these essential before-and-after school services, ensuring that all students receive the support they need," reported a news release from Camp Lejeune.

"These children are going to be served at a school for before-and-after care without any disruption in their day," Gipson said in the release. "They come to the school, they receive care, they go to the classrooms, they do their work, and they come back in the afternoon to receive additional care."

Helen Rogers, Child & Youth deputy administrator, added that the program is a win for families. "You think of the anxieties and stressors they have in their daily lives," she said. "This partnership with DoDEA speaks volumes about how we take the early learning needs of our children and well-being of our military-connected families very seriously."

DUTY, HONOR, COUNTRY IS NOT JUST A SLOGAN IN THE FAMILY HISTORY OF N.C.'S NEW VETERANS SECRETARY

Patriotism runs deeply among Jocelyn Mitnaul Mallette's extended clan – 153 years of service, in fact, stretching across Air Force, Army and Marine careers. "I am really honored to serve," she says. "I am so grateful for this opportunity; it's great to talk about generational service."

By Rick R. Smith

RALEIGH – Some people wear their hearts on their sleeves and salute when the national anthem plays. Some people's blood runs red, white and blue. In the family of Jocelyn Mitnaul Mallette, patriotism is more than a choice. It's family heritage.

Her voice is cheerful and sincere as she launches into an interview about how much the U.S. Armed Forces has meant to her grandfather, father, uncles, an aunt, and herself.

Mallette, chosen as North Carolina's Secretary of Military and Veterans Affairs by recently elected Gov. Josh Stein, thanks a reporter for asking about the family lineage.

"I am really honored to serve," she says. "I think it's important to serve. I am so grateful for this opportunity to talk about generational service."

An inquiry to the secretary's staff was triggered by a line in her official biography citing the fact she is "a third-generation service member." When Mallette received a request for more information about that point she launched a search of family history to see just how many relatives were veterans.

The results were a surprise.

"One hundred and fifty-three years of service," she says excitedly.

The secretary and nine family members answered the call of duty, honor, country.

Compiling a list, the secretary provided names, ranks and years of service that includes Air Force, Army and Marines. Since



Air Force was an all in the family affair for the Mitnaul clan: From left, Henry Mitnaul, his wife Teresa, son Justin and daughter Jocelyn. Jocelyn Mitnaul Mallette is North Carolina's Secretary of Military and Veterans Affairs. (Photo courtesy of the Mitnaul family.)

the Marines are part of the Navy, the only branches not included are the Coast Guard and the Space Force – which actually was spun out of the Air Force in 2019.

Having grown up with so many military people around her and based on her own career experiences, Mallette says she brings to the job as secretary a passion to help those who answer duty's call.

"Absolutely, absolutely," she says when asked if family influenced her job to accept the post in the Stein's cabinet. "I just feel like veterans deserve a lot from us, from the government collectively for the sacrifices they have made.

"Also, since I experienced these challenges myself and since I am a disabled veteran this job is very personal to me."

The Road to Air Force Academy

Her path to the Air Force began as a child, having a grandfather and father who both made the military a career. Her father Henry served in the Air Force for 30 years, retiring as a colonel. [Her parents live in Apex.] Such a career meant multiple duty stations for him – and plenty of different schools for the secretary as well as her brother Justin [a former Air Force pilot] and sister, who did not choose a military career.

"I remember when we were stationed in Germany we lived in a high-rise apartment and I could look out and see Dad walk home," she recalls. "We would get so excited. He was so proud. He'd always talk proudly about his service, and I just wanted a job that would make me feel that way.

"Also, my grandfather. He served 26 years in the Army and retired as First Sergeant [top non-commissioned rank in the Army]. At family gatherings he and my uncles and aunts were so proud of their service and the camaraderie that came from that service. Those were reasons I was so inspired."

All the duty stations for her father who she says focused on missiles led in a way to her desire to attend the Air Force Academy, Mallette explains.

"We were stationed at barren bases. If a missile accidentally exploded [the Air Force] didn't want anyone to get hurt," she recalls.

But the deployment in Germany did have a plus. "It's pretty cool to be a fifth grader and take a field trip to Switzerland," the secretary

says with a chuckle.

Postings included the Pentagon, Kansas, Nebraska, Alabama, Germany - and Colorado.

"That's where my Air Force journey began," she says. "I graduated from Colorado Springs high school and I remember Dad pointing out these spires in the mountains."

They were the 17 towering spires - each 150 feet tall designed to look like fighter planes.

"He took me on a tour," Mallette says. The rest is history. It's beautiful."

The transition trail

The journey to the academy was filled with twists and turns, however. "We always say when one member of a family serves the whole family serves," she says.

While the elder Mitnaul had a stable career, the family didn't have a stable homestead in terms of locale.

"We moved 17 times," she recalls. "When we came here to North Carolina in 2011, I haven't left [since]."

"Not all kids transition well and can adapt. I did. My stability was my mother. I want stability for my kids because I know how hard it is to go to new schools.

"I loved seeing the world and different cultures, how people live and work in different states. I'm also adamant that I want my kids to see the world."

But living in the state where her parents and a grandmother trace roots to Goldsboro has plenty of appeal, she says. [In fact, longtime North Carolina Congresswoman Eva Clayton recommended the secretary for the Academy.]

Putting her own roots down in North Carolina actually came as "a little bit of a shock for me, a sense of permanence," she explains. "I lived in different homes every two years."

In the Tar Heel state, she has found many enduring qualities.

"The weather is great, this is a great place to live and work," the secretary says. "The people, the culture, and also family."



Jocelyn Mitnaul Mallette, Secretary, North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Photo courtesy of the NC Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

'An invisible illness'

Veterans who have suffered disabilities will find an advocate in the secretary that extends beyond family due to her own first-hand experience.

Mallette's Air Force career was cut short after 10 years, being retired after she was diagnosed as having a sleep disorder.

"Some disabilities can't be seen. I refer to it as an invisible illness," she explains of the disorder. "It does not affect my ability to do a job. I just couldn't deploy anymore."

Mallette "sleeps very well" now and is not reluctant to share her story with veterans who face their own challenges.

"I like to talk about the fact I am a disabled veteran," she explains. "I tell them it's OK to receive help at a V.A. hospital, to take advantage of resources that are available so they can have a fulfilling life."

An Air Force Academy graduate and fluent in Arabic, she trained as an intelligence officer. Among her duties was briefing pilots for missions across the Middle East at a duty station in Germany. In 2009, she received the General Michael Hayden Award as the overall top training graduate. [Hayden is a former

FAMILY TREE BREAKDOWN:

- Woodrow Mitnaul, Grandfather; 26 yrs; (Retired) Army; First SGT
- Henry Mitnaul, Father; 30 yrs; (Retired) Air Force; Colonel
- Woodrow Mitnaul, Jr., Uncle; 24 years; (Retired) Marines; Master SGT
- Patrick Mitnaul, Uncle; 20 yrs; (Retired) Marines; Gunnery SGT
- Rito Jackson, Uncle; 12 years; (Medically Retired) Marines; SGT
- Calvin Mitnaul, Uncle; 6 years; Air Force
- Christina Mitnaul, Aunt; 6 years; Air Force
- Anthony Mitnaul, Uncle; 7 years; Marines
- Justin Mitnaul, Brother; 12 years; Air Force; Major

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head of the National Security Agency.]

Under fire

The secretary took her intel job very seriously – to the point she wanted to see the end results of a mission brief firsthand.

“I kept asking the pilots if I could join them on one of their missions when they went into Iraq or Afghanistan. They kept saying, ‘Lieutenant Mitnaul, this is dangerous. I don’t know why you want to do this. Stay in Germany.’ I was like, ‘No, I want to be a part of this flight with you.’

They finally said yes to having me accompany them on a mission. I gave them their intelligence briefing. I told them that we expected to receive fire as we attempted to land at a base in Iraq,” Mallette told Jessica Junqueira in a story for the North Carolina Bar Association.

“So I sat in the cockpit in one of the seats behind the pilots, and sure enough, we got shot at as we were trying to land. And on the one hand, I was like, I gave a correct and accurate briefing. And they maneuvered how they needed to. But on the other hand, I was like, we just got shot at – maybe I should reconsider being an intelligence officer.

“And then I thought, let me go back to that legal studies degree. I always wanted to go to law school, so I took the LSAT [law school admission test] in Germany.”

The disorder diagnosis triggered Air Force retirement and that new mission – becoming a lawyer. She earned a law degree at the University of North Carolina and also cross-trained as a Judge Advocate General. The JAG training led her to a position at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro where she served both as a prosecutor and general practice attorney.

After UNC she landed a law clerk’s position at the North Carolina Supreme Court and, later, a partnership at the MacGuireWoods firm in Raleigh, and much more.

The Air Force upside

Mallette left the Air Force with many good



The spires at the Air Force Academy were one of the inspirations for Jocelyn Mitnaul Mallette to launch an Air Force Career. (Photo courtesy of the Mallette family)

memories – and some bad ones.

