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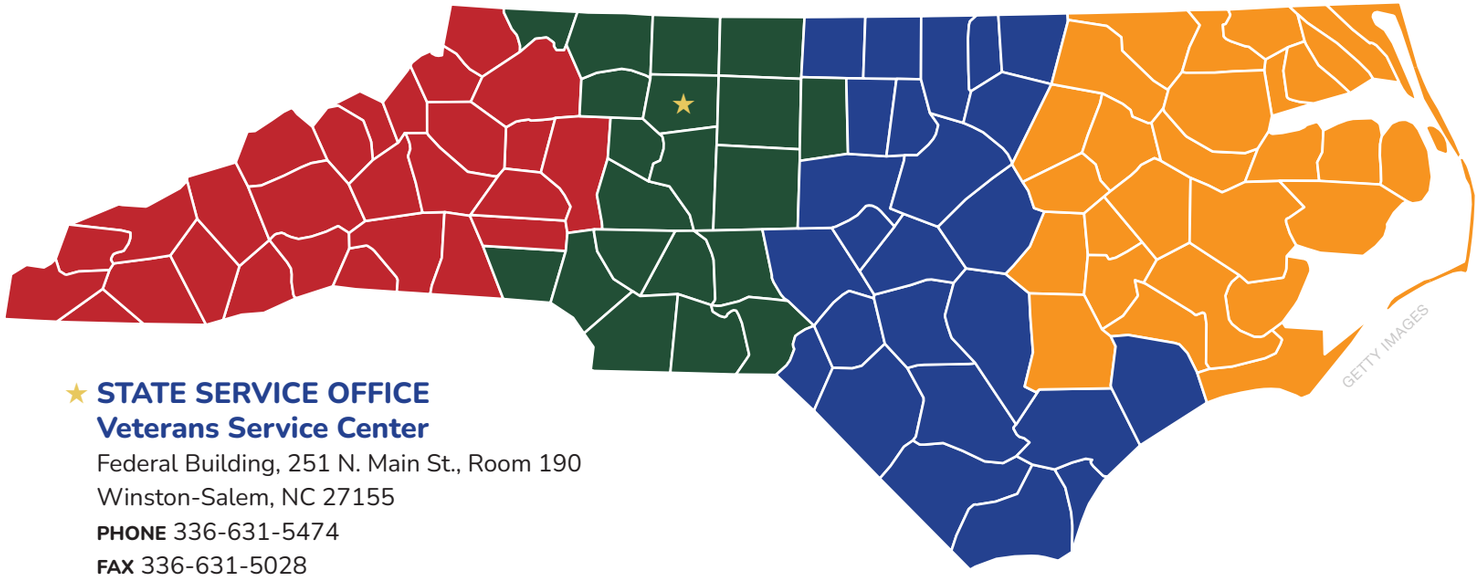
Military Service Hits Home

How Service Members, Families, Employers and Veterans Face the Future

Funded by North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services - Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services and the Governor's Institute

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State Veterans Service Centers



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Winston-Salem, NC 27155
PHONE 336-631-5474
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REGION I (Western NC)

HICKORY,
1985 Tate Blvd SE, Ste 113
Hickory, NC 28602
PHONE 919-664-1040
FAX 919-664-1041

CANTON,
120 Main St
Canton, NC 28716
PHONE 919-664-1095
FAX 919-664-1096

MORGANTON,
305 East Union St, Ste A135
Morganton, NC 28655
PHONE 919-664-1055
FAX 919-664-1056

REGION II (Piedmont)

CLEMMONS,
3802 Clemmons Road, Ste C
Clemmons, NC 27012
PHONE 919-664-1000
FAX 919-664-1001

CHARLOTTE,
5500 Executive Center Dr,
Ste 132
Charlotte, NC 28212
PHONE 919-664-1080
FAX 919-664-1081

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GARNER,
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1027 Hwy 70 West, Ste 202
Garner, NC 27529
PHONE 919-664-1160
FAX 919-664-1161

FAYETTEVILLE,
225 Green St, Ste 903
Fayetteville, NC 28301
PHONE 919-664-1130
FAX 919-664-1131

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3205 Randall Parkway,
Ste 102
Wilmington, NC 28403
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REGION IV (Coastal)

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1023 US 17 South, Ste 2
Elizabeth City, NC 27909
PHONE 919-664-1150
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KINSTON,
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Kinston, NC 28504
PHONE 919-664-1030
FAX 919-664-1031

GREENVILLE,
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Greenville, NC 27834
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FAX 919-664-1016

WILSON,
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Wilson, NC 27893
PHONE 919-664-1185
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A MESSAGE FROM KELLY CROSBIE, NCDHHS ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR DMH/DD/SUS



Military service is part of the fabric of North Carolina. Service members, veterans and military families live in our communities, strengthen our workplaces and contribute to our state in countless ways.

For me, this is also personal. I grew up as the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, and I know that military families share in the experiences, sacrifices and pride that come with service.

This edition of NC4Vets explores what the future looks like for service members, veterans and families — from building careers and finding community to accessing support when it is needed. It also asks employers and communities to recognize the tremendous experience, skills and perspective military-connected North Carolinians bring with them.

Being a military-friendly state means more than honoring service. It means creating opportunities, removing barriers and making sure North Carolina remains a place where service members, veterans and their families can build the futures they want.

A MESSAGE FROM GOVERNOR JOSH STEIN



We owe a deep debt of gratitude to the veterans who have fought bravely so we may enjoy our freedoms at home. As Governor, I'm committed to recognizing that sacrifice by ensuring the state is equipped to provide key resources to North Carolina's service members and veterans.

Through NC4VETS, North Carolina is creating a strong network among state agencies and nonprofit organizations to connect veterans and military families with critical services such as health care benefits, educational opportunities, and job services.

Earlier this year, I was proud to sign an executive order that supports service members and military families by strengthening coordination efforts among state agencies.

When we work together, across the public and private sectors, we can deliver better results for our military families and veterans. We are forever grateful for your service to our country. You make our state proud, and we hope to demonstrate it through our support.

ASK ME NC.

Have you or a family member ever served in the military?

Just Ask.

Veterans, Service Members, and their Families regularly interact with healthcare providers, housing agencies, schools, and support services — yet they are not always asked about their military background. Many choose not to disclose this information, whether out of pride, privacy, or simply not realizing how important it is to their care or support.

Asking the simple question, ***"Have you or a family member ever served in the military?"*** helps professionals:

- Connect individuals to specialized resources designed for the military and veteran community.
- Better understand the context of physical, emotional, financial, or academic challenges.
- Build trust and respect, showing care for a person's full story.

And if you haven't been asked, you can always take the lead — proudly say ***"Ask Me NC!"*** and share your service connection. Your experiences matter, and the more we know, the better we can serve.

Learn more at AskMeNC.org

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RESETTING RELATIONSHIPS

After deployment, a service member often returns home to family dynamics that have changed in their absence — and they're coming back a different person as well.



The year she spent deployed to Iraq took a toll on Crystal Miller's family. Now the Director of SMVF Programs at the Governor's Institute, Miller supports veterans in transition.

Four months. Six months. A full year or longer. After the deployment of a parent, child, sibling or life partner, it's almost certain that the service member will come home to a different family dynamic. A dynamic that will be further tested by the fact that the service member themselves is likely coming home a different person.

Over time, people change. Even without major life events or traumatic experiences, subtle differences surface. Children learn new behaviors. Teens mature and grow increasingly independent. Adults continue to adapt and evolve. Even in the most constant and stable environments, family dynamics are shifting sands.

In her role as the Lead Child and Youth Program Coordinator for the North Carolina National Guard, Kristi Wilson has found that teenagers have the hardest time resetting relationships after a parent deployed. "Not so much with the leaving but with the reintegration process," Wilson said.

The teenagers in a family are often the ones whose daily lives have been changed dramatically, maybe they no longer had the opportunity to participate in an after-school activity because they took on more responsibilities at home, or because there wasn't anyone to drive them to and from

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activities.

"A lot of times teenagers have been asked to step up and fill the gap when a parent is deployed, maybe they've helped with younger siblings or picked up chores around the house that the missing person normally does," Wilson said. "When the service member returns, we see the conflicts start because the teenager has been mature and responsible during deployment, but that service member still sees them as the child that was there when they left. This creates a little bit of rift in figuring out where everyone fits back in. The service member has to understand that their teenager has grown and become more responsible. The teenager has to understand they're still the service member's child."

Or maybe after a homecoming a best-case scenario unfolds: Everyone communicates openly. Acclimates to one another's needs. Easily falls back into step with one another and relationships move forward almost as if there was never an interruption.

