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Researchers aim to improve lives of military families with special needs

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Raising a child with a mental or a physical disability is tough work for any parent. But just imagine the added stresses for a parent on active duty in the U.S. armed forces: Possible deployments to war zones, base reassignments and recurrent training pose even more challenges to securing quality care and therapy for a special-needs child.

Similar hurdles face military personnel who give care to disabled spouses or parents.

Now, researchers at the Beach Center on Disability at the University of Kansas are analyzing military policy and developing recommendations to be enacted across all branches of the U.S. military, with the goal of strengthening military families facing these exceptional circumstances.

"Our work focuses first on analysis of policy within the Department of Defense and the four branches of the military — the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy," said Rud Turnbull, the Ross and Marianna Beach Distinguished Professor of Special Education, who leads the research team. "Secondly, our work involves conducting a literature review and interviews with service members to determine what constitutes best practices in supporting families. We'll bring this research together to make recommendations to the Department of Defense."

The work by the KU group, funded by a $260,000 grant from the DOD's Office of Community Support, will benefit special-needs families of armed services personnel around the world, across all branches of the

military and up and down the chain of command.

"The rank of the military person is irrelevant," said Turnbull, who is a veteran of the active and reserve Army. "We've been dealing with a retired four-star general in the Army, and we've been dealing with shaved-head recruits. Likewise, the duty station is irrelevant. While we've conducted our interviews exclusively within the continental United States, our work also applies to personnel outside the U.S. For example, a military base in Korea or Germany would benefit from our work because those installations abroad have responsibility to the families of their military personnel."

Each military branch has a program called the Exceptional Family Member Program that supports special-needs families by providing information, referral to services, advocacy training and outreach. The KU research will enhance the EFMP's delivery of these services and promote its consistency across Army, Navy, Marine and Air Force installations worldwide.

"If you don't have policy informed by the literature and research, you are apt to be floating around, without sufficient direction," Turnbull said. "There most likely will be standardization of policy and practice as a result of our work, and that result becomes very important given the amount of intra-service and intra-base work in the military. Military personnel need some certainty in their lives. But there's a tremendous amount of uncertainty in their lives because they deploy often and they're frequently in harm's way. When we can provide certain standardized policies and services that are available at every branch and at every installation, then we can assist the military family support programs to address the special-needs issues that military families have."

Turnbull said that standardization and improvement of policies designed to help families with special-needs members would likely boost the

overall effectiveness of the armed services, while improving the lives of those who serve their country. To this end, research at KU's Beach Center aims to achieve four goals: enhance mission readiness, ease the burdens of redeployment, advance retention in the services and aid recruitment efforts.

"Part of the motivation here is our sense of responsibility to armed forces personnel," said Turnbull. "We recognized the great need that they have. This is more a matter of patriotism than practically any other work we've done, because it deals with the armed forces when they are involved in combat in the Middle East or in stressful duties elsewhere. I've respected the military ever since I served, and, personally, this is my payback to the military for what it did for me while I served on active duty for nearly two years."

Provided by University of Kansas

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