Asked what she found most rewarding about the Air Force, she replies quickly:

“The opportunity to contribute to a mission that was much bigger than myself, especially when I deployed to Germany and brief pilots before missions to Iraq and Afghanistan. I knew what I was doing and was part of a team to help other people.”

Then there is the experience of training to survive and avoid capture after being shot down.

“Hardship breeds camaraderie, we learned at the Academy. It bonds classmates,” she recalls. “Like going through basic, low-crawling in the mud with somebody, survival training with 50 pounds on your back.

“One time, we were in the woods for seven days. You had to navigate to the next spot.” And rations weren’t necessarily tasty, Mallette points out.

The downside

Not all her military experiences were positive, however. She can speak to negative experiences linked to being a woman and also being black.

“Once I graduated from the Academy my immutable person – being a black person and a woman – became a source of hardships,” the secretary recalls. Asked if she

experienced sexual harassment, she says: “Yes.” But only after she left the Academy.

Not discussing what happened, Mallette says that such conduct did not deter her from wanting to serve in the Air Force.

“I will say that year when women appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show [in 2003] and talked about what happened ... I told Mom, ‘See you at graduation.’ I was determined to graduate.”

Future generation?

In 2018 the secretary married Harold Mallette, an architect. The Mallettes co-founded a business, MLT LLC, a federal government contracting business, which is based in Raleigh. They have two young children.

Like so many other longtime service members, Mallette’s transition to civilian life, law career, marriage, entrepreneurship and parenthood was a significant one.

“The only life I had known was a military life,” she recalls. By navigating so many changes, however, helped prepare her for the role as secretary.

“As a military dependent, as a service member and as a disabled veteran helps me understand what veterans are experiencing,” the secretary says. “It’s an honor to serve in this position.”

Will the Mitnaul-Mallette family add to its military lineage in the future? After all, the secretary is, as she says, “the proud mother of two hilarious and lively toddlers.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m hoping they do that,” she says about whether she would encourage a military career. “I will say that I speak fondly of my experiences, but the military is not for everybody.”

The secretary adds that there are “many ways of supporting the military short of putting on the uniform. It’s much more than that.”

For her children and for young people growing up today, Mallette is unequivocal about backing the military as a career choice.

“If they are inspired and motivated to serve our country and keep us free,” she says, “I support that.”

MARRIED TO A SOLDIER: FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCES IN DEALING WITH THE TRIALS OF DEPLOYMENT AND MORE

“That first [deployment] was definitely a baptism by fire for me; a true induction into military spouse life,” says Kathleen Kent, whose husband is stationed at Fort Bragg. “I know everybody says the first year of marriage is the hardest, but I’d always thought that would be because of little spats and adjusting to life together, not because we’d be 7000+ miles apart.”

By Rick R. Smith

FAYETTEVILLE - Kathleen Kent ponders a long list of questions about what it’s like to live as a military spouse. Never a member of the armed forces, she married Brian Kent in 2011, has one daughter and seems destined to remain an Army wife since Brian, an active duty soldier since 2009, is in line for promotion to Lt. Colonel.

But she’s an independent sort, having started her own photography business and a podcast, thus joining the ranks of spouses who work outside the home even though statistics show employment challenges and compensation are a real challenge to military families.

In agreeing to talk about the challenges as well as the benefits in being married to an officer who intends to at least reach 20 years of service, Kent talks about what she likes, doesn’t like, and much more.

“I did not,” she says when asked if she



The Kent family - from left, Brian, daughter Esther and Kathleen - are far from alone in dealing with separations created by deployments. According to a 2021 survey, 46% of couples have children under 6 living at home, says Military One Source. (Photo courtesy of Kathleen Kent)

had joined the Armed Forces. “Never even considered it!”

“Coming from a family with very few military connections I really had no concept of the variety of careers available in the military. I assumed everyone carried a gun and practiced war all day. Now I have a friend whose entire job is to evaluate and instruct Army choirs and bands across the country, another who does the same thing for various Navy Hospital nurses, and one of my college English students at Fort Johnson (then Polk) was a chaplain’s assistant and his job looks a lot less like war and a lot more like a church volunteer.

“One week his Army job was to be my daughter’s vacation bible school teacher. These are career paths I never could have fathomed would be an option in the Army!”

Right now she says the Army is part of her

future at least through 2029.

“Brian began active duty in 2009, so in May of this year he’ll have served 16 years as an Infantry Officer in the Army. His goal has always been to ‘do the full 20’ and that sounded so, SO far away when we got married in 2011. But suddenly it’s right around the corner! He’s a Major promotable so next year he’ll pin Lieutenant Colonel.”

Originally from Asheville, is happy her husband’s career brought him to Fort Bragg. “was so excited to come back to my home state,” she explains. “It’s been so fun to be within reach of family and old friends.” The Kents met at the wedding of a friend in 2009 – her best friend married a soldier whose groomsman turned out to be her future husband. Brian and I had a fun chat at the reception, but I never expected our paths

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to cross again. I accepted his friend request on Facebook, and a few months later when we'd both broken up with the people we'd been dating I was pleasantly surprised to see Brian's name pop up to say, "Hey!" on Facebook's then-brand-new chat feature.

"We got married in January of 2011, about eight weeks before Brian's first of six deployments."

Then the reality of being a military spouse struck home.

"That first [deployment] was definitely a baptism by fire for me; a true induction into military spouse life," Kathleen says. "I know everybody says the first year of marriage is the hardest, but I'd always thought that would be because of little spats and adjusting to life together, not because we'd be 7000+ miles apart."

In 2016, the Kents had their first child, adding joy as a parent and the challenge of separation. They are far from alone. According to a 2021 survey, 46% of couples have children under 6 living at home, says Military One Source.

"We have one daughter, Esther, who is 9 going on 30. She's a lot of fun and her bond with her dad is incredible," she says. "People always say military kids are so resilient, but I don't want people to forget that they're just normal kids who are asked to be far more resilient than any kid should be."

"When she was small and Brian was gone a lot it didn't faze her that he was in and out. At age two, if I said, 'Daddy's at work,' she'd ask if I meant 'homework or far-away-work?'"

The wounds of war also have affected the family – at least psychologically.

"[A]fter we had a few years with no deployments and she got old enough to realize that all her friends' dads missing fingers and limbs lost them in Afghanistan, every separation has been very difficult for

her," Mrs. Kent explains.

"Despite that, she loves Army life, living on post with lots of friends, and when I told her we'd get to stay in Louisiana a third year instead of the two we expected, she threw her little hands in the air, shouting, 'But Mommy, I need ADVENTURE!'"

To help children like Esther manage military life, Mrs. Kent has a suggestion:

"I feel building a community for your military kids is so key for success. Even though she had a hard time with Brian's last deployment, one of her best school friends' dad was deployed too. The difficult things are a lot easier when you're surrounded by other people who are going through them too. Which is exactly why my military spouse friends are so important to me."

The perils of "GeoBach"

There's a military term that couples may very well fear "GeoBach." That's slang for "voluntary separation" with one member of a couple deployed to a separate location. In talking about the life of a couple, the first point Kathleen mentioned was that.

"I'm grateful that my husband and I have never had to GeoBach, but I've known many families for whom that was the best choice," she says.

Asked what are the biggest challenges you faced as a military couple, Kathleen mentioned several at length.

"Definitely that first deployment as newlyweds. It would have been painful enough to just be apart, but he was in an area with a significant Taliban presence and I believe it was around six months before his company finally experienced a single day without receiving fire. I've never been able to quite put into words the feeling when I'd finally get a brief, crackly satellite phone call and hear a big explosion in the background and then, 'I gotta go; love you.' And suddenly I'd be there listening to silence,

with no real idea of when I'd hear from him next. Experiencing something like that kind of skews your concept of what even counts as a 'challenge,' and it's resulted in some darkly funny moments where I've said to someone, 'I don't know why I'm even upset about [insert stressor here]!' And they've had to explain to me that actually, that IS something worth being upset about."

But there are positives, she adds.

"It's cliché but I have to say the friends made along the way! It's no exaggeration when I say after 14 years as a military spouse and connecting with other spouses at seven different duty stations across the country, I don't think there's an Army base anywhere in the world I could go where I wouldn't have a friend waiting. I've had all these really special moments where I've been shown such deep care by people who have only known me a few months and that never ceases to be humbling.

"Because of the generosity people have shown me over the years, I'm always looking for opportunities to pay the love forward. And since the vast majority of us are far from the support systems we had back home, there are always opportunities to be more like family to someone than a friend. We also have such a unique online community.

"Facebook groups of spouses have been a true lifeline for me when we've moved and I haven't made new friends yet. Upon arriving at Fort Liberty, I met up with two different women who I've known online for years but had never actually talked to in person. Another internet friend,' Margo Shoaf and I bonded so much over social media that we started a podcast together for military spouses called "Household Six". I don't think we connected IRL until well into season two but I definitely called her a best friend long before that.

"And I can't let the question go without saying I've always seriously appreciated the access to healthcare the Army has

given us. While, of course, the system has its issues, at the end of the day, I know I'll get treatment and walk out without a bill. I grew up with minimal insurance coverage and doctors' visits were a major expense, so being able to go for any little thing still feels like such a big deal to me."