That's the story you'll hear if you talk with Colonel Robert (Bob) Cusick, the 8th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) Commander at Fort Bragg. He and his family held steadfast throughout his many deployments, seven to Afghanistan and one to Iraq. It wasn't always easy by any measure, but his wife helped keep him "even keel" through the years, the first to support him staying in the Army after he was gravely wounded in 2007 and holding their family strong through all the moves and missions. Now, as his 25-year military career draws to a close and the family transitions into civilian life in March 2027, COL Cusick talked candidly about the resiliency of a modern military family. (Story page 8.)

Crystal Miller, Director of SMVF Programs at the Governor's Institute, tells a different story of resiliency. When her North Carolina National Guard unit deployed to Iraq in 2005, she expected to return to her four children and husband in six months. Instead, the deployment was extended to nine months, then a full year.

"People ask what the hardest thing was and it was not what they expect," Miller said.

"Teenagers often have the hardest time, not so much with the leaving but with the reintegration process. A lot of times they've had to step up and fill the gap when a parent is deployed, maybe they've helped with younger siblings or picked up chores around the house. When the service member returns, we see conflicts start because the teenager has been mature and responsible during deployment, but that service member still sees them as the child that was there when they left."

KRISTI WILSON
Lead Child and Youth Program Coordinator for the North Carolina National Guard



Building caring relationships while deployed helped Crystal Miller cope with being away from her family. (After divorce, Miller replaced her married surname, Anderson, with her maiden name.)

It was "learning to love again," having to work to re-establish family relationships. "It wasn't as easy as just coming home, because I'd had to detach myself [emotionally] to survive, otherwise I couldn't function with that much pain."

Her husband was also serving, and the anxiety from having had both parents deploy while they were growing up left her children and stepchildren with struggles that have continued into adulthood. Family dynamics were forever altered.

"There are still some wounds that have never healed and sometimes I question whether or not we ever rebuilt those relationships," she said. And from her family's experiences, she knows that secondary post-traumatic stress disorder is real.

The growing prevalence of PTSD

PTSD is slightly more common among veterans than civilians according to the National Center for PTSD at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Seven percent of veterans compared with 6% of adults in the civilian population will have PTSD in their lifetime. However, the incidence of PTSD has accelerated in recent years and almost a third, 29%, of veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom have experienced PTSD, 15% of them reporting PTSD within the past year.

Research and programs at the UNC School of Medicine's Institute for Trauma Recovery focus on acute stress reactions and how those reactions transition into post-traumatic stress disorder and other long-term problems, like insomnia.

"Anyone who's been in a very difficult or stressful situation can have difficulty sleeping afterward and that increases the risk of having persistent PTSD problems," said Dr. Samuel McLean, Director of the Institute for Trauma Recovery and professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Emergency Medicine.

In addition to difficulty sleeping, symptoms of PTSD can include feeling on edge, having flashbacks of the trauma, experiencing dizziness, difficulty concentrating or feeling like it takes longer to process information, and generalized aches and pains. It can also manifest in social withdrawal, outbursts of anger, and — in the most severe instances – suicidal ideation.

The result of surviving traumatic events is what he describes as a heightened neuroplasticity, but it "comes at this terrible cost, where it can cause permanent rewiring. We can remember the event, and there are a lot of problems with flashbacks and other disturbances of memory. There's this constant sense of miserable anxiety and agitation that trauma survivors sometimes can't escape."

The effects are multifactorial. It's hard to go to sleep, hard to stay asleep. And the core characteristic is "feeling very on edge and very revved up," McLean said. "I've had servicemen and women tell me that after their first deployment, they could go home and be relaxed. But after their second or third deployment, there was no difference between sort of wartime and home time. Laying on their couch at home, it felt like when they were about to go around a corner in Fallujah and didn't know if they would be shot when they stuck their head around the edge of the building. Even at home with their family, they're always on that same edge."

In addition to the terrible burden of symptoms associated with PTSD, McLean said the service members he's talked with often have an overwhelming feeling that they're losing their mind. That they're the only person struggling to deal with trauma, so there must be something wrong with them. One of the important messages that he strives to convey to people is that they are not inherently flawed, they're just human. "This is what happens to any human who is put through the kind of horrific experience that they had. Nothing is wrong about what's happening to them, it's the effects of the trauma and the traumatic stress."

Although this is widely applicable to service members who've experienced combat trauma or military sexual trauma, it could happen to anyone. And speaking in general terms, looking at PTSD epidemiologically across the population, McLean said experiencing additional trauma can make it harder for people to recover from previous trauma. However, he added, "I wouldn't want people who experience trauma to feel they're destined to have PTSD, because I do think people can be remarkably resilient."

PTSD Among Veterans

Post-traumatic stress disorder is slightly more common among veterans than civilians according to the National Center for PTSD at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: 7% of veterans compared with 6% of adults in the civilian population will have PTSD in their lifetime.

Incidence of PTSD By Service Era	Experienced PTSD within past year	Esperienced PTSD at some point in their life
Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom	15%	29%
Persian Gulf War (Desert Storm)	14%	21%
Vietnam War	5%	10%
World War II and Korean War	2%	3%

7% of veterans will have PTSD at some point in their life

13% of female veterans will have PTSD

6% of male veterans will have PTSD

Source: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_veterans.asp

Women at higher risk

The National Center for PTSD also reports that women veterans are more likely to experience PTSD, or at least report having had PTSD, than their male peers. Thirteen percent of female veterans have reported struggles with PTSD compared with 6% of male veterans.

Patricia Harris, who served 22 years in the U.S. Army Reserve, experienced military sexual trauma as well as domestic violence in her first marriage — life experiences that have made her acutely aware of the pain that PTSD causes.

After retiring out of the Army Reserve, she founded Women Veterans Support Services (WVSS), a nonprofit organization that provides safety and support for women veterans and servicewomen who are facing a crisis, struggling to advocate for themselves or unable to find essential resources. Since it started in 2008, WVSS has served more than 2,200 women. Harris talks about her vision for WVSS and its mission in a Q&A discussion on page 15.

Throughout this issue we explore how Military Service Hits Home, calling out challenges, opportunities and resources for service members, veterans and their families. ■

RESILIENCE DEFINES THE MODERN MILITARY FAMILY

The ethos of today's military family is one where every member of the family feels the honor and commitment of service.

Colonel Robert (Bob) Cusick was about eight months shy of retiring out of the military when he talked with NC 4 Vets magazine. After 25 years of service in the Army, March 2027 will mark the beginning of his life as a civilian. It's a monumental transition for him and for his family, including his wife of 20 years and their three children who have spent their entire lives "in the military" so to speak.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't anxious, but there are so many programs out there to help support service members through the transition," said COL Cusick, currently the 8th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) Commander at Fort Bragg.

He cites the state's public-private partnership, NC 4 Me, as one such resource as well as American Corporate Partners, a national nonprofit with more than 5,000 service members, veterans and active-duty spouses currently being mentored and more than 40,000 who've been helped since the organization was founded in 2010. American Corporate Partners assigned Cusick a mentor, who continues to counsel him through the transition and in turn connected him with NC 4 Me.

"The transition space can be overwhelming to veterans, so my mentor is helping me navigate the changes and when he connected me to NC 4 Me it was a breath of fresh air to see both the state's efforts to help businesses and the efforts to help veterans meet a bigger community," Cusick said.

Overwhelming is an understated assessment of the transitions underway for him and his entire family: Not only is Cusick faced with redefining his career, which for the last two decades has entailed serving as an officer in Special Forces, he and his family were also in the midst of relocating to a new home in Fuquay-Varina where their youngest daughter was starting a new school in a new town – pretty much a way of life for the children of service members. Their son was returning to college at West Virginia University (Cusick's alma mater) and their daughter was heading to Boone for her freshman year at Appalachian State University. The inevitable sibling rivalry that comes with two "Mountaineers" in the house — representing different universities — is a lighthearted version of the flux Cusick and his family have often navigated, from the typical challenges posed by military service to some of the most traumatic events imaginable.



The Cusick family beach vacation in 2018.

Start to finish

The world was a quiet, stable place in May 2001 when Cusick commissioned into the U.S. Army – at least that's how he described the way things felt before 9/11. After the September attacks, "we all knew 9/11 would change the trajectory of our careers," Cusick said.

But knowing things would change didn't begin to prepare the young officer for the military career that unfolded. In sharing his story, he candidly reflected on the moments in history he's been privy to witness and the significance of having had his family's unwavering commitment throughout.

COLONEL ROBERT (BOB) CUSICK,

8th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) Commander at Fort Bragg

Commissioned into U.S. Army: May 2001

2008: Awarded Purple Heart

20 years: Special Forces Officer

Deployed: 7 times to Afghanistan, 1 to Iraq (8 total)

Retiring out: March 2027

Family: Wife and three children

Within months of officer basic training, Cusick found himself deployed to Afghanistan in January 2002, his first of eight deployments to the Middle East, seven in

Afghanistan and one to Iraq.

"Talk about a full circle perspective," he said, noting he was among the first troops deployed to Afghanistan for the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, and he was also there in August 2021 when the mission ended.

