



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Military Families: Extreme Work and Extreme ‘Work-Family’**

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**W**hile the U.S. military might at first glance appear to be a model of rigidity rather than flexibility, there are strong incentives to address the work-family concerns of service members and their families. For example, the military must compete with private employers to recruit volunteers to join the organization, and since all promotion is from within, retention is the only way to ensure that talented individuals are available to rise to positions of leadership.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have exposed millions of men, women and children in the United States to combat-related sequelae stemming from deployment, including prolonged and repeated family separations, psychological and physical injuries, and disruptions to subsequent life as civilians. High rates of suicide, substance use, mild traumatic brain injury, and psychological symptoms among service members and veterans merit concern from employers, friends and family, and citizens. Evidence from prior wars suggests that the treatment costs associated with the current conflicts will likely continue to rise for at least 30 years.

From a work-family perspective, military service generates substantial structural, energy, psychological, and behavioral tensions with family life. For example, military duties must be performed whenever and wherever they are needed, requiring families to move and potentially interfering with spouses' career progression and children's educations. Military life is heavily regulated and imposes heavy workloads, especially in wartime when units must simultaneously support deployed service members and prepare for their own upcoming combat tours of duty. Particularly during combat deployments, service members can be exposed to traumatic and stressful experiences that have the potential to generate psychological symptoms following return.

Although the U.S. military had already implemented extensive programs, policies and practices to support families prior to the current conflicts, the wars and demographic changes have spurred the development of innovative new models, some far outside previous boundaries of military workforce flexibility. The Navy, for example, has implemented several award-winning initiatives including telecommuting, alternative work schedules, operational deferments, and career intermissions. The wars have also challenged civilian employers to 'step up' to support not only their employees who serve, but also their employees who are the family members of those who serve. Despite these creative efforts, significant challenges remain unresolved at the interface between work and personal life.

Future challenges include continuing to adapt as military conflicts and missions evolve, defining the ideal balance between military support and family self-sufficiency, sustaining excellent leadership throughout the military around work-family issues, and caring for the millions of individuals whose lives have been changed by their own or a loved one's military service during the past decade.

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