Dealing with separations

Asked how she and her daughter deal with separations is not necessarily an easy – let only briefly – to answer.

"Something I've only really been able to articulate recently is that I've never felt the separation was the hardest part," Kathleen says.

"The hardest part of any deployment for me are the transitions. The days leading up to my husband leaving are incredibly stressful—there's so much to get ready, everyone wants to see him before he leaves, my daughter is an emotional wreck, and I always end up annoyed at my husband about something minor.

"I think that's my subconscious trying to make it easier to separate or something. But when he leaves, although I miss him terribly, I've always really made a point to focus on trying to find opportunities for fun.

"I go on lots of trips to visit friends, have sleepovers with my single girlfriends like we used to in high school, watch trash TV that would have my husband rolling his eyes and groaning, focus on my hobbies, and buy a lot of prepared foods instead of cooking. Once my daughter came along, we added frequent trips to Chuck E. Cheese to my list of fun things.

Then comes the homecoming – and life as a family once more.

"[T]he transition back to normal when he returns is always a challenge. I'm used to being alone and prioritizing friendships, Brian's been in constant work mode and has to work to get used to relaxing again. It usually feels like he comes home right when my daughter and I really feel settled into our

routine," she says.

"I remember after that first deployment, a group of the more experienced wives went on a fun weekend trip together without the husbands and kids. I couldn't fathom why they'd leave their husbands just a few weeks after their return.

"By deployment three I totally got it. Reintegration is a huge task and while homecoming is always joyful, the adjustment is rarely seamless. It's something I hear families talking about a lot more now, and I'm so glad we're having a more open conversation on the topic."

Offering advice for others – 'A big question'

With years of experiences, from deployments to parenting, Kathleen reaches out to others through her podcast and sharing.

Asked what advice she could offer to other military couples in terms of dealing with challenges, she begins: "Whew. That's a big question."

Then she launches into an explanation.

"The thing is, the challenges are many and the situations are nuanced. I think one of the biggest things is, don't discount your hardships just because someone else has it worse. The hardest thing you've done is the hardest thing you've ever done. Your feelings are valid; it's okay if you're sad your spouse is gone for a couple weeks even though your neighbor's is gone for nine months.

"In Household Six, Margo and I talk a lot about our experiences with moving, making friends, and dealing with deployments specifically because we both felt we had SO much we wanted to tell our younger selves. This lifestyle has a steep learning curve and I don't feel like I truly had a handle on it and all the acronyms until about a decade in.

"So I also say it's so important to connect



To deal with the financial challenges of being a military spouse, finding jobs and raising daughter Esther, Kathleen Kent started her own business. (Photo courtesy of Kathleen Kent)

with other spouses, both those who are in your same phase of life but also seek out some more experienced women who can provide some mentorship and guidance.

"Also, take full advantage of the resources available on post. Most bases have a 'newcomer's brief' ... that is a great place to get information about what's available and meet other people who have just arrived too. Also, if you are having some kind of personal crisis or concern, chaplains are an incredibly valuable resource. If they can't help, they can often connect you with resources or the person who can help. You don't have to be religious either. They're here for all of us!"

To learn more, she notes check out the podcast.

"Until you find your people, though, Margo and I will fill in on HH6 — come virtually hang out with us on Spotify and Apple Podcasts!"

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HOW TO DEAL WITH LACK OF JOB OPPORTUNITIES? THIS SPOUSE LAUNCHED HER OWN BUSINESS:

By RICK R. SMITH

FAYETTEVILLE – Kathleen Kent experienced firsthand the challenge of finding work as a military spouse. So she started her own business. The couple also had to learn to manage deployments and how they affect finances.

In a Q&A for this NCVETS publication, she was asked about the recent study examining the challenges facing military families when it came to finances.

How did she and her husband Major Brian Kent deal with budgets and finances?

“My husband deployed for part of every year from 2011-2014, so as newlyweds we definitely fell into the routine that we and others jokingly called ‘the deployment savings plan.’ See, when you deploy to a combat zone, your earnings are not federally taxed, which already can be a good chunk of change. But you also receive various entitlements like, hazardous duty pay, family separation pay, and maybe more depending on location and MOS [military occupational speciality].

“When Brian was a fresh new Lieutenant, it felt like those entitlements just about doubled the money we had coming in. And since Brian was constantly working, he had almost no expenses, and I was buying half the groceries and half the gas, etc. So we ended up in the habit of using those deployments to top up savings and investments and honestly, not worrying about those too much otherwise.

“It was a bit of a rude awakening in 2015 and we realized that we needed to do things a little differently if we were going to have to pay taxes on every month. It is funny in retrospect, but I know we weren’t the only ones!

“Brian’s never deployed to say, Poland, but I talk to many families who experience real financial strain during these non-combat deployments to Europe because they don’t receive hazardous duty pay and most other

“Part of the reason I initially started my business is because I was frustrated that I couldn’t find many opportunities to use my master’s in English,” says Kathleen Kent. “I love teaching, but it’s hard to get plugged in to college communities and snag a spot as an adjunct instructor while moving every couple of years. So I decided to figure out a way to be self-employed.”

KATHLEEN KENT

entitlements, and then their soldier is not just spending his normal budget for lunches and gas, but instead living it up in another country with his buddies nights and weekends. It’s such a rough situation because the family’s budget is upended, but everyone hates to be like, stop having so much fun in Europe, haha.”

As for starting her own business, Kathleen says she developed the itch to become an entrepreneur. Thus was born Kathleen Kent Photography.

“I started my business in 2016. Like many photographers, I got my first good camera when I was pregnant with my daughter. I signed up for a class online that I thought was for beginners but quickly realized it was intended for professionals. So I frantically Googled basic terms while learning more advanced technique and I fell in love.

“By 2016, I had gotten to the point where I

couldn’t take enough pictures of my baby to scratch the creative itch so I made it official.”

The decision proved to be a financial benefit as well.

The study cited earlier and another reported high unemployment among military spouses. Kathleen found help paying bills as a self-employed entrepreneur.

“It definitely has helped our finances at times and I appreciate how I can do more marketing when I want to do more business, but can take a break and focus on family when we’ve got a lot going on, whether that’s in our personal lives or because of Army demands,” she says.

“Part of the reason I initially started my business is because I was frustrated that I couldn’t find many opportunities to use my master’s in English. I love teaching, but it’s hard to get plugged in to college communities and snag a spot as an adjunct instructor while moving every couple of years. So I decided to figure out a way to be self-employed.”

More opportunities may come in her future, too.

“Now I’m actually making yet another career pivot and am getting a Master’s in Social Work at Fayetteville State University, a historically black university just a few minutes away. This change is because my volunteer work definitely started to feel like more of a priority to me than my business when we were in Louisiana. I realized that the MSW is a highly versatile degree that’s very employable on military bases since counselors and social workers are embedded in our schools, units, Army Community Services, and more.

“So I’m excited about how the degree will give me more opportunities to support and advocate for military families. Photography is still a huge love of mine, so I’ll always do that alongside whatever comes next, but I’m enjoying my courses and excited about future opportunities.”

A CHAPLAIN'S CREED: CHAPLAIN SCOT McCOSH DETAILS HIS JOURNEY WITH DEDICATED SOLDIERS

A 23-year Army veteran and now senior director of veterans programs at Fayetteville Tech, Scot McCosh wears his faith on his sleeve and shares love from his heart across the three core competencies of being a Chaplain: Nurturing the living, caring for the wounded, honoring the fallen. He's there for Gold Star and Blue Star families as well as the warfighters.

By Rick R. Smith

FAYETTEVILLE – You can call him by his Army reserve rank of colonel, his former active-duty rank of captain, or in a civilian role as preacher or reverend. But you also can call him chaplain, a title he earned and holds most dear.

While Scot McCosh swore to defend the United States against all enemies foreign or domestic when he joined the Army, he also chose to obey the Chaplain's creed:

*Pro Deo et Patria
For God and Country.*

"What this means to me is that my role, as an Army Chaplain, is to serve both the God in whom I believe and the nation that is my home," McCosh says. "It also means that I'm there to ensure the freedom of all members of the military to engage and exercise their faith, or spiritual practice, as doing so make them more equipped to serve our nation in the most challenging times."

A man of medium height, healthy build and solemn voice, McCosh carries himself as a



Delivering disaster relief ... Chaplain Scot McCosh offers Communion during mobilization to support FEMA during the national COVID response in 2020. (Photo courtesy of Scot McCosh)

soldier, cracks a smile often, and talks to a stranger as if they were longtime friends.

Insights gathered from conversations spread across two group gatherings and a phone interview followed by give-and-take via email reveal a man who has served his country for 23 years in foreign lands, attended Special Warfare School, and is currently a member of the Army Reserves. He's also dual-hatted, handling the job as Senior Director of Military and Veterans Programs at Fayetteville Technical Community College.

Gold Star families (those who have lost a family member) and Blue Star families

(those with family members in service) have a friend and counselor in men and women such as this Chaplain.