"It feels surreal; I still can't believe I was there at the beginning and the end, and all that I witnessed across those years. But being there in 2021 I think helped me with closure — although the families of the fallen are always on my mind, especially the families whose sons and daughters did not come home," Cusick said. "I lost many friends over the years in Afghanistan, and I think about that a lot because it's important not to forget. That's what we always talk about in the military: It's important not to forget. Honor the fallen."

His second deployment came on the heels of the first and when he arrived back in the states after several months in Afghanistan, he was told "don't unpack your bags, you're going to Kuwait." He took it in stride, with all the energy and adrenaline of an "eager" first lieutenant.

"Just talking about it today gives me the chills — that my career started with two immediate deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, the start of both wars. But that's what I signed up for and at that time I was still single, no wife or kids at home."

There was no second-guessing the choice he'd made, but what he did question, "quite often," was whether he would ever relive the excitement of those early days. That's when he decided to go into Special Operations, specifically Special Forces.

Soon after, he met his wife in Syracuse, New York, where she had grown up and recently finished nursing school. Her parents were moving to North Carolina, Cusick was going into Special Operations, and their future naturally fell into place.

"I truly believe God has a plan for everybody and this all came together. After I finished my training in Georgia, my wife and I moved to North Carolina in 2005 and we haven't looked back," he said. Except for a year spent in Newport, Rhode Island, and three years in northern Virginia while he worked at the Pentagon, they've spent their lives and raised their family in and around Fort Bragg.

The toughest talk

On January 25, 2008, COL Cusick was gravely wounded during a seven-hour battle in Afghanistan and one of his men was killed.

When I was doing a fellowship at Duke University back in 2023-2024, I told all those young kids that the military has been good to me. The experiences that I've lived have been more positive than negative. And the military truly has taken care of me and my family, so I've got no regrets. Overall, the military story is positive, and I'd like more people to learn that who aren't connected to the military."

COLONEL ROBERT CUSICK

"I was on life support for two days and my teammate at the lead of the patrol, Staff Sergeant Robert Miller, was killed. He was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions on what was a really bad day in Afghanistan. Robbie Miller saved my life — so that's a high-impact story from my long career that I always talk about," said Cusick, who was awarded the Purple Heart for injuries sustained in that combat.

Within 48 to 72 hours after being wounded Cusick was in Germany, and within five days he was at Walter Reed Hospital with his wife, who was pregnant with their second child, at his side. Their two-year-old son was with her parents and Cusick's parents were also at the hospital. The U.S. military is known to rally families almost as quickly as they do troops.

"My wife being a nurse helped me interpret and translate what the doctors were telling us, but it took me about a year to recover," Cusick recalled. "And then we had probably the toughest conversation in our marriage: Were we going to stay in the Army or get out of the Army?"

His wife answered the question for them, reminding Cusick that serving in the military was his dream and she thought he should keep chasing that dream. By the summer of 2009, he was back in Afghanistan, deployed again while his wife held steady at home with their infant daughter and toddler son.

"She's been amazing throughout the whole process of this military life," he said. Together they have continued to stay in touch with the family of Staff Sgt. Miller, who had moved from his hometown of Wheaton, Ill., to Florida.

Cusick and his teammates make a trip down there every couple of years to pay respect at his grave and visit the family. "His mother and father have been tremendous," Cusick said. "You never know how to interact with a Gold Star family. I think those families would tell you they just want to hear stories about their loved one, and they want you to be normal around them. They don't want anything special, just that you remember and recognize their loved ones. So that's important for me, especially with Robbie."

Miller's family has a legacy of military service dating to the Revolutionary War. Both of his grandfathers served in WWII, his father was in the Army, and he has brothers in Special Forces and the Navy. "When you talk about a salt-of-the-earth family of service, his family is it."

Pros and cons of difficult moves

The word Cusick comes back to when he describes his own family is "resilience." But in his estimation resilience is also a prevailing characteristic of any military family that's been through turmoil and trauma over the last two decades.

A Special Thank You:

COL Cusick would like to highlight his appreciation for the support he's received during his transition including from the Donovan and Bank Foundation, American Corporate Partners (ACP), Leader Solutions and Decision Support (LSDS), NC4ME and Oplign. As well as special recognition to his friends: Jeremy, Lee, Chris, Brent, Erik, Doug, David, Drew, Terry, John, Ed, Paul, and many others.

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Ask him what the most difficult time was for his family and his answer might come as a surprise: It was in 2016, when they moved to Northern Virginia where he spent three years working at the Pentagon.

"That was probably the highest stress period because we had a 10-year-old, 8-year-old and 2-year-old, so my wife and I had to have a conversation about whether she should get a job up there or stay home with the kids. We understood it was going to be a significant transition for them, moving to a new place and new school, so my wife chose to focus on the family and not work outside the home while we were there," he said.

It's the kind of work choices military spouses often face — many times to the detriment of their own careers and to the detriment of financial well-being.

"Military families are always going to talk about finances, especially as they move. The cost of living in a lot of places can be high and it's a very nuanced conversation," Cusick said. "We made it work because I'd had multiple deployments and we had money in savings. But there's no denying that your dollar will get you further in North Carolina than it will in Northern Virginia."

On the positive side, moving about reinforces family and individual resiliency and it teaches children how to adapt quickly, make friends and find their own niche. His son and older daughter have friends they met in Virginia that they still communicate with.

"Moving teaches them that life can be stressful, but that's okay — you find ways to cope, you drive forward," Cusick said. When his older children wrote essays for college applications, they both wrote about sports and that while they moved between states (back and forth to North Carolina between years in Rhode Island and Virginia) they always had the foundation of participating in sports that brought new friendships and teamwork.

Ultimately the family foundation has been what he and his wife built together.

"My wife has been magnificent in supporting my Army career and I love her. She can be a hard read, my biggest critic but also my biggest cheering base. And she's helped keep me even keel through the years. When she's seen me struggling or knows that I need to get support, she's told me to get help. In the last 12 to 24 months, we decided that it's time to transition and build the next chapter, to enjoy however many years we have left together."

"Aggressively pursuing retirement"

At this point, Cusick said the conversation in his house circles around a lot of "unsolicited advice," with his kids weighing in almost daily on what dad should do next. Everything from buy a franchise to go work in corporate America, it seems nothing is off the table, and opinions vary widely on where and what the future should hold. "I think my youngest wants to stay in North Carolina. My middle daughter wants us to stay in North Carolina, and my son is telling me: 'Dad, go wherever the job is.'"

For the foreseeable future, the plan is to settle into Fuquay-Varina, and the steady constant through it all is his wife and her job as a clinical care coordinator for hospice case management, which Cusick believes is probably a tougher job than the career he's had, given that she's helping families with end-of-life care.

The shared experience of both having high-stress jobs can sometimes help the couple cope, but Cusick said his wife would likely say that occasionally it's too much, so they make opportunities for the family to head to the Outer Banks or just get a breath of air at home.

"Because all this transition space is overwhelming, we've started going on walks at night around the neighborhood and I think we're learning how to cope with both the stressors of me leaving the military, the unknowns, but also the stressors of her job," he said. "I know she's going to get more of me when I've retired out of the military, and the inherent stressors of not being there physically weigh on a military family during all the deployments. But my promise to my kids is that whatever I decide to do next, they're going to get more of me — both wanted and unwanted attention."

Every veteran is faced with how to deal with the transition from service to civilian life, and with a handful of months remaining Cusick is intent on building a network of people to help him along the way.

"I'm in the process of transition, but I think



On Veteran's Day 2023, COL Cusick joined his youngest daughter at Baucom Elementary School in Apex.

veterans that have successfully transitioned will tell you: Be humble, build relationships, build a network. And meet with people for the right reasons, don't just see it as a transition or a potential job, they need to know who you are as a person."

At this point, he is "pursuing retirement aggressively," hoping to find a job that "helps the people of North Carolina and puts money in my pocket."

During a fellowship at Duke University a couple of years ago he told the students that the military had been good to him. "The experiences that I've lived have been more positive than negative. And the military truly has taken care of me and my family, so I've got no regrets, and I don't think my family has any regrets in our continued service for 25 years," he concluded. "Overall, the military story is positive, and I'd like more people to learn that who aren't connected to military."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and the interviewed, they do not represent an official position of the Department of War, the Army, or the U.S. Government. ■


Getty Images

RIGHT TO RETURN TO WORK — WHAT EMPLOYERS SHOULD KNOW

Employers of National Guard and Reserve service members play a significant role in supporting U.S. military forces by upholding the right for these individuals to return to their civilian jobs after service.

Supporting National Guard and Reserve service members that are employed in civilian jobs is the right thing to do. The patriotic thing to do. And, when those service members are called into active duty, it's also a legally obligated requirement that employers must uphold. But it's not always the easy thing for employers to do.

Organizations that employ Guard and Reserve members must guarantee those employees can be reinstated in their civilian jobs when they return from service and do so at the same seniority level and pay rate they would have reached if they had not been deployed.

