



VA | U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Policy Research Agenda – FY2015 Series

HIGHLIGHTS OF A FORUM: VETERAN AND FAMILY REINTEGRATION

Office of Policy and Planning – Washington, DC 20420

FOREWORD

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recognizes the importance of family participation in the transition from military to civilian life. However, more needs to be done, not only in the area of program development, but also in the policy, strategy, and research space to understand how we can better support Veterans and their families.

On June 11, 2015, the VA Office of Policy and Planning (OPP) convened a forum to discuss Veteran and family reintegration. Thirty participants, representing a range of experience and viewpoints from federal government agencies, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations, and academic institutions attended the event. These participants provided firsthand insights on the opportunities and challenges facing Veterans and their families during the reintegration process which generated areas for immediate action necessary to inform policy and strategy.

The following is a summary of the discussion among the forum participants, as well as insights from OPP's other related research and analysis activities organized into five major areas for immediate action. The summary attempts to capture the ideas and themes that emerged at the forum and the collective discussion of participants at the sessions. The summary does not necessarily represent the views of the organizations, including VA, whose various Staff Offices and Administrations participated in the forum. The forum was structured so that participants could comment on issues openly, although not all participants commented on all topics. Participants were given the opportunity to comment on a draft of this summary.

A list of forum participants, the VA contact, and acknowledgements are located in the Appendices. A copy of this forum brief can be found on the [OPP website](#).

I wish to thank all of the participants for their thoughtful contributions to our discussion on Veteran and family reintegration. The discussion enhanced our understanding and provided valuable suggestions for ways to make progress on this important issue.

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September 28, 2015

INTRODUCTION

Over the next five years, more than 1 million Servicemembers will become Veterans and, with their families¹, begin their journey transitioning from military to civilian life.² For many Veterans and their families, reintegration is a complex, multifaceted process that involves finding a “new normal” in the realm of family relationships, wellness, and economic stability.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) presented Servicemembers with unique threats and injuries. However, reintegrating Servicemembers into civilian life and the challenges they face are not new phenomena. Over 60 years ago, General Omar Bradley delivered the Commission on Veterans’ Pensions report to the White House emphasizing the importance of reintegrating Veterans from military to civilian communities.³

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and its partners have worked to affirm this obligation to Veterans and their families by developing programs to: reduce Veteran homelessness, advance education by implementing the Post-9/11 GI Bill, partner with the private sector on Veteran hiring initiatives, and expand some benefits and services to more Veterans and family members. Furthermore, VA has worked with non-profit partners to connect Veterans and families to their local communities. Nonetheless, families have often been overlooked as key parties that both support the Veteran and experience the reintegration journey themselves.

¹ A Veteran family is defined by federal regulations as “a single person or a family in which the head of household or the spouse of the head of household, is a Veteran” ([38 CFR §62.2](#)). For the purpose of our forum, we expanded our definition to include parents, siblings, caregivers, partners and children.

² Chairman’s Office of Reintegration (2014). Veteran Reintegration: Useful Data. Retrieved from http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/CORe/1410_Veteran_Reintegration_Useful_Data.pdf.

³ The President's Commission on Veterans' Pensions. (1956). *Veterans' benefits in the United States, findings and recommendations: A report to the President*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

FORUM OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

This report summarizes discussions from the VA Office of Policy and Planning (OPP) Forum on Veteran and Family Reintegration that was held on June 11, 2015 in Arlington, VA. During the day-long forum, participants:

- Discussed their unique perspectives on Veteran and family reintegration,
- Explored key challenges facing Veterans and their families during reintegration, and
- Examined desired scenarios that address the key challenges.

To inform our understanding of Veteran and family reintegration and establish a structure for presenting forum discussions, OPP conducted structured interviews with a small sampling of Veterans to discuss their experiences with reintegration, conducted a literature review, and used insights learned from related research and analysis activities.

Overall, forum participants included individuals with a range of background, experiences, and knowledge who comprised the following two main groups: representatives from government and non-governmental organizations involved in current Veteran and family reintegration efforts, and experts who could address related policy and research areas.

Following the forum, OPP allocated specific challenges identified by forum participants into broad categories and developed related areas for immediate action.

FORUM DISCUSSION AND AREAS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

1. Develop a framework and standard definition of Veteran and family reintegration.

Many forum participants expressed differing views on how to define the term “reintegration.” While most agreed that reintegration, in its broadest sense, is the process by which a Servicemember and his or her family leaves the military for civilian life, participants tended to define this term in a way most applicable to their organizations’ specific programs and initiatives. They also noted how “reintegration” is often confused or used interchangeably with the term “transition.” As a result of the inconsistent use of terminology, participants highlighted the absence of any common strategic guidance and the need for a champion to help align programs and services.

With more than 218,000 Servicemembers projected to leave active duty military service in FY 2015 alone, OPP believes there is an urgent need for Veteran stakeholders to develop a framework and utilize a common taxonomy surrounding reintegration, as reintegration is often the beginning of a lifelong relationship between VA and Veteran-serving organizations and the Veteran and family.⁴

OPP will continue to explore the development of a collective framework for reintegration with input from the community of Veteran stakeholders. Such a framework should include a lexicon of definitions, outline broad strategies, and identify potential roles and responsibilities for the federal government and community stakeholders.

2. Inventory current reintegration programs, services, and partnerships targeting Veterans’ families.

Forum participants represented the broad array of reintegration programs available for Veterans and their families in the private, non-profit, and public sectors. Many participants had preexisting relationships and were already working to develop or sustain partnerships around specific Veterans’ issues. However, participants generally noted that the sheer number and scope of military and Veteran focused organizations, programs, and services make it a challenge to be fully aware of the full spectrum of programs, services, and partnerships available for Veterans and their families. Many times throughout the day, a participant would highlight the need to develop a certain program only to be informed by another participant that such a program already existed.