RESUME OF SERVICE – FROM HIS LinkedIn PROFILE:

"Storyteller. Connector. Military/Veteran advocate. Higher Ed professional. USAR Chaplain. Passionate about people ...

"Passionate about connecting people, organizations and communities to create capacity, build bridges and break down barriers. Decades of experience in public and private sectors building teams, casting

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vision, marketing programs and developing leaders. Combat Veteran with conventional, special operations, Active/ Guard /Reserve units. Dynamic and energetic public speaker / presenter and compassionate counselor serving as a Chaplain, Social Worker, Congregational Pastor, Success Coach and Military/Veterans Programs Director/Advocate.”

In all his different roles he has found value in helping others. “This is a very important group of people we’re talking about,” he says in agreeing to share stories about his career and the values he holds dearly. “Very much so,” he replies when asked about nurturing the children of veterans.

Long before military life and multiple changes of posts plus deployments, McCosh was used to travel. Asked where he grew up, the Chaplain says with a laugh: “I-95 between Philadelphia and Cold Springs, Fla.” He attended Samford University in Alabama for his religious education before launching into a role as Chaplain.

What follows is a Q&A about his life, his belief, his service, and his love for helping the war fighters with which he serves.

Why did you decide to become a chaplain? When? Was that a goal when you joined the Army?

I was serving as the Co-Pastor of a small church just outside of Philadelphia, PA trying to serve the community and pay off student loans. One of my seminary professors, who was an Army National Guard Chaplain, knew that I was looking for additional work and called to recruit me to come serve as a Chaplain. The process took 18 months to complete but my goal was simple – to serve my community, state and nation with the gifts, training and calling that I had and to earn additional income for my new, young family.

What term is used most often?

On the civilian side I’m called Pastor or Reverend in my clergy roles.

Did you ever consider swapping your



A break from war ...Chaplain Scot McTosh having chai [tea] and enjoying the smile of an Afghan child near a fire base in Afghanistan in 2007. (Photo courtesy of Scot McTosh)

Chaplain role for that of a front-line warfighter?

The first 10 years of my military career – nearly three with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard and nearly eight on Active Duty – I served with combat arms units. I loved being with these warfighters as it reminded me, in many ways, of being with my high school and college teammates. The physical demands of serving alongside them was something I embraced as was the mental challenge of learning about the Army and how it operated.

Serving alongside Special Forces units was another tremendous opportunity to walk alongside our nation’s elite warriors. Yet, at no point did I waiver from my specific calling to serve these soldiers and their families as a Chaplain. In my deployments to Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan I saw that my role of providing spiritual support was critical to sustaining the force.

As Gen. George Marshall said, “The soldier’s heart, the soldier’s spirit, the soldier’s soul, are everything. Unless the soldier’s soul sustains him he cannot be relied on and will fail himself and his commander and his country in the end.”

The Chaplain’s Creed: What does this creed mean to you?

This Latin phrase “Pro Deo et Patria” literally means, “For God and Country.” What this means to me is that my role, as an Army Chaplain, is to serve both the God in whom I believe and the nation that is my home. It also means that I’m there to ensure the freedom of all members of the military to engage and exercise their faith, or spiritual practice, in doing so make them more equipped to serve our nation in the most challenging times.

Whether in training or operations, Army chaplains represent hundreds of American denominations and faith traditions and fulfill a sacred calling of service captured in our motto, “Pro Deo et Patria.”

Can you share what your faith is and why you chose that faith?

I’m a Christian in the Baptist tradition and endorsed for Chaplaincy by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I was blessed to attend churches of other denominations, as a child, and to spend my school aged years in South Florida, meaning that I had many friends who practiced Judaism as well as other faiths. In my adult years, I landed with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as they emphasize seeing the image of God in all people, to include support of women in all

ministry roles, and a commitment to, what we call, the four fragile freedoms:

- Soul freedom
- Bible freedom
- Church freedom
- Religious freedom

Yet in working with soldiers you strike a balance? Avoid proselytizing?

Like all military members, I take an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. That Constitution includes in the first amendment which simply states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This means to me that my presence as a Chaplain is to ensure the free exercise clause so that all Soldiers have the freedom to practice their faith tradition, or lack thereof. My role is to provide support for them to do this and to advise my Commanders on the impact of religion in their formations as well as in the particular area of the world in which they are operating.

I too, have the right to practice my faith and to share freely, when asked, about what I believe and why. I have found that in times of crisis, most military members just want to know that someone is present for them, open to discuss hard questions and point them to practices which may help them connect to their own faith and spirituality.

Let's talk about the three competencies -- nurturing the living, caring for the wounded, honoring the fallen.

Military Chaplains are present at all phases and stages of a Soldier's life. We are there as they enter military service, when they celebrate the birth of a child, when they earn a promotion. In these times we seek to nurture the living and to build into them a spiritual resiliency which will assist them in the darker days of life.

Then, in those dark days, we are present to care for those same Soldiers and Families and work with broader teams to provide care for their wounds, physically, emotionally, morally



Into the shadow of death ... Chaplain Scot McTosh leads a pre-mission prayer with his soldiers of 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, 101st Airborne in Iraq in 2006. (Photo courtesy of Scot McTosh)

and spiritually.

Finally, we are present to honor those who give the last full measure of devotion for our nation and to stand alongside those who loved them and served alongside them. This honoring not only celebrates the life of the fallen service member but brings healing and hope to those left to carry on.

Why are these three the most important for someone in your role?

These competencies are critical as we, as Chaplains, are the only ones focused on such roles in the military. It's why our branch was created 250 years ago and it's why we've continued to serve alongside every military member since.

Do you consider any of the three the most important? If so, why?

A mentor shared with me that in an initial meeting with his Executive Officer the officer stated, "Chaplain we don't really need you." After a long pause and having turned around to pull something off his shelf, he turned back and said, "But when we need you, we really need you."

If you are young and new to the Army, and scared of the unknowns ahead, then nurturing the living is most important. If you

are wounded on a battlefield and not sure if you are going to make it home, then caring for the wounded is most important. If you are the battle buddies or family members of a fallen Soldier, crying out in grief and looking for hope then honoring the fallen takes precedence. All three are equally important.

In which of the three is caring for the children of affected warriors the most critical and why?

Military children amaze me with their resilience. They endure so very much from a parent's absence due to training and missions, to frequent moves of active duty families, to dealing with their parent's wounds, both visible and invisible, and learning to live and love in hard times.

Caring for military children is critical, always, but in particular when a parent is wounded or killed. In addition to unit Chaplains, we specially trained Family Life Chaplains, social workers and more, who focus on children and their needs in such times. I believe it is a testament to the care provided these children that so many of them, in spite of the pain and loss experienced due to their parent's military service, have a strong connection to the military and many go on to serve either in uniform or in a civilian support of the military.

What's your approach in dealing with children? Is every child different?

While every situation and every child is unique, we have found that peer support, with experts guiding such support, is crucial to children impacted by a parent's military service. Whether it's groups of Gold Star children, all who personally know the pain of losing a parent in military service, or peer support groups during long deployments, children connecting with each other and with trusted and trained adults helps them not to feel alone, to have a safe place to process and have guidance when they don't know where to turn.

In your own family, how do you talk to them about life-challenging or life-

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changing events?

My wife and I have four children. Our daughter is 25 and was just 2 years old when I joined the Army on May 31, 2001. It was her first day of a pre-school program on September 11th, 2001 and she has endured all four of my overseas deployments and operational missions around the globe.

She has attended memorial services for the parents of friends and played on the playground with one Gold Star child as I took that child’s family on a tour of our military post. Our three adopted sons joined our family 10 years ago and have seen me mobilized to support FEMA during the height of the COVID pandemic, along with witnessing me don my dress uniform for memorial ceremonies, services and funerals.

From day one, we have sought to be open, honest and encouraging in such crisis, providing true and accurate information, at an age appropriate level, for our children. We always seek to provide connection and hope no matter the scope of the event,

knowing that as we seek to stand alongside others in crisis, our children need to always know that we first are there for them.

The deadly crash near Washington, D.C. involved three Army members, including one from North Carolina. When deaths occur is that when chaplains are needed most?

With a nephew who is an Army Aviator and another who is a commercial pilot, this recent event hit very close to home. Chaplains are absolutely critical in such moments, to provide care for grieving families and wider work families. Our role in honoring those whose lives were lost, can help to shape the narrative when some want to blame, politicize or speculate – we point to the stories of service and sacrifice and allowing a unity and celebration of such even in the midst of grief.

What are your specific responsibilities at Fayetteville Tech and how do you balance your full-time employee role vs. your chaplain role?

Service as a Citizen / Soldier in the Army Reserve cannot happen without supportive family members and civilian employers. I’m

very thankful for the support I have at home and from FTCC.