Numerical perspective

Including both National Guard and Reserve forces, the Reserve Organization of America puts the count of current Guard and Reserve service members at over 1.2 million. Between state and federal deployments, thousands are called into active duty at any given time. That's no small sacrifice for the service members and their families. It's also a significant impact for the thousands of businesses that are called to operate with reduced manpower.

For instance, a little over a year ago, in August 2025, 800 National Guard members were mobilized for President Trump's "Make DC Safe and Beautiful" initiative. Fast forward to the height of deployment in DC and roughly 5,000 National Guardsmen were in the city for America's 250th celebration. The count declined across the summer, but current projections forecast that 2,500 to 3,000 National Guard members will remain in the capital city for the foreseeable future.

There are other domestic deployments underway, and the National Guard reported that more than 15,000 of its members deployed internationally in 2025. The actual number of Guardsmen deployed fluctuates at any point in time, but earlier this year the Council on Foreign Relations reported that more than 1 million National Guard members had been deployed internationally since 9/11.

Most of the men and women deployed with the National Guard and Reserve also maintain full-time jobs, and the businesses and organizations that employ them do so with the understanding that members of the Guard and the Reserve could be called into service at any time.

Educating employers and the workforce

"For the service members, their families and their employers, education is the lynchpin," said Sergeant Major Robert T. Shook, Director of the North Carolina National Guard Military and Family Readiness Program.

Understanding the differences in full-time military service members and those in the National Guard or Reserve is key. "Our active-duty component peers have one full-time job, to be a soldier. But our National Guardsmen, who are not full-time military, truthfully have two full-time jobs because they are expected to maintain the exact same standards as their active-duty counterparts, and yet they still have another full-time civilian job. And their duty as a soldier doesn't pay the mortgage," said SGM Shook. "It's tough. And those civilian employers need to know it's tough."

Ask him what employers can do to support the Guard and Reserve service members and his answer comes fast: "Show compassion. But that's a tall order."

SGM Shook has been in the Army National Guard for 26 years, initially serving with a unit in western North Carolina in the position of a military police team member and including mobilizations for a variety of assignments including time in Guantanamo Bay.

"I joined a National Guard unit in Sylva, before the towers came down. At that time, it was very community oriented. Now, not so much," he said. "Functionally speaking, the National Guard has historically been a hometown guard, but the past 25 years have changed that DNA considerably. We've always been prioritized

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as a federal force that can serve as members of our community. Frankly that's why I joined the Guard — to take care of the people to my left and right. But because we've become so much more geographically dispersed it's put a different strain on our families."

When his unit was mobilized in February 2003, he was given just 14 days' notice before he was deployed for 16 months, returning in late June of the following year. Now, he says there is typically a 30-day mobilization cycle, so service members and their employers have a little more notice.

"Generally speaking, we have 12 months now, and that includes ramp-up, the mission, and ramp-down. Dates are always subject to change, but the Air Force National Guard generally does shorter rotations than Army National Guard because their operation has a different intensity cycle and they have a different mission altogether," he said.

The North Carolina National Guard is comprised of the North Carolina Air National Guard (NCANG) and the North Carolina Army National Guard (NCARNG), which means NCNG "falls subordinate to the secretaries of both the Air Force and the Army," SGM Shook added.

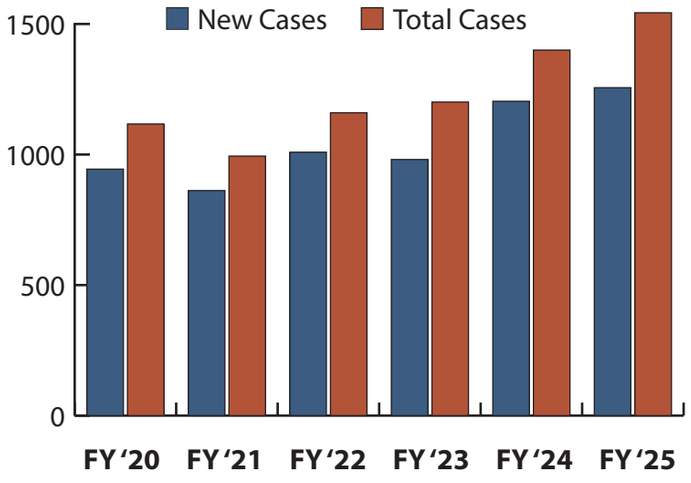
He recognizes the stress that unexpected deployments bring both to families and to the workplace. Shook has a wife of 18 years and two children, ages 13 and 9, and in his estimation, caring for the families of its service members is a "foundational element" of all the strategic objectives of the National Guard.

Before becoming a full-time federal employee and assuming his role at NCNG, he worked for a small business in western North Carolina where he was one of five employees. "The owner, who was one of those five employees, knew he could count on me to work to task, not to time, and to bring that military work ethic to bear on the subject, but I still had to go to annual trainings, and deployments were always around the corner," SGM Shook said. "That creates a general anxiety with employers that's tough to overcome. And it's not that they necessarily will hire or fire prejudicially, but it does create a whisper of concern in the back of their mind, which is why we work so closely with ESGR to make sure that service members have those employment protections that they are so richly entitled to."

Conflict Resolution: When Military Service and Civilian Work Collide

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 protects the civilian jobs, health benefits and seniority status of Reserve and National Guard military members who are called into active duty.

Source: June 2026: USERRA Annual Report to Congress FY 2025 from VETS (Veterans' Employment and Training Service) at the U.S. Department of Labor



Shared responsibilities

The Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) program operates under the Department of War and was established in 1972 to promote understanding and cooperation between members of the Guard and Reserve and their civilian employers, mediating to help resolve conflicts that might arise over the employee's military obligations. Synergistically, the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) of 1994 is a federal law that protects the civilian jobs, health benefits and seniority status of military members. The USERRA outlines the rights of Reserve and Guard members and the responsibilities of civilian employers.

For instance, members called out of their civilian jobs for military commitments are asked to provide notice 30 days in advance of leaving, unless military necessity makes that impossible. Employers are required to allow the necessary time off for training or active deployments but can do so with the employees on unpaid status. However, the employee has the option of using any accrued paid time off.

The employer is also required to allow deployed employees to continue health insurance coverage for themselves and their dependents for up to 18 months, or the duration of the leave, but the employee is expected to cover the cost of insurance.

The crux of the USERRA is that service members are guaranteed they can be reinstated in their civilian jobs with the seniority, status and compensation they would have reached if they had not been deployed. In most cases, employers are required to provide training to their returning employees if it's needed to restore competency and the employer is expected to provide the pensions and benefits that would have accrued over the employee's time in service.

For their part, employees released from military service are required to apply for reemployment within 14 days of being released if they served between 31 and 180 days, and within 90 days of being released if they served for more than 180 days.

The Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) within the U.S. Department of Labor protects the employment rights of veterans, service members and their spouses and assists employers with compliance. In its annual USERRA report that was released in June, VETS reported there were over 1,500 USERRA cases reviewed in FY 2025 by the DOL. Of the more than 1,300 USERRA cases that DOL closed last year, more than a third (38%) cited potential violations involving employer discrimination of military obligations, roughly 21% entailed claims about employment reinstatement and over 7% were about layoffs or terminations. ■

ANXIETY IN THE UNKNOWNS

Financial insecurities and struggles with mental health are leading sources of anxiety for military families.

The family members of military and veterans experience higher rates of anxiety and depression than the general public according to a recent report from the Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness at the University of Texas at Austin. As of 2024, there were more than 4.3 million individuals in the overall DOD Force community, per the U.S. Department of Defense (now Department of War) — and more than half of that community, 54%, were the family members of military personnel. That includes spouses, children and adult dependents of active-duty military and reserves. It doesn't count extended family like parents and siblings, nor does it include veterans and their family members — all of whom feel the stresses and anxieties of their family member's service.

Significant shifts like deployments, returns home or transitioning out of service create high levels of concern within families, but the day-to-day stressors during these cycles are what can cause ongoing and excessive anxieties. Among the most common anxiety triggers are income insecurity, cost of living challenges, household instabilities, unexpected deployments and feelings of isolation.

Military Spouse

23% Unemployment rate

70% Underemployed

67% Participation in labor force

68% of military families said two incomes is "vitally important to their financial well-being."

(source Blue Star Families, 2025 Military Family Lifestyle Survey)

Income Insecurity

In her role as the Military and Family Readiness Specialist at the North Carolina National Guard, Michelle Blanton said she has encountered multiple service members who are having issues with employment. "Whether they just can't find work, they can't maintain work, or their employment is not paying them enough to sustain them and their families, it's creating challenges for the military families," she said.

Not being able to find work when they are in reserve status rather than active duty, is a significant problem for National Guardsmen and Reservists. More than two-thirds of military-connected families, 68%, said that having two incomes is "vitally important to their family's well-being," according to responses in the 2025 survey from Blue Star Families.