Despite the existence of a strong community of concern, OPP has consistently heard through its research and analysis engagements that due to the size and complexity of the Veteran

⁴ Separation figures are a result of an analysis of the FY 2015 Defense Manpower Requirements Report. Retrieved on August 15, 2015 from <http://prhome.defense.gov/Portals/52/Documents/RFM/TFPRQ/Docs/FY14%20DMRR%2028%20Aug%2013%20FINAL.pdf>

community, reintegration programs and initiatives are often disjointed and compartmentalized. For example, as of May 2015, there were more than 41,000 registered non-profit organizations serving the military and Veterans. Furthermore, federal, state, and local governments, as well as academic institutions, local communities, and private citizens also provide a wide array of programs and services to Veterans and their families.⁵ As a result, even the most seasoned advocates do not know about all of the available reintegration programs and services for Veterans and their families.

OPP recognizes the need to identify the various programs, services, and partnerships available for Veterans' families, and will begin evaluating methods to develop such an inventory.

3. Identify and explore data gaps that may exist related to Veterans' families.

While many participants pointed to available data sets on military families, they noted the lack of available similar data on Veterans' families multiple times throughout the forum. A few participants noted that this is primarily due to a lack of longitudinal data on Veteran families. Some participants recommended extrapolating information from the available research on military families, but others cautioned against this activity to avoid making erroneous conclusions as the needs and situations of military and Veteran families may not be the same. They also highlighted the challenges with obtaining and sharing data across organizations.

Through the forum and its other engagements with external stakeholders, OPP has found that the Veteran family has not yet been the subject of a comparative amount of study and research attention that the military family community has received. For example, a simple internet search using variations of the phrase "Veteran family research" results in information sources on military family research. Despite VA's efforts to make public data easily accessible and usable through the [Open Data Initiative](#), there is a need for more information on Veteran and families' choices, contemporary challenges, and their concerns.

OPP will review existing data on Veterans' families and identify ongoing data initiatives of interest. This review will inform updates to the Veterans Policy Research Agenda, OPP's internal research and analysis activities, and future data collection efforts.

4. Explore understudied areas related to Veteran family reintegration.

Throughout the day, forum participants cited several understudied areas related to Veteran families and reintegration for further exploration. These areas included:

- **Veteran Family Financial Stability** – Participants commented that Servicemembers are provided financial education and protections from predatory lending to mitigate

⁵ The Urban Institute, National Center for Charitable Statistics. (2015). Internal Revenue Service, Exempt Organizations Business Master File. Retrieved on August 15, 2015 from The Urban Institute, National Center for Charitable Statistics: <http://nccsweb.urban.org>.

financial instability for the military family. However, once leaving the military, the loss of income and protective measures may result in financial instability for certain Veterans and their families.

- **Reserve and National Guard Veteran (R/NG) Families**— Participants noted that the geographically dispersed nature of the R/NG component creates added challenges, including greater isolation and reduced access to the military community supportive network. Given the frequency of mobilization, the experiences of the R/NG dealing with separation, relocation, and reintegration are distinct from their active duty counterparts.
- **Spousal Employment** – Some participants generally noted that due to geographic location, professional opportunities, and requirements of the Servicemember's service, conditions for spousal employment while on active duty can, at times, be less than ideal. The challenges posed by active duty service can result in the spouse's professional pursuits being secondary to the requirements of the Servicemember.
- **Rethinking the Definition of a Veteran Family** – Participants generally noted that expanding the definition of a Veteran family should be explored. Participants generally agreed that the definition should include caregivers, children, parents, partners, and siblings because they play an important role in the Veteran family and can also be affected by reintegration.

OPP will review available literature on the areas above and identify potential partnerships to encourage research on these topics.

5. Examine opportunities to address desired future states developed by forum participants.

During the afternoon session, participants were organized into focus groups to identify specific challenge areas and develop a desired future state for Veteran family reintegration that could help inform strategic policy efforts. The challenge areas and future states are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Veteran Family Challenge Areas and Desired Future State Developed by Forum Participants

Challenge Area	Desired Future State
Financial Literacy	On-demand, customized and effective training program is available that anticipates, incentivizes, and meets the complex financial needs of transitioning military family member and their families.
Career Preparation	Every employer is a Veteran employer or Veteran-spouse employer.
Navigating the Sheer Number of Resources	Family members are included as targets of information sharing during the lifecycle of the Servicemember/Veteran.
Local Public Health	Customized system is available across the spectrum of existing services to support family wellness.
Cross Sector Integration	Systems of care of integrated in order to enhance access to family-centered, comprehensive health services for Veterans and their families.

Source: Information was obtained from focus group sessions with forum participants and analyzed by OPP.

As it relates to all of the challenge areas and desired future states, many of the participants also mentioned the need to eliminate stigmas and increase the cultural competency of stakeholders. They also identified the need to establish baselines, and develop methods to analyze and evaluate existing services.

OPP will closely analyze the challenge areas and desired future states, and identify opportunities for further development. As with all of OPP's policy analysis activities, any issues identified with short-term implications will go to the relevant [MyVA initiatives](#) for immediate review. Longer-term issues will inform VA's next strategic planning cycle and environmental scanning efforts.

* * *

In the coming fiscal year, OPP will work collaboratively with stakeholders on the areas for immediate action, and encourage other organizations to conduct additional research and analysis.

APPENDIX I

FORUM PARTICIPANTS

Forum Host

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APPENDIX II

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Acknowledgments

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