I serve as the Senior Director of Military and Veterans Programs at Fayetteville Technical Community College, supervising a team of 16 across our main campus and the Fort Liberty Training and Education Center. Our team assists military connected students (active duty, Reserve, Veterans and Family members) in accessing their military education benefits and planning for transition from military service to the civilian community. We partner with numerous Veteran Service Organizations, hosting Warrior Wednesdays to introduce these partners to our students; have on campus yoga for our Veterans through Team Red, White and Blue and have a Student Veterans Association to engage students in advocacy efforts for the military / veteran community.

My office at FTCC partners closely with NC Works, Veterans Bridge Home, the Wounded Warrior Project, Team Red, White and Blue, the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic and all of the support programs at Fort Liberty in addition to the VA’s Veterans Centers.

NORTH CAROLINA SERVICES AVAILABLE TO MILITARY FAMILIES:

Active members of the military and their families may access various state support resources, including those listed below:

- Tax Assistance
- License Renewals and Duplicates
- Family and Medical Leave Act Eligibility For Families
- Rental and Leasing Resources
- Employee Assistance Program
- Job Training and Job Placement Assistance

- NC4ME Hiring Resources
- Identity Protection Resources
- Behavioral Health Services
- NC Pre-K
- Resources to Protect from Scams
- Additional Resources for Servicemembers and Families

SERVICES AVAILABLE TO NATIONAL GUARD MEMBERS, FAMILIES:

- Family Programs Pages
- Family Assistance Centers
- Child and Youth Program

- Air Guard Family Programs
- Soldier and Airmen Assistance Fund

ARMY RESERVE PROGRAMS INCLUDE:

- Family Advocacy Programs
- Child and Youth Services
- Financial Literacy
- Survivor Outreach Services
- Yellow Ribbon
- Training Support
- Family Support Resources
- Volunteers

FROM WEST POINT TO TEACHING IN CHAPEL HILL, A VETERAN SHARES HOW HIS WW2 GRANDFATHER INSPIRED A LIFE OF SERVICE

The military tradition of Anthony Kajencki's family led to an Army career and then to become a teacher. Why go to West Point? "Because my grandfather, a January '43 West Point graduate." Troop to Teacher program and Duke University helped launch a teaching career after his dream of teaching at the Point didn't work out.

By Rick R. Smith

RALEIGH – Families with a military legacy in the United States include many well-known names, from the Pattons to the MacArthurs, the McCains to the Roosevelts and descendants of Chester Nimitz who commanded U.S. Naval forces in the war against Japan. Anthony Kajencki, a West Point graduate who now teaches in Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, shares his own military heritage, a story he is proud to tell.

Asked why he applied to West Point and went on to an Army career before retiring to become a teacher, Kajencki replies:

"Because of my grandfather, a January '43 West Point graduate."

Col. Francis Casmir Kajencki turned the Army into a career, serving from 1943 through 1973.

"He saw potential in me, he convinced me to apply to West Point in 1989," Anthony explains. "Having skipped a generation - my dad went to an academy preparatory school, Bullis Prep, but didn't make it to West Point himself."

However, Anthony points out, "My father was instrumental in helping me through the rigorous Academy application process; my grandfather didn't have a lot of time to help my father, having busied himself with his overseas tours in Turkey in the late '60's as an ADA [Air Defense Artillery] Battalion Commander."

The three share more than a West Point

connection. Anthony is the third holder of that name, his father being the second and grandfather Kajencki the first.

Learning the ropes

Duty, honor, country, loyalty runs deeply in the Kajencki family.

"My grandfather would visit with me during my early years when he worked as an Information Chief for the Military District of Washington while my family lived in Northern Virginia and Maryland," the younger Kajencki recalls. "Thus, he would tell me some stories from his time in the Army. I really got to bond with him during the summer before my senior year of high school - he discussed his time at West Point in detail and introduced me to a West Point recruiter.

"Also, because he retired to El Paso, TX, the home of Air Defense Artillery, we got to visit the post and talk about what life was like for Air Defense Artillery officers. I enjoyed hearing him talk about his time spent working and training at the many different posts in the U.S. and around the world, from Fort Sill to Fort Bliss to his command in Ishmir, Turkey, and how ADA was very technology-focused."

The technical requirements of ADA drew special interest from Kajencki since "I was skilled in computer programming in high school, which led me to choose Computer Science as my major in college." ADA became his Army career choice.



Three generations of Kajencki's: From left, his father Anthony Kajencki, stepmother Christine Kajencki, West Pointer Anthony, and his grandfather Anthony Kajencki at the Army-Navy game in 1990. (Photo courtesy of Anthony Kajencki and his family)

But there was more to the grandson-grandfather relationship than military history.

Masters of degrees, writing history

"I found his entire life fascinating. From growing up the child of two immigrants from Poland, my grandfather worked hard to distinguish himself as a scholar in high school," the grandson says. "Also, when his appointment to West Point was taken away and given to another person due to political reasons, this did not stop my grandfather from his chosen path -- his enlisted in the National Guard and used this as a doorway to West Point.

"Moreover, I found it inspirational that he worked in the fledgling guided missile programs in the U.S. after WW II. While stationed in the Pacific, he did not see much action during WW II himself; he distinguished himself after the war by earning a Master's Degree in Mechanical Engineering from USC before transitioning into work with the new Nike Ajax missiles (the predecessors to today's

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nuclear missiles).

“As a burgeoning military historian, I found it interesting that the military allowed him to get his journalism and history Masters degrees from the University of Wisconsin and George Mason (at different times) during his work as a field grade officer. (This work would later serve him as Information Director in the Military District of Washington.) Thus, I learned the importance of continuing education in the growth of military leaders, which was inspiring to me.”

His grandfather also became an author and would go on to establish a publishing company, which his father took over when the elder Kajencki died in 2008.

“While I believe my grandfather was one of the first Kajencki to serve in the armed forces, I was inspired by my grandfather’s writings about two very famous Polish military figures. One of his first books was about Thaddeus Kosciuszko. Because I had learned about Kosciuszko’s work with General George Washington -- and his instrumental role in designing and building Fortress West Point -- I felt proud of the work of this Polish colonel in securing our country’s freedom from the British,” Kajencki explains. “Without Kosciuszko’s experience fighting for

Poland’s freedom from the Russian’s during his early, officer years in Poland, the revolutionary, Colonial Army would have had a difficult time defeating the British. Thus, at West Point, we have a statue in his honor overlooking the Hudson River.

“Also, my grandfather wrote another book on Casimir Pulaski and his work as the ‘father of the American Cavalry.’ Similar to Kosciuszko, he fought against the Russians and used his experience as a cavalry officer to help General Washington during the Revolutionary War.

“Thus, reading about these two legends from my grandfather -- and also learning about them during my time at West Point -- was extremely inspiring and made me want to do my part in service toward the nation.”

Retirement? What retirement?

Kajencki further inspired his grandson with continuing service long after retirement.

“Watching my grandfather travel back to West Point, or the Polish Embassy, or to other important functions around the US to give lectures about his books during his entire, retired life really hit home with me about continued service to the Nation -- he continued to educate people about the importance of military figures outside of the



Anthony Kajencki at West Point (Photo courtesy of Anthony Kajencki)

U.S. in securing our freedom in the formative stages of the U.S.. He even finished his last book, American Betrayal, a few years before he died dealing with President Roosevelt selling out Poland to Stalin. Again, there is a pattern with my grandfather’s heritage and how military actions had influenced his parent’s birth country freedom.)”

How has your military experience helped you as a teacher?

“Learning to do many different jobs in the Army every few years helps me as a teacher since teachers must constantly learn new ways of instructing, planning, and grading according to changing school leadership directives. Also, learning how to communicate effectively with subordinates, peers, and superiors in the Army helps me immensely in working with students (subordinates), fellow teachers and parents (peers) and superiors (assistant and full principals).

Moreover, learning to work ‘to standard,

not time’ in the military allows me to put a lot of time and energy into my job to do the best I can.

- Anthony Kajencki

What are some of the lessons you learned in the Army that you apply in the classroom?

From [former Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin I learned to always ‘keep people - especially your superiors - in the loop.’ This has helped me quickly provide detailed information to school leadership concerning any student issues that arise; also, it trained me to ‘communicate more,

not less’ concerning daily classroom expectations. Also, beginning at West Point and cemented during my Army-time, I learned that ‘flexibility is my watchword.’ Thus, I constantly assess how my students are learning and continually adjust how and when instruction occurs. Finally, I always try to inspire my students to ‘do your best and forget the rest.’ At West Point and in the Army, we learned that failing is part of the process and we must learn from our mistakes - especially during AARs [after action reviews] - improve, and then move on.

- Anthony Kajencki

"I feel that my grandfather really imparted the importance of service to one's country onto me due to his heritage from a country that had to continually fight for its existence. Because Poland has had to battle outsiders for centuries to remain sovereign, I believe this fight for freedom remains in descendants who are connected with their war-torn history. As the grandson of one such Polish-American officer and historian, I feel grateful and proud to know how our heritage has impacted America's freedom."

The Fort Bragg connections

Kajencki, a divorced father of two, was born in Washington, D.C. and graduated from high school in Maryland in 1990, ranking 10th among 220 students. Next stop: West Point.