Among military spouses, employment challenges are even greater, and their unemployment rate is 23%. Equally concerning, 70% of military spouses who are working in either part-time or full-time roles say they are underemployed, contributing to increased anxiety due to personal dissatisfaction and lower wages.

Blanton refers spouses and military members to Work for Warriors, which provides tools and guidance to help them find and retain stable employment.

"I would hate to think employers would not want to hire people who are in the National Guard because of their military commitments, but when Guardsmen get deployed the business has to have kept that position open for the soldier when they return — so some employers might look at that [negatively] and some might not," Blanton said.

Kristi Wilson, Lead Child and Youth Program Coordinator at the North Carolina National Guard, is the spouse of a military member, and her husband works in law enforcement.

"His job was always available for him when he returned," Wilson said. "But it's harder for small businesses or businesses in rural counties to keep those positions open because they only have a limited number of employees to get all the tasks done. But the Work for Warriors program does [partner]with a lot of companies that specifically want to hire military-connected people because of the work ethic service members bring to the table."

Cost of Living

30% Could not afford balanced meals, often or sometimes

28% Have low or very low food security

22% Ate less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough food

(source Blue Star Families, 2025 Military Family Lifestyle Survey)

Expenses Eating into Life

Economic shifts have been hitting military families particularly hard. Costs of necessity items like food, shelter, utilities, gas, medical care — the various expenses calculated in the consumer price index — have been trending up this year. In the Bureau of Labor's assessment of the Consumer Price Index, the 12-month fluctuation had dropped from a high of 9.1% in June 2022 to a steady average of 3% year-over-year increases in the months from June 2024 until April of this year, when costs were up 3.8% compared to 2025, then up 4.2% in May.

Food costs have been especially difficult for military families to deal with: Roughly a third of the families surveyed by Blue Star families said they could not afford healthy, balanced meals in 2025.

And the fluctuations in gas prices have also taken a toll. The price of regular gas hovered around $4.10 a gallon in August, a year ago regular gas was pumping at an average of $3.20 a gallon, per AAA. In North Carolina, prices were slightly lower than those national averages: $3.76 for a gallon of regular gas in August versus $2.89 a year prior.

"Everyone is affected by the economy and by everything that's been going on. Financial health and mental health go hand in hand," Blanton said. "Financial issues heighten

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anxiety or depression and when you can't pay your bills and you can't take care of your family, it's hard. This year, financial issues are probably the No. 1 problem I hear about, but mental health is right behind it."

The North Carolina National Guard reaches out to its families whose soldiers are deployed and Blanton said she has around 100 people that she checks on monthly to see how they're doing and what they might need. "If they're having trouble paying their rent, we have access to different funds that are set up to help soldiers and their families, and we have a lot of community resources for different issues so there's usually at least one resource that we can refer them to," she said. "We also have a mental health [professional] on board so they can get free mental health help here."

Once deployed into active duty, members of the Guard, the Reserves and their families become eligible for the resources available to all active-duty service members. But when they aren't on active duty, "it knocks the National Guard and their families out of the running for resources they really could use," Blanton said.

Childcare Conundrum

86% High costs make it unaffordable, unsustainable

67% Lack of availability and long wait lists make it unattainable

52% Quality of care is concerning or unacceptable

(source Blue Star Families, 2025 Military Family Lifestyle Survey)

Family Stability

According to DOW demographics, 65% of the children in the families of National Guard or Reservists are 11 years old or younger, so access to childcare would be necessary. If the parent who's in the Guard or Reserve deployed into active duty, the family could become eligible for some of the childcare benefits that are available to service members, but the paperwork required to activate those benefits might take longer to process than the actual deployment.

Like the other cost-of-living hardships, finding childcare is a problem across communities, not one limited to military families. However, military families reported in the 2025 Blue Star Families survey that their challenges with childcare have become untenable. The lion's share, 86%, said high costs of childcare make it completely unaffordable. And even if they could afford the care, more than two thirds, 67%, said the waiting periods to secure a spot in childcare make it unattainable. Adding insult to injustice, over half said the quality of care provided is unacceptable.

Unexpected Departures

Sometimes its parents that are hit hardest when their adult children deploy. Blanton, who served in the U.S. Army Reserve from 2002 through 2010, relates to that personally: "When I deployed as a young soldier, my mom was very emotional when it was time for me to go. It was hard for her while I was deployed, and she was very emotional when I came back. The good thing is most of us who are family readiness specialists have military connections so we can relate to the families on a personal level."

In 2003 when he was mobilized with the National Guard, Robert Shook had 14 days before he was deployed for 16 months. Now a Sergeant Major and Director of the North Carolina National Guard Military and Family Readiness Program, Shook recalled that his mother had a very hard time with his sudden – and what for her was a very unexpected — transition to active duty.

"I believe the expression was a 'come to Jesus moment,' for my mother. But that was the reality check in 2002 and 2003, it happened very fast," SGM Shook said.

Now, it's more often a 30-day mobilization cycle for the Guard, and counting ramp up, time away and ramp back down, the duration of active-duty service is often six to 12 months.

But any time apart is disruptive for military families, especially for young children, as Wilson explained: "It's harder for little kids to understand because they don't fully understand [the concept of] time yet. They know their dad or their mom is going to miss their birthday or not be home for Christmas, so they [feel] the big touch points."

That was something Shook's family struggled with when he was deployed for several months in 2018 to Guantanamo Bay, and their six-year-old daughter began having some challenges. Sometimes well-meaning friends and associates just don't grasp the burdens military families face. His wife "didn't know whether to laugh or cry" when another woman said she knew exactly what they were dealing with because her husband had been gone on a two-week mission trip and "it was so hard." Having a friend equate a two-week trip to a deployment of seven months and counting, made his wife feel more isolated than supported.

Feeling All Alone

In a survey of more than 1,000 military spouses throughout the country by the Institute for Military & Veteran Family Wellness, the challenge cited most often was finding community and friends. "More than half of the military-connected spouses, 53.2%, identified this as a concern, pointing to persistent gaps in social connection that can compound other stressors," IMVFW stated in its June release.

It's as much a problem for children and teens as it is for the spouses. In one instance when an older child was having trouble adjusting to a recent move to Camp Lejeune, he felt "stressed out because nobody understands what I'm going through." The adult in the classroom asked all the kids to raise a hand if they had a parent or guardian in the military. All but four raised their hands and the child who felt alienated could instantly see that he wasn't alone.

That works near a military installation like Camp Lejeune or Fort Bragg, not so much in the rural counties where many Guard and Reserve families choose to live. In those cases, there might only be one or two hands raised when asked if they have a parent in the military.

"When we go into schools or talk with community partners in rural areas, I always bring facts and raw data about how many military families are in their communities because that helps them feel less isolated," Wilson said. "And we encourage families at our Yellow Ribbon events to make their schools aware when their service member is being deployed, so the teachers and counselors have situational awareness and can notice and respond appropriately to any changes in the kids." ■

COMBATTING THE SOUND OF SILENCE

WVSS gives voice to women veterans and the children of service members who need support, shelter or safety.

Fast-Impact Donations:

$25	$50	$100
provides emergency supplies for one woman in crisis	funds one week of transitional support resources	"opens a door" to housing

After 22 years in the U. S. Army Reserve, Patricia Harris retired from her position as a Non-commissioned Officer (NCO), but she didn't stop serving the military, veterans or their families. In 2008 she founded Women Veterans Support Services (WVSS), a nonprofit organization that provides safety and support for women veterans and servicewomen who are facing a crisis, struggling to advocate for themselves or unable to find essential resources. To date, WVSS has served more than 2,200 women.

Harris joined NC 4 Vets magazine in a candid conversation about her vision for WVSS and why its outreach is personally important to her as well as vital for the military connected communities it serves:

"Women Veterans Support Services is the oldest nonprofit organization in North Carolina that is solely dedicated to supporting women veterans, active-duty service members and military-connected families in crisis," she said. "The biggest part of our mission is to disturb the silence, to make sure that no woman who served our nation is ever invisible, forgotten or forced to suffer alone in her crisis."

What motivated you to create WVSS?

In my first marriage, I experienced domestic violence and during my military career I was the victim of military sexual assault. In my second marriage we were a dual military service couple, with both of us going to war at the same time and leaving our children at home. So these life experiences are where my passions came from to create Women Veterans Support Services.

We started out in advocacy because of the part of the MeToo movement that included military sexual assault, and then homicides were coming up behind that and there has been growing violence against women. We want to give these issues a voice, and we want to make sure the women who served and then perished from the hands of someone they loved, or someone they thought loved them, are also counted. Domestic violence and sexual assault, these are community issues in the military and beyond.

Tell us about your military service.

