



Hidden Helpers at the Frontlines of Caregiving: Supporting the Healthy Development of Children from Military and Veteran Caregiving Homes

Executive Summary

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“Far too often, the veteran is the only one who is made to be the primary person in need of support. If you’re not talking about the other people in their life, you are missing a giant piece of the puzzle.”

– Adult caregiver

Why this study?

Empowering, supporting, and honoring the informal caregivers who care for America’s wounded, injured, or ill service members and veterans is the mission of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation (the Foundation). These informal caregivers are usually the service members’ or veterans’ family members or friends. The Foundation led some of the earliest research on these caregivers, also known as “Hidden Heroes,” and identified the challenges military and veteran caregivers (hereafter military caregivers) encountered in helping their service member or veteran manage the adversities that stem from their visible and invisible wounds (Ramchand et al. 2014; Tanielian et al. 2017). This effort resulted in a research blueprint which revealed that attending to the well-being of children, the “Hidden Helpers” living in these homes, was a critical next step to enhance support for military caregiving families (Tanielian et al. 2017). The Foundation partnered with Mathematica to examine the impact of caregiving on children growing up in military caregiving homes to help address the national challenge of providing effective support to caregivers of all ages and backgrounds.

“People would ask how our dad was. Nobody would ask how we were.”

– Young adult who grew up in a military caregiving home

Whom do we hope to help with this study?

Approximately 2.3 million children under age 18 live with a veteran who is disabled, according to our analyses of data from American Community Survey (ACS) for 2015–2019. Prior research suggests negative outcomes for children growing up in military caregiving homes (Briggs et al. 2020; DeVoe et al. 2018; Glenn et al. 2002). The return of service members who sustained or developed an illness or injury because of their military service can be disruptive for families as they learn to support them and establish new norms for operating as a family. In the midst of this disruption, families are often left wanting help. Caregiving consumes the time and energy of the adult caregiver, and children in many military caregiving homes consequently take on additional responsibilities—ranging from additional household chores to caregiving responsibilities for their injured or ill service member or veteran and responsibilities for siblings who would otherwise have been cared for by the adults in the home. Ultimately, children in military caregiving homes can get lost in their family’s response to the needs of the care recipient.

What did our study find?

“There are not enough programs, and there is not enough attention for people with problems.”

– *Child caregiver*

Children want more support to navigate their experiences as Hidden Helpers, and caregivers struggle to identify responsive sources of support tailored for caregiving children. Children need help not only managing the stresses and the demands of caregiving; they need child-centered information on their servicemember’s or veteran’s injury and its long-term implications. Adult caregivers face challenges identifying and accessing supports and attending to children’s needs can become crowded out by the demands of caregiving.

“The responsibility of everything is really my responsibility. I just try to delegate where I can.”

– *Adult caregiver*

Caregivers fight to make the most of their situation and to foster well-functioning families by emphasizing cohesion, communication, and flexibility. They also work hard to keep the demands of caregiving from dominating all aspects of family life. Addressing the expressed needs of caregivers could help families function better.

“I do not want my children to feel that they need to hide dad’s injuries.”

– *Adult caregiver*

Fears of stigma and being misunderstood by friends, family, and the larger community can engender feelings of isolation for children and caregivers. Children and caregivers report that their non-caregiving peers struggle to understand the experience of caregiving. At worst, misunderstanding and stigma about injured and ill care recipients can keep military caregiving families from seeking healthcare and other supports. Some families avoid looking for support altogether out of fear.

“I’d like a program that gets the veterans and caregivers and families what they need. I want to be able to come home and not see my mom doing a bunch of paperwork... I want to see that my dad gets the correct care, and it doesn’t take him a week to get permission to go to the ER for a broken bone. I want my mom to get the help she needs.”

– *Child caregiver*





National and local barriers limiting access to speedy, high quality care for care recipients and their families negatively impact the entire family’s well-being, but families have ideas about how to overcome the barriers. Navigating the federal system to access quality care is a significant source of anxiety and distress for military caregiving families. Caregivers offered solutions that they believed could help improve family functioning and support the well-being of children from military caregiving homes, like providing affordable and accessible child care and cultivating schools’ understanding of the needs and impacts of caregiving.

“We’ve been married for 20-something years, and I’ve seen how my husband was prior and then after... It’s two different men... The Army does not brief you on this.”

– Adult caregiver

What can be done about it?

We identified four key recommendations to help improve the well-being and healthy development of children in military caregiving homes:

 Create and scale	 Invest	 Raise awareness	 Increase access
Develop quality programs and interventions that support children in caregiving families and focus on peer support, mental health, and age-appropriate developmental opportunities.	Fund, promote, and create supports for the entire family unit.	Amplify national campaigns and coalitions to improve understanding of care recipients’ visible and invisible wounds and the needs of caregivers and children in military caregiving homes.	Partner with federal and local agencies, including private organizations, to reduce barriers to health care and provide centralized comprehensive services focused on supporting caregiving families.

Hidden Helpers take pride in the ways they help their families, but they need more support, both to navigate their role in their families and foster their own healthy development. Acting on these recommendations requires active collaboration and partnership among federal agencies, community and nonprofit organizations, policymakers, researchers, and philanthropic organizations. To this end, steps these entities could take to improve the well-being of military caregiving children include:

- / Identifying, researching, and scaling programs and strategies likely to improve outcomes for children and caregivers in military caregiving families;
- / Identifying and removing barriers or disincentives to obtaining timely and effective care;
- / Improving data collection about military caregiving families to more comprehensively understand their needs and monitor progress toward improving their outcomes;
- / Building on existing and create new efforts to build awareness and understanding of the needs of those in military caregiving families;
- / Providing trainings for those most likely to interact with individuals in military caregiving families so that they are better equipped to support their needs; and
- / Centralizing and sharing resources that help military caregiving families better identify and navigate programs and supports.