Then came the Army, including earning acceptance to Ranger School as an Air Defense Lieutenant. An injury ended his Ranger bid but he went on to a number of air defense roles, including service at Fort Bragg as part of a battalion led by former Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

"My soldiers and I were paratroopers and worked primarily with shoulder-fired Stinger missiles," he recalls.

His first connection to the paratroopers and Fort Bragg came while he was at West Point.

"I really got to see current ADA in action when my tactical officer at West Point sent me to Fort Bragg during the summer before my senior year of college to learn what life was like as an ADA officer," he recalls. "Thus, I shadowed a second lieutenant platoon leader for over a month and got to learn what life was like for ADA officers stationed at the 82nd Airborne Division.

Kajencki earned a promotion to captain, served with the 10th Mountain Division and deployed to Bosnia. However, in 2001, he transitioned out of the Army.

"I relinquished command [in 2001] and transitioned out of the Army in October as a Captain. Because of my high OPTEMPO [operations tempo] experiences from '95-'01, I decided that I wanted to go to graduate



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school and then teach at West Point," Kajencki says. However, the Army "disagreed and said that 'the needs of the Army' put me at Fort Campbell, KY as an ADA liaison; I told them, 'Then I will leave the Army and become a civilian teacher.'"

From troops to teaching

But the path to teaching was one filled with curves. After eight years as a retail store manager and going through a divorce in 2009 he decided to try once again to become a teacher. Both his parents had earned advanced degrees and, like them, he earned a Masters at age 40 and a fellowship at Stanford University. "They constantly pushed during my time in the Army to do the same," he says.

Helping open doors was the (now defunct) Troops to Teachers program and a fellowship from Duke University.

"Troops to Teacher provided me with an entry point into teaching. Discovering how soldiers transition from the military into the teaching world provided me with a framework that I could follow myself," he says.

"Duke provided me with access to a Masters of Arts in Teaching and high school licensure. My director at Duke, Dr. Ginny Buckner, helped me afford Duke by enrolling me as a Durham Fellow; Duke and Durham

Public Schools have an agreement that if a Duke MAT graduate teaches for two years at a high-needs school, then your Duke education is paid for. I taught for DPS at Northern Durham H.S. for six years. I'm finishing my seventh year at Carrboro H.S. where I teach AP Statistics and Math 2.

Of course, Dr. Buckner played on the "K" connection to now retired Duke men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski.

"Dr. Buckner asked me to use the Captain K, moniker which I have used throughout my entire teaching career," says the grandson of another legend with Polish roots.

As he continues teaching, Kajencki says he tries to pay something back to the Army.

"I see myself as a secret recruiter for the military. My good friend and fellow 1994 West Point graduate, COL(R) Faren Cole, told me a few years ago to 'keep telling your Army stories to the kids,'" for he learned as a leading recruitment officer in the Army that these stories connect them to the military and lead some to join the Profession of Arms.

"I believe I influenced five students to attend the Merchant Marine academy, West Point, the Air Force academy, VMI and the Citadel, as well as many former students who enlisted in all of the military branches."

TROOPS TO TEACHERS: HOW U.S. ARMY PREPARED N.C. NATIVE JAMES HARRIS SR. FOR A NEW CAREER AS AN EDUCATOR

“Promoting an awareness of teachers’ crucial role in shaping the future could inspire more service members to embark on this challenging yet profoundly rewarding career path,” says James Harris Sr. “Through such initiatives, we can cultivate a new generation of educators dedicated to making a difference in the lives of young learners.”

By RICK R. SMITH

RALEIGH – After 22 years in the U.S. Army, James Harris Sr. retired then chose to transition to a new career as a teacher, a role his decades of service as an infantryman and non-commissioned officer he says prepared him to be.

“Being a platoon sergeant best prepared me to become a teacher for several reasons. First, it honed my leadership skills, teaching me to inspire individuals and foster a collaborative atmosphere. I also learned the importance of adapting my communication style to meet the diverse needs of my soldiers, much like I do with my students now,” the North Carolina native explains.

“Additionally, the experience taught me how to assess situations and implement strategic plans to overcome obstacles effectively. I apply this skill in the classroom to create engaging business lesson plans and address my students’ learning styles. My time as a Platoon Sergeant instilled in me the value of patience, resilience, and continuous improvement, which are essential traits for any effective teacher.

In that teaching role, Harris strives to inspire students based on his extensive military career and educational skills learned across multiple degrees.

“I hold five degrees and am working on the sixth. Thus, I am deeply passionate about continuous learning and professional

development,” he says. “This commitment drives me to stay abreast of the latest educational practices, empowering me to create an inspiring and engaging atmosphere that fosters growth and curiosity among my young learners. I am excited to share my knowledge and passion with the next generation!”

A TROOPER TO TEACHER

Now a business and technology teacher at Norwayne Middle School in Fremont, Harris launched his teaching career in 2019 after participating in “Troops To Teachers (TTT),” a federal funded program designed to help military service members transition to an educator role. He left the Army in 2011 after enlisting in 1989.

In a Q&A with NCVETS, Harris, a first-generation military veteran, talks about his Army career, his teaching experience, and how he helps students prepare themselves for post-high school life.

How did the Troops to Teachers program help you become a public school teacher? What was its greatest benefit? Since this program is no longer funded how would you encourage the Army and other services to encourage other armed forces members who are transitioning to become teachers?

The Troops to Teachers program has profoundly influenced my journey toward becoming a public school teacher by



James Harris loved being an infantryman. Here he is shown on Middle East deployments. (Photos courtesy of James Harris)

providing invaluable guidance and resources. Among the most impactful benefits was the chance to learn how to craft a compelling resume and receive financial assistance. This support significantly eased my transition, allowing me to concentrate on honing my skills as an effective educator rather than becoming mired in the complexities of certification costs and resume writing.

I regret to note that this essential program is no longer funded. I firmly believe that the U.S. Army and other military branches should champion teacher training for transitioning members. By forging partnerships with educational institutions, they could create streamlined pathways to certification. Furthermore, establishing mentorship programs where seasoned educators, especially those with military backgrounds—can guide new teachers would be invaluable.

Promoting an awareness of teachers’ crucial role in shaping the future could inspire more service members to embark on this challenging yet profoundly rewarding career path. Through such initiatives, we

can cultivate a new generation of educators dedicated to making a difference in the lives of young learners.

Who are your heroes? Why did you decide to join the Army?

When it comes to heroes, I must list educator Booker T. Washington and Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois who both had a different vision for education but both methods achieved the desired outcome.

My hero has always been my grandfather, Elbert Harris Sr., a sharecropper who often shared stories of sacrifice and the importance of duty, although he never served in the military. His experiences in farming, coupled with the values he instilled in me, fostered a profound sense of faith, responsibility, and a deep appreciation for the freedoms we cherish. Witnessing the pride and respect he commanded inspired me to pursue a career as a soldier. Joining the Army felt like the most fitting way to honor his legacy of respect, faith, hard work, and discipline while striving to make a meaningful difference.

I grew up in rural Franklin and Nash County, NC, during the end of the Vietnam era and saw many Vietnam Veterans return from the war. The sight of the soldiers in uniform was unique to me as a child and left a lasting impression. I joined the Army at 19 and retired at age 41, inspired by a desire to serve my country and follow in the footsteps of those brave men and women I respected and admired.

Your email: Why do you call yourself “infantryman4life”? Your military career must mean a great deal to you.

Thank you for this question! I proudly call myself “infantryman4life” because my military career has profoundly shaped who I am today. After nearly 22 years of dedicated service as an Infantry Soldier in the U.S. Army, my commitment to the Infantry has become an inseparable part of my identity. The values I embraced, the relationships I forged, and the incredible experiences I



James Harris poses with one of his degrees he has used for his teaching career. (Photo courtesy of James Harris)

encountered are treasures which I carry daily. This email address reflects my deep pride and unwavering commitment to that remarkable chapter of my life.

Where were you born, and when? Where did you go to high school?

I was born on March 14, 1970, at the former Parkview General Hospital in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. My family moved frequently throughout my childhood, leading me to experience three different high schools. I started my journey at Bunn High School in Franklin County during my 9th grade, then transitioned to Southern Nash Senior High School in Nash County for 10th grade, before finally finding my home at Louisburg High School, where I completed my 11th and 12th grades. I proudly graduated from Louisburg High School on June 2, 1990, marking a significant milestone in my life.

You held a variety of roles across more than two decades of service. When did you decide to become an educator? And why? Who inspired you to be a teacher? What's the biggest reward for teaching? The biggest challenge?

Of all the positions I held in the Army,

my favorite was undoubtedly being a Mechanized Infantry Platoon Sergeant. This role was particularly fulfilling because it combined leadership, strategy, and hands-on training with my soldiers. I enjoyed the dynamic environment of leading my platoon through challenging missions, where clear communication and teamwork were essential for success.

Being a platoon sergeant best prepared me to become a teacher for several reasons. First, it honed my leadership skills, teaching me to inspire individuals and foster a collaborative atmosphere. I also learned the importance of adapting my communication style to meet the diverse needs of my soldiers, much like I do with my students now.