I worked in finance and communications, but we're not talking desk jobs. This was on the line; I was a line NCO deployed in direct combat positions at the active front. It wasn't sitting in a pretty office that was nice and cool. I was outside most of the time and I did the lineman work, like climbing up telephone poles for the Army. Like the signal towers for cell phones except they were mobile and moved around in the battlefield. There was a 15-foot antenna and a 30-foot one that was more stabilized, and yes, I had to climb to the top.

I also operated a secure switchboard, and when I went to war, I was moving around on the ground, supporting the other units that were in combat.

When and where were you deployed?

It was the first Gulf War, and that took us into Iraq and Saudi Arabia. It was a time when the Saudis had not seen women driving in their country and they were not pleased at all to see us drive and see us leading men.

Did you have to change your uniform?

When my husband and I went out, I had to walk behind him and I had to wear [the abaya] that was a cover over my uniform. I met other women that were married to Americans and some American women that were married to Arab men, and they all had regular street clothes on under their cover dress — I learned a lot being over there in the Middle East.

Was your husband stationed in the same place where you were?



Patricia Harris, founder of Women Veterans Support Services (WVSS).

My late husband and I were in the same brigade, but I was in Bravo company, and he was in Alpha company, so we didn't get to spend a lot of time together, but we could talk to each other regularly because he was also involved in communications. It was his job to place our vehicles where they needed communication, so he knew where I was all the time. I'm pretty sure that upset him and when I came back and had some combat issues, he knew where those issues were coming from.

You were in combat?

Yes, but I knew that's what I signed up for. My father was very clear with me when I talked to him about my decision to go into the military. He was in the Army in World War II, and he also was a legionnaire with the American

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Legion post in Raleigh, the same one that I belong to now.

My dad told me that when you join the military, understand that you're volunteering your life. If you go to war you're defending the Constitution, and if you fall while you're serving it's because you agreed to die for our Constitution.

He also wanted me to understand that whatever reason I had for choosing to serve my country, there were going to be people that had different opinions about me and my service. Some would think I didn't belong there, that I should be at home being somebody's wife, but I'm not a traditional type of person. He said some people might make it hard for me to serve, and some would try to take advantage of me while I was serving. And my dad was right; he didn't lie about any of it.

Did you experience prejudice and discrimination during your service?

Absolutely. There were misogynistic leaders and like I said, I'm a survivor of domestic violence and military sexual assault. What I'm most sorry about is that I didn't get mad when I should have. I didn't address it when I should have, so I had to address it later. And that's never easy to do. But I just kept sucking stuff up until, at some point, there was no more room to hold it inside. I've thought about it a lot because I did face double whammies with racism as well as with anybody that was against women, especially against women in service.

Did you feel there was more discrimination because of race or more because you were a woman? Or did you feel like Black men were more readily accepted than you were?

Yes, because they were men. I think for me the discrimination was more because I was a woman. But that really didn't come to me until I decided to run for department commander for the American Legion. I was North Carolina's first woman and first person of color to ever lead the department of the North Carolina American Legion. That was in 2013-2014.

But it was a hard run. My opponent was an older gentleman, an older veteran, and he was white. For this election, you campaign all over the state just like a regular politician does. And it was brutal. I did not know people were still feeling discrimination to that extent until I got out there and started campaigning. But at least 90% of the problem was not because I had melanin on my skin, it was because I was a woman. That was their problem. And because I happen to have melanin on my skin, that was a double whammy.

But when I got elected it was a huge win for North Carolina as well as nationally, because it was the first time in the Southeast region for a Black woman. People were used to seeing Black men in leadership, but not Black women. And that kind of took some of them by storm, especially coming out of North Carolina.

Going back to when you and your late husband were both deployed, did you have children at that time?

We had two of our own and a stepdaughter from my husband. When we were both deployed together, we left those children in the trusted hands of a babysitter that had been with us for eight or nine years. It turned out to be terrible because that babysitter decided to kidnap our children while we were over in Saudi Arabia, and she took our children from Texas to Mexico and tried to sell them.

That's why I'm a huge advocate for family safety, especially for the safety of our military families because military families are more vulnerable to human trafficking than people realize. We often see situations like what my family experienced.

Why do you think that is?

It has a lot to do with access. In my opinion, a military kid is usually well-rounded because they've had exposure to different cultures and they take on new experiences easily. If parents are deployed or moved, they often allow older children or teens, to stay behind with a trusted friend or family member to keep them stabilized and let them finish high school where they've lived. That can turn bad if they get around the wrong type of people, because the kids might be easily swayed or taken, either despite their better judgment or by force.

It happened to us while we were boots on the ground, on foreign soil, and with a woman that had been our babysitter for years. So I believe in family codes, like a secret word or message between parents and children, because that's what made my daughter finally believe it was me on the phone talking to her, and that's why the deal went south with that babysitter and my mom got our children, who were eight and nine at the time, and brought them back to North Carolina with her.

We didn't know the term of human trafficking back then and we just couldn't figure out what in the world somebody would want with our children. But it wasn't just our children. There was another child involved, too, that the babysitter was trying to sell. And her father was a military police officer that was a single father raising a daughter, which is another situation that we address at WVSS – and all of this is based on what we've seen and experienced.

So, there are instances when men are supported by WVSS?

Yes, we've assisted single fathers that were raising daughters. Because a father and his son could stay at a shelter together, but if it's a father and his daughter, the daughter would have to go to the women's side. And there are some women that are not upstanding, that are also predators.

We see the same challenges when it's a mother and her son being split. They would rather stay in the car together, rather than split off.

Our mission has been to keep those families together while we help them navigate through their crisis and get them to a safe place.

Does WVSS work throughout North Carolina?

Yes, and people reach out to us from outside of the state. We've worked in at least 12 states and that's one of the reasons why the American Legion, the DAV (Disabled American Veterans) and the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) are so important, because they have posts and chapters all over the United

Women Veterans Support Services, Inc.

WVSSnc.org

Founder and Executive Director: Patricia Harris
Launched: 2008
To date: Over 2,200 women served
Operations: Volunteer-based
Employees: Two part-time
919.276.5085 (office)
Text for help:
919.635.6123 or 919.696.9572

States. When we get a phone call from a woman that needs assistance, I know who to call even when they're in a different state or serving outside the country. We can connect them with local folks in that place and put eyeballs on those people so we can figure out what they need us to do. Like we have a program called Safe and Seven that will pay for a hotel room or housing for seven days.

How do you fund your operations?

WVSS is mostly a volunteer-based organization; there are at least 10 of us who collectively volunteer regularly. And I work as the executive director in a volunteer capacity, but we do have two paid employees. Sometimes I'm available for consultation, and that money goes to WVSS, and each October we have our annual domestic violence awareness luncheon at the North Raleigh Hilton to raise money for WVSS.

How does WVSS uniquely respond to women in need?

We are trauma-informed, veteran-led and culturally competent. We provide emergency response without the red tape so a woman in crisis doesn't have to wait. If they have housing instability, if they're afraid of sexual assault or if they're trying to escape domestic violence, they don't have time to wait for approval. We can pretty much show up immediately. Now, if someone tells us they're in immediate danger, we tell them to get off the phone with us and dial 911.

Does WVSS follow up with the women who call?

Yes, we check on our clients. Like if they were having problems with a person that had been hurting them or if they felt like that person was going to ignore a protective order, we always check back on them. And if they do not respond to us in a certain amount of time, then we request a welfare check and tell the officer or whoever we're talking to why we are concerned.

Also, a lot of places don't answer the telephone after office hours. At WVSS, we'll answer the telephone at eight o'clock and later, or we'll call them back or text them back. So yes, we'll show up and see what we can do to get them to a safe place.

Given the war that started earlier this year and the uncertainties of recent months, are you seeing an increase in any particular needs?

We've been seeing a lot of younger women that are exiting the military, sometimes it looks like it's because of mental health issues or behavior issues, maybe some of them have been to the brig. And when we've talked to many of them, it was because they were defending themselves.

Women continue enlisting to serve. In 2024, DOD reported that women made up 18% of active-duty service members and 22% of reserve forces. Do you think the misogyny and the discrimination have changed?

It's still there because a lot of what should have been safety nets — the policies and positions that should have been in place to protect women or at least give them a place to go if they feel like they're being threatened or harassed — a lot of those positions have been scaled back or eliminated.

Do you see WVSS filling these gaps in support?

We reach the women no one else is looking for. Women veterans and spouses that are living in silence because they don't know where to go or who to talk to. And that includes the active-duty servicewomen that are victims of sexual harassment. It includes survivors hiding in homeless encampments or mothers fleeing violence with nothing but their children and their faith. It's the people that nobody's really looking for — but we see them.

We want to make sure that they are supported now. And if they need extra support, they can come to us because we hear them and we can say things that they can't, especially if they're still in uniform. We can speak for them. ■

WVSS Special Programs:

Red Shoe Program
Dedicated to protecting homeless and at-risk women veterans in crisis. The Red Shoe Program provides immediate access to safe shelter, nutritious meals, clothing and transportation assistance as well as mental health counseling, financial literacy training and guidance for navigating veteran benefits.