Additionally, the experience taught me how to assess situations and implement strategic plans to overcome obstacles effectively. I apply this skill in the classroom to create engaging business lesson plans and address my students' learning styles. My time as a Platoon Sergeant instilled in me the value of patience, resilience, and continuous improvement, which are essential traits for any effective teacher.

How do you answer your students when they ask about the pros and cons about volunteering for the US armed forces?

Though joining the U.S. Army has undoubtedly been the most rewarding decision of my life, when I engage with students about the pros and cons of volunteering for the armed forces, I strive to present a well-rounded perspective:

Pros:

1. Training and Skills Development: The military offers comprehensive training across various fields, equipping service members with invaluable skills that can significantly enhance their career prospects in civilian life.
2. Educational Benefits: Many service

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members take full advantage of benefits like the GI Bill, which allows them to pursue higher education and smooths the transition to civilian life.

3. Job Security: Enlisting in the military typically provides a stable and rewarding career with benefits such as healthcare and retirement plans that ensure a secure future.

4. Sense of Purpose and Community: Serving one's country can foster a profound sense of fulfillment and belonging as individuals unite

within a team that shares a common mission.

5. Travel Opportunities: Military service often opens doors to travel and cultural exploration, offering unprecedented opportunities to experience the world.

Cons:

1. Risk of Physical Harm: The inherent dangers of military service, and the prospect of injury or loss is a significant concern for many.

2. Mental Health Challenges: The psychological toll of military service can be considerable, as service members may face

stress-related issues, including PTSD, both during and after their time in service.

3. Commitment and Time: Enlisting usually requires a substantial commitment spanning several years.

4. Separation from Family: Deployment can lead to extended absences from loved ones.

By encouraging students to meticulously weigh these factors against their values and aspirations, we can help them make informed and thoughtful decisions about military service.

MILITARY FAMILIES IN CRISIS: NEW REPORT, RECENT SURVEY DOCUMENT WORRIES OF THOSE WHO SERVE

By RICK R. SMITH

RALEIGH – Financial health is not alone among the challenges military families face, according to recent reports from Wells Fargo and the Blue Star Families – families which include at least one service member – organization.

However, worries about money can be seen in virtually all the primary points made in these studies.

Military service members did receive a 5.2% increase in pay as of Jan. 1, 2024. It was the largest jump since 2002. Housing allowances also were increased. But the Wells Fargo study and the Blue Star Families survey report that money worries have not disappeared.

“More than 30% of military families indicated in 2023 that they were either ‘finding it difficult to get by’ or ‘just getting by,’” says the Wells Fargo report titled *Are We Prepared? Military Families Face Financial Strain*. “Unreimbursed expenses related to permanent-change-of-station moves have led to financial hardship for many military families.”

A similar point is made in the global Blue Star Families survey:

“Military families face mounting financial

challenges driven by military pay concerns, high relocation costs, and spouse unemployment, with many taking over a year to recover financially after a move.”

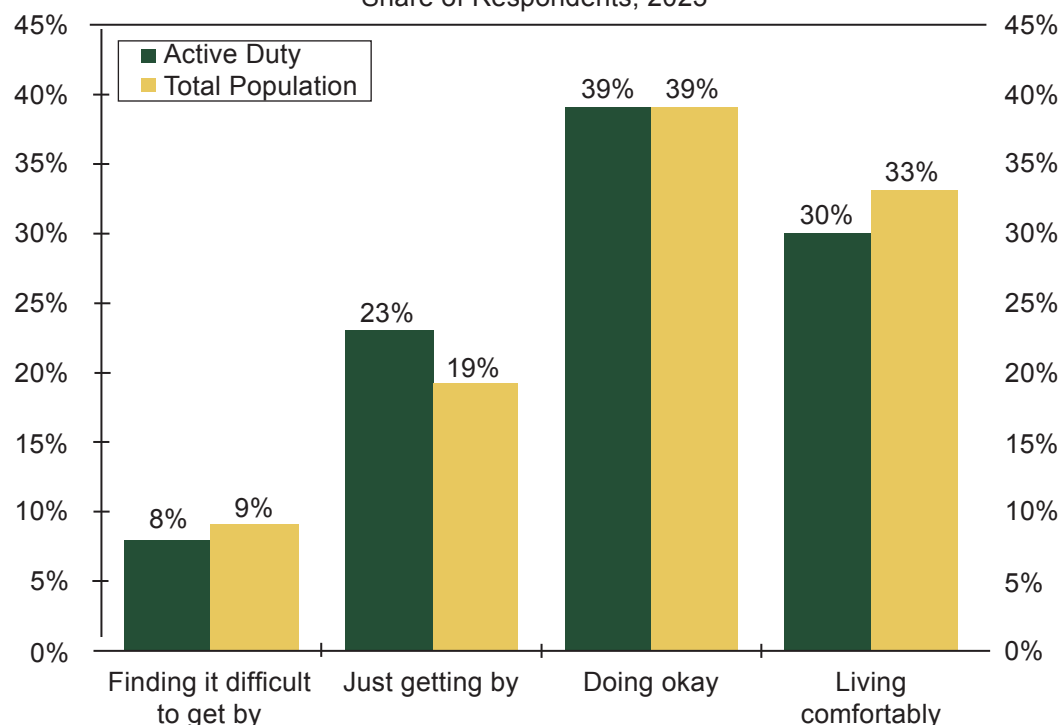
The survey also noted that “in inflation-

adjusted terms, military households are worse off now than they were in 2011.”

Here are the top issues military families say they face as reported in the 2024 survey by the Blue Star Families’ annual Military

Levels of Financial Comfort

Share of Respondents; 2023



Data courtesy of Blue Star Families and Wells Fargo Economics

Family Lifestyle Survey, or MFLS:

- “The top issues for active-duty spouses and service members reveal overlapping concerns related to financial stability, family well-being, and quality-of-life challenges.
- “The top concern for active-duty spouses continues to be military spouse employment with military pay, time away from family due to service, housing affordability, and children’s education rounding out the top five concerns.
- “Similarly, service members prioritize military pay, housing concerns, and time away from family, while also highlighting spouse employment, lack of control over their military career, and access to health care systems.”

NATIONAL SECURITY RISK

Why should all Americans pay attention to the compensation issue? Simply but succinctly put, financial concerns for military families also are a clear and present threat to the nation’s security,” Wells Fargo says.

“High levels of financial stress among military families may pose a risk to the readiness of the U.S. armed forces. Survey data show that only one-third of military family members are likely to recommend military service, down significantly from 55% as recently as 2016. If the armed forces are not able to adequately recruit and retain service members, military preparedness could be negatively affected in coming years,” the report warns.

Bottom line: Military families are earning more but not keeping pace with civilian families.

Despite pay increases, “income growth among military households has lagged civilian households for more than a decade. Although the average level of household income among active-duty military families rose 21% between 2011 and 2022, this gain fell well short of the 43% increase enjoyed by civilian households over that period,” Wells Fargo says.

“Moreover, consumer prices, as measured by the personal consumption expenditures price deflator, rose 25% over that time. In inflation-adjusted terms, the average military household was worse off in 2022 than 11 years earlier.”

There is no short-term solution, either.

“One year of outsized pay increases will do little to narrow the income gap on a sustained basis,” Wells Fargo reported.

“Until steps are taken to address the chronic joblessness and under-employment of many military spouses, some of the families that honorably serve the country likely will continue to feel financial stress,” the report says.

SPOUSES’ UNEMPLOYMENT SOARS

While the U.S. jobless rate is under 4%, approaching what economists consider “full employment,” military families are hard pressed.

“Although civilian households were able to take advantage of the robust labor market conditions in recent years, military spouses remained largely on the job market sidelines,” the Wells Fargo report says.

“[T]he widening gap in household income [between the military and private sector] was due largely to spousal income,” Wells Fargo says. “Active-duty military personnel who are single earned roughly the same, on average, as their civilian counterparts in 2022. However, household income among married service members is considerably lower than married civilian households. Not only is the incidence of part-time employment among military spouses higher than among civilian spouses, but the unemployment rate among the former is astronomical. According to Blue Star Families ... the jobless rate among military spouses stood at 22% in 2022.”

EMERGENCY NEEDS

Several salient points in the report point to lack of emergency cash and even the need to meet basic requirements:

- “The mixture of low spousal income and elevated household expenses leaves many active-duty families with little room to build emergency savings
- “With relatively fewer savings on which to lean, active-duty service members utilize credit cards at a higher rate than the general adult population
- “The overall fragile financial position has left some military families unable to meet their basic needs.”

PART TIME VS. FULL TIME

Citing data from the Military Family Advisory Network, Wells Fargo pointed out that “military spouses who are employed are more likely to work part-time than their non-military counterparts.”

But many don’t have full-time jobs, which often come with benefits while many part-time positions don’t.

“17.4% of active-duty military spouses worked part-time in 2023, compared to 16.0% of all civilian workers that year,” the study said. “The relatively high incidence of part-time employment in combination with astronomical joblessness is one of the key reasons that military spouses earn half the income of non-military spouses, on average.”