Protective Red Shoe Program
Addresses domestic violence and sexual assault awareness among active-duty servicewomen and underserved women veterans.

H.E.R. Redefined
Designed to support holistic recovery and empowerment of women veterans and military spouses with comprehensive resources for mental, physical and emotional well-being.

Ready 4 Work
Dedicated to helping women veterans transition out of the military into the civilian workforce through career preparation and job placement assistance.

The American Legion
Legion.org
Founded: 1919
Mission: To serve veterans, strengthen the nation, and uphold the values that define American democracy.
Members: Over 1.2 million

North Carolina American Legion
NClegion.org
Notable: From 2013-2014, Patricia Harris was the first woman and first person of color to serve as commander of the North Carolina American Legion

EDUCATING SCHOOLS TO SUPPORT MILITARY FAMILIES

Military-connected students experience unique circumstances in their families — from those that are common and somewhat expected, to extreme instances with potentially weighty consequences — and in every case, school administrators, counselors and teachers need to be prepared.

On a typical day, kids will say they have so much more to think about than what's going on at home. That's what Howard Lattimore, State Military Consultant with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, will tell you.

He works with military-connected students, their families and military-liaison counselors across the state, and even in that population what he hears kids saying they worry about is pretty much standard fare: "I have to worry about who I sit with. How I look. What my friends are doing. What's happening with my sports. My social media."

That's what military students are thinking about across the K-12 spectrum as they move from primary to middle to high school. It's kid stuff.

Until the definition of typical changes. And what becomes their norm is abuse in the home.

"The biggest impact on students is when there's some kind of abuse in the home — substance abuse, alcohol abuse, physical abuse — that's when we see students being affected most," Lattimore said.

The time when that seems most likely to occur, in his experience, has been when the service member is transitioning out of the military into civilian life.

"What happens with the veteran [parent] affects the children, and sometimes the veterans have the hardest time with the getting out, that ETS [expiration of term of service] transition. I see more trauma then versus other transition periods," he said.

The stresses of ETS transition can produce excessive anger and anxiety, which can then manifest into abuse. "We have to make sure that the students are okay, and we often do this through the social workers," Lattimore said. "And we also do whatever we can to help the veteran, which is getting them as much help as possible through national resources or the VA. But a lot of times if it has gotten to the point of abuse, they're not receiving services from the VA and so the thing we do is try to influence them to get services and counseling — really from anywhere."



Howard Lattimore at the Purple Star Award Ceremony in April 2026. At the annual ceremony, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction recognizes schools that have demonstrated a commitment to military-connected students and their families.

Other challenges that military-connected students often face are transitions with relocations to a new post that require changing schools or adjusting to altered family dynamics when a parent comes home from deployment. While those can create periods of upheaval and instability for the military student and their families, in Lattimore's experience, those are more apt to be short-term issues around emotional behaviors or resetting expectations. The student usually needs some time and additional support from the school to work through those periods.

"The main thing in my job is to educate the teachers and the administrators that don't know what military-connected students might be going through," he said. "When active-duty military are coming back from deployments, the students and the families have probably transitioned through that before so all they need is a little time. Although coming back after their first deployment can be a little rougher, harder for the soldier and the families to readjust."

But every situation is different and one of the biggest factors that can influence outcomes is the mental "tempo" of the experience that the service member is transitioning out from. "The ones that have been serving at a high tempo, like going 100 miles an hour right up to when they

Military OneSource

www.militaryonesource.mil

Phone: 800.342.9647

Military OneSource is available 24/7 to provide confidential guidance and resources for service members and military families. Secure live chats are available on the website, and both English- and Spanish-speaking counselors are available at 800.342.9647. Instructions for calling from international locations are detailed online.

leave, and then they drop to life at 10 miles an hour, those are the ones that have the biggest issues," said Lattimore, who joined the Army when he graduated from high school in Charlotte. After 21 years of service, he retired out of the military in 2007, and his wife, also a veteran, transitioned out in 2009.

"I was an infantry guy, and in the infantry you're always on alert, running at 110 miles an hour because you might get called up in the middle of the night, so you're always visible, always alert. But I had a good transition because my tempo went down gradually, like from 100 to 60 to 40 to 20," he said. "And my wife had a good transition too; she worked in personnel and her tempo range during service was always between 40 and 60."

The two of them were deployed at the same time and left their son in the care of an aunt and a grandmother. As for the impact on military students if both parents are gone at the same time, Lattimore has found that children tend to be very adaptable and resilient when left in the care of family. Often because they're left with an older sibling or a grandparent, either of which may be more lenient with rules than the parents. In terms of readjusting when the parents return, the better scenario he's seen is when children of dual-service couples are left in the care of an aunt and uncle, or other family that presents more like a traditional two-parent household.

"What is often more overwhelming and creates more issues is when one parent is gone and one is at home. That can seem like more of a crisis to the whole family," Lattimore said. What they see in schools is that the spouse is having to make multiple adjustments and be responsible for everything at home, including being the disciplinarian. The child might respond by testing boundaries, acting out, withdrawing from social interactions and, even those who were historically strong students, might have trouble maintaining grades or getting along with their peers.

For additional resources and support, Lattimore refers families and students to Military OneSource, the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), and the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (mic3), all of which address the educational challenges of military families. There are numerous benefits and programs available through these platforms, including MCEC's Student2Student outreach, which is a peer-to-peer student led program that helps build connections between civilian and military students. Within North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction initiated the Purple Star Award designation to recognize schools that proactively support military-connected students and their families. In the current school year, more than 450 schools around the state have earned the Purple Star Award. ■

"The biggest impact on students is when there's some kind of abuse in the home — substance abuse, alcohol abuse, physical abuse — that's when we see students being affected most."

HOWARD LATTIMORE,
State Military Consultant, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Purple Star Award

https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/student-support/nc-supports-military-children/purple-star-award

Since the inception in 2019 of its Purple Star Award designation, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has recognized schools across the state that proactively demonstrate a commitment to military-connected students and their families. Schools apply each year for the upcoming school year and schools that earn the Purple Star Award across consecutive years receive additional recognition. Applications for Purple Star designation for the 2026-2027 school year are online and will be due in early 2027. In the current school year, more than 450 schools across the state received the Purple Star Award. The full list can be viewed at ***dpi.nc.gov.***

Each participating school receives a Purple Star Award banner with the year (or years) of designation. Schools in 33 districts have participated so far.

If all schools in a district earn the Purple Star Award, the district receives a superintendent trophy and is designated as a Purple Star district. Sixteen districts have earned Purple Star status.

Eight districts have done so for five or more consecutive years and received a legacy plaque celebrating their continued support for military-connected students and their families. These districts are:

LEAs Designated with Purple Star Awards for five or more consecutive years:

- Craven County Schools
- Cumberland County Schools
- Harnett County Schools
- Hoke County Schools
- Moore County Schools
- Onslow County Schools
- Wayne County Public Schools
- Whiteville City Schools

NAVIGATING BENEFITS

Service members, veterans and family members have numerous options for benefits, but gaining access can be a challenging and cumbersome process.



The North Carolina Military Transition Team at the 2026 SAMHSA Military Veteran Transition Academy in San Antonio, Texas, hosted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

North Carolina has a significant benefits utilization gap. Despite having one of the largest veteran populations in the country, many eligible veterans — and their eligible spouses and family members — never access the federal benefits they earned through their military service. Helping veterans understand the benefits they are eligible for and how to access those benefits is a priority throughout the state.

"It's a sea of resource overload," said Crystal Miller, Director of SMVF Programs at the North Carolina Governor's Institute. "Our goal is to make resources easier to navigate for service members, veterans and their families, and that work should begin before they leave military service."

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) helps service members prepare for civilian life by connecting them with information, benefits and resources before separation. For Miller, the challenge is not a lack of resources, but helping people find the right ones at the right time.

"We don't need to give people another list of resources. We need to help them find the right door and make sure someone is there on the other side."

Service members who are going to file for disability compensation after they transition out of the military start by filing a Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) claim, which can be initiated between 180 and 90 days prior to separation. Doing so within this timeframe enables the VA to schedule any necessary health exams, review the service member's Service Treatment Records (STRs), and evaluate the claim before their separation, which will ideally enable the VA to meet its goal of delivering the BDD decision within 30 days of the service member's separation.

"The BDD can be their first interaction with federal benefits prior to leaving service, and it's been available for at least the past 10 years, but sometimes our best benefits are also the government's best kept secrets," said Miller, who also acknowledged that despite the military's attempts to educate those transitioning out, many people leave service without an understanding of the benefits available to them.

That was her experience, when she left the North Carolina National Guard after 10 years of service including a full year of deployment to Iraq in 2005-06.