CHILDCARE CHALLENGE

The Blue Star Family survey also found that lack of spousal employment is not limited to lack of opportunities.

“Childcare remains a significant barrier to employment for active-duty spouses, with many taking over two months to secure care after relocating and facing high costs, limited availability, or a lack of awareness about fee assistance programs.”

Wells Fargo researchers found that “family composition” is a key factor in who experiences financial stress.

“Married active-duty service members with children were more likely to report that they faced ‘some difficulty’ or were ‘not

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comfortable' financially (42%) than single service members without children (37%) in 2022" the study says.

"The most financially stressed group was single active-duty members with children (52%). These data suggest that marriage still offers some economies of scale for military families when raising children, but having children in the first place can pose a significant financial challenge."

HEALTHCARE WORRIES GROW

Tangential to financial concerns is worry about health care.

"Health care access remains a key issue for military families; the proportion of active-duty families who report 'health care access' as a top concern has more than doubled from 2020 to 2024, the survey found. The percentage has grown to 22% from 11%.

ON THE MOVE

Another worry for families is the cost of relocation, or "permanent change of station."

"Although the military provides monetary support and other resources to help alleviate the financial burden of moving, survey data reveal that housing costs are a top contributor to financial stress for military families. In 2023, 45% of active-duty respondents who completed a PCS move in the past year reported spending \$500 or more over the amount that was reimbursed by the military," Wells Fargo reported.

Housing costs – both for home buyers and renters – are not coming down as 2025 begins. Housing costs are expected to increase some 3% and mortgage rates remain in the 7% range, according to the Federal National Mortgage Association, or Fannie Mae. Realtor™ forecasts a slight increase in rents.

RETENTION RISKS

Armed forces recruiting has been a challenge in recent years, but the Pentagon reported good news for the Army based on December 2024 figures: Nearly 350 new enlistments a day. It was the best December



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for recruiting in 15 years

"Our recruiters have one of the toughest jobs – inspiring the next generation of #Soldiers to serve," the Army posted on the social platform X. "Congratulations and keep up the great work!"

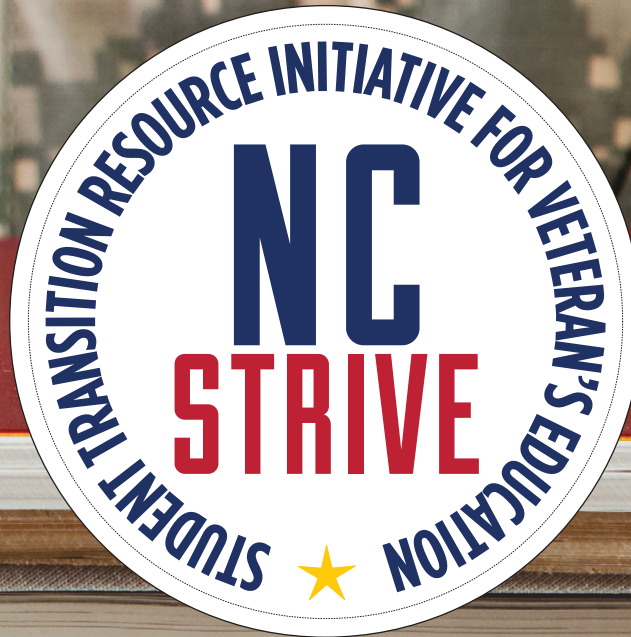
But the influx of new talent doesn't remove worries about retention. And Wells Fargo warned that convincing men and women to remain in a military branch will rest in part on addressing financial worries.

"Among those less likely to recommend military service were families who reported spending more on out-of-pocket housing costs as well as those with unemployed spouses, revealing that financial stress likely plays an important role in military service recommendation and re-enlistment" the report found.

"Indeed, separate research conducted by the [Department of Defense] concluded that service members who experienced higher levels of financial stress were more likely to indicate they were unlikely to stay on active duty. They were also more likely to report higher dissatisfaction with the overall military way of life and lower perceptions of readiness, for both themselves and that of their unit. For the nation's all-volunteer force, military families' financial well-being is crucial to maintain the supply of volunteers."

The challenging economic environment also could be changing veterans' attitudes about recommending the military as a career.

Only 57% of those surveyed now say they recommend a military career, down from 74.5% in 2019.

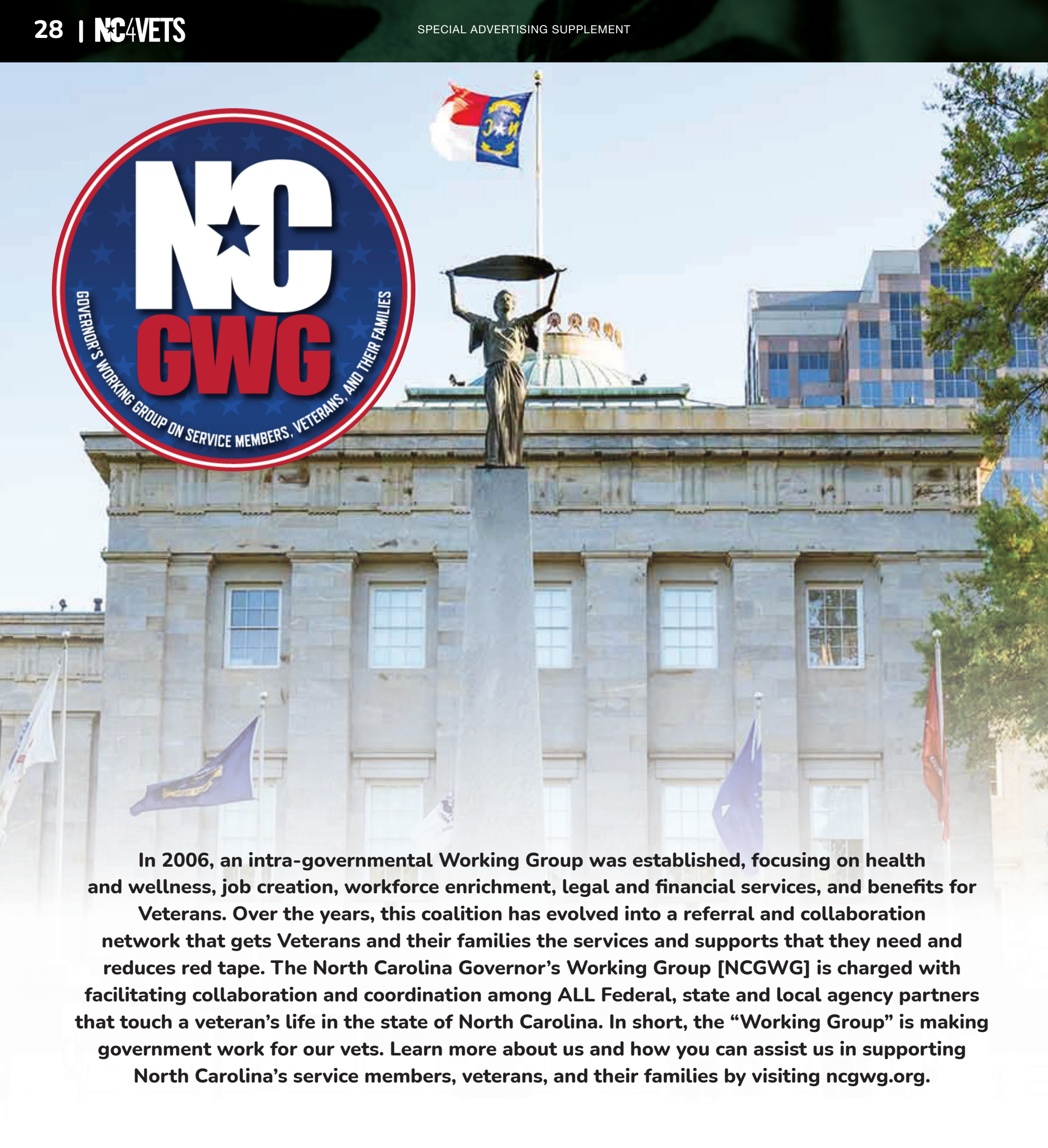


SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS,
AND THEIR FAMILIES

PODCAST

GOVERNOR'S INSTITUTE

Find us wherever you listen to podcasts. Season One is a must-listen. We tackled the unique challenges military students face helping them transition from service to academia. From leveraging campus resources and enhancing the college experience to securing financial aid, we covered everything you need to succeed.



In 2006, an intra-governmental Working Group was established, focusing on health and wellness, job creation, workforce enrichment, legal and financial services, and benefits for Veterans. Over the years, this coalition has evolved into a referral and collaboration network that gets Veterans and their families the services and supports that they need and reduces red tape. The North Carolina Governor's Working Group [NCGWG] is charged with facilitating collaboration and coordination among ALL Federal, state and local agency partners that touch a veteran's life in the state of North Carolina. In short, the "Working Group" is making government work for our vets. Learn more about us and how you can assist us in supporting North Carolina's service members, veterans, and their families by visiting ncgwg.org.