"The National Guard has a fast demobilization, so guardsmen get to go through TAP quickly. I attended class every day for several weeks and it was like basic training all over again; they check to see if you have evidence of any disabilities so they can document that for you. But in 2006, I was just checking off the boxes so I could get out, and that's what a lot of people do so they leave the service without a good understanding of what their benefits are or all the resources that exist."

There are resources available to cover everything from financial planning to translating military skills for civilian employment to the benefits for healthcare and disability compensation.

After the service member has finished all the steps to leave the service and "actually come out on the other side," there are numerous organizations and programs that provide support and services.

OnwardOps supports veterans as they transition out of service. Participation is voluntary. The program's objective is to connect the service member with a sponsor in the local community where they will be living. The OnwardOps sponsor will help walk their veteran through benefits and resources in that community and connect them to people and organizations that will be most helpful.

"The Army is the only [branch] piloting OnwardOps right now, but I think this could be one answer to the fragmented system that veterans are facing when they come out of service," Miller said. "Our services are not aligned. Regardless of how much we try to align services through the activities of the Govenor's Working Group and Military Veteran Transition Team, programs like NC Serves and organizations like Veterans Bridge Home and Veteran Services of the Carolinas, we are still not seeing veterans until they are nearly in crisis. We would love to be able to engage them when they come out the door and not 12 months later when things have gone wrong."

What Miller has seen in her current role

of advising the SMVF community is that many people don't realize how extensive VA healthcare and support programs have become. "Beyond traditional medical care, there are geriatric and long-term care programs that can make an enormous difference for aging veterans and their families," she said.

This is particularly compelling given that 43% of the veteran population in North Carolina are age 65 or older, per the 2026 report on Veteran Needs and Well-Being from RAND, a nonprofit research organization.

"Depending on eligibility, veterans may receive in-home caregiver assistance several days each week, attend adult day[care] health programs, access respite care, or even live in Medical Foster Homes when independent living is no longer possible," Miller explained. "There are also home adaptation grants for severely disabled veterans, mental health services, justice-involved veteran programs, caregiver support, housing assistance, education benefits, employment services, and countless specialized programs designed to improve quality of life."

One of the most critical components in the process is for the veteran to establish a connection with their local Veteran Service Officer (VSO) where a simple conversation can "uncover benefits someone never knew they qualified for," Miller asserted. "Too many veterans assume they are ineligible, or maybe they were denied years ago, or maybe they simply do not know where to begin. Once that connection is made with a VSO, it can change not only their life, but the well-being of their entire family."

There are 12 veteran service centers run by the North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, each with one or two VSOs, as well as one or two VSOs located in almost every county around the state

Advocating and Providing for Families

In the ideal scenario, the VSO becomes both the person who helps the veteran understand their resources and a proactive advocate for that veteran or family member to ensure they receive all the financial, emotional and community support to which they are entitled. If the veteran has a service-related disability, the VSO can refer them to an NC Works representative who will help them find meaningful employment.

Additionally, veterans with a service-related disability may be eligible for disability compensation. The Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022, or PACT Act, expanded the VA's health care and benefits for veterans' whose disability is associated with exposure to burn pits, Agent Orange and other toxic substances. In the context of veterans' benefits, the Department of Veterans Affairs has identified "presumptives" relating to illnesses and disabilities that can automatically be presumed to have been caused by military service. By utilizing this status, veterans do not have to prove the condition originated in the military to qualify for disability compensation.

The surviving spouse, dependent child or parent of a veteran may be eligible for compensation because of the veteran's military service. If the veteran was owed unpaid benefits at the time of their death the next of kin may be entitled to receive a one-time accrued benefits payment. And the surviving spouse or child of a veteran with wartime service may qualify for survivor's pension. Similarly, if a veteran died from a service-connected disability, their immediate family member may qualify for a monthly Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) payment from the VA.

Prior to her current position, Miller served as a VSO in Mecklenburg County. One of her most memorable experiences was helping the elderly widow of a service member solve what seemed like an insurmountable problem. The woman had a $75,000 debt with the VA because she had continued receiving her husband's pension benefit after she started receiving Social Security income. Receiving both is not allowed unless certain criteria is established.

The veteran had filed for service-connected disability, but was denied, therefore the surviving spouse had only been previously eligible for a pension. Miller, in her capacity as the VSO, reviewed the medical files and saw that the man's death was from a stroke and high blood pressure, which the PACT Act established as a presumptive service-related illness. A DIC claim was filed, and the woman was awarded $150,000 for the years since her husband had passed, more than enough to pay off the debt, and allow her to begin receiving a monthly DIC payment in addition to Social Security, effectively moving her from below the poverty level to a self-sustaining income.

Who's a veteran to trust?

For all the positive outcomes and the plethora of benefit options that exist, there are shortfalls that need attention, the most pressing being the need for more VSOs. Miller points to some of the rural counties in the state where there may only be one VSO and no support staff to address the needs of hundreds of veterans and their families. Veterans Service Offices need at least two staff to effectively serve their communities: one to manage claims and benefits while another conducts outreach and connects with veterans who may never walk through the office door especially in rural NC.

There's also a need to help businesses, organizations and policy makers develop a clearer understanding of the economic impact VA funding has on the state: Of the more than $13 billion that the VA invests in North Carolina veterans annually, Miller suggests that much of it comes back into the state's communities through consumer spending and monies spent for professional services or living necessities. And the $4.7 billion that the VA spends in medical care for North Carolina veterans is money the state doesn't have to allocate for Medicaid support.

One of the trends in recent years that Miller finds most disturbing is an increasing number of unauthorized organizations and nonprofits that appear to be acting on behalf of veterans. They will initiate contact with veterans and offer to file claims on their behalf under the guise of producing faster response times and higher compensations.

"These companies don't need to come into North Carolina charging veterans to duplicate our efforts. It adds another layer of navigation onto an already flooded system," Miller said. "And it's confusing. Veterans don't know if the services are free or if they have to pay. How can veterans know who to trust?"

The answer is to do a better job of educating communities about the free services and resources that exist for veterans.

"At its core, this is exactly what AskMeNC is trying to solve. The campaign isn't just about asking one question. It is about finding military-connected families, identifying veterans who may have never raised their hand for assistance, and educating them about the benefits, services, and support available regardless of where they are in life," Miller said. ■

WHERE GRIEF AND GRATITUDE COEXIST

A veteran mom, primary caregiver of her disabled veteran daughter, will tell you caregiving is not that different than going to war: “Facing fear is the same in either situation.”

Having spent more than 12 years caring for her adult daughter, Karee Van Wert White realized she’s “credentialed by life experiences” to write about the caregiving journey. White and her husband, Jim, both veterans of the U.S. Army, have nine children, seven who have also chosen to serve in the military. Caring for their oldest child Kimberly after her tragic accident and traumatic brain injury in 2014 became a family mission. Her family memoir, Ash Woven, was published in April.



Getty Images

Kimberly — affectionately known to all as Kimmy — was a lieutenant serving in Afghanistan as a Medical Services Corps officer. A tour she came through without a scratch. But when a new baby arrived, Kimmy and her husband went to Vicenza, Italy, with the Married Army Couples Program. That’s where tragedy struck in 2014.

Rear-ended in a traffic accident on a Vicenza highway, Kimmy was in a coma for over a year, and now she continues to live with aphasia, severe pulmonary complications and confined to a wheelchair.

Within 24 hours of getting the call, White and her husband were at Kimmy’s side, along with Kimmy’s husband. (The couple were in the process of separation and have since divorced. Her ex-husband has custody of their daughter, Rory.)

“What I’ve learned after Kimmy’s catastrophic injury is that hope changes shape. In the beginning, we were hoping for a complete recovery,” White said. “Over time, we began thinking about what might actually be possible — like wishing for my daughter a steady breath as opposed to the stacked breathing she had. Getting out of the coma. Having purposeful movements.”

After a year of hospital care it was time to move to long-term care. Thinking it would not be possible to bring Kimmy to their home, White toured nursing facilities.

“Looking to move my 25-year-old daughter into a nursing facility was the most depressing thing I’ve ever done,” she recalled. “Then we found out we could have clinical-level care in our home because Kimmy was still on active duty. She had not been chaptered out yet and because of that she was allowed to receive care as a service member,” White said. “When she was switched to full-time combat veteran and became a VA entity, [the benefit] dropped from 22 hours a day of clinical-level care to six hours a day of unskilled care, and 18 hours were left for us to do. That was probably our lowest point in trying to figure out how to live while having this grueling care requirement and making sure she stays safe.”

The traumatic brain injury was just the start of care needs; it’s the secondary impacts of the TBI that have added layers of complexity and responsibilities to Kimmy’s daily care needs. Her pulmonary system is suppressed so her shallow breathing makes it difficult to keep her lungs clear. “We do a lot of suctioning and a lot of things you might think of with ALS patients, like the cough-assist machine. She gets albuterol and sodium chloride to loosen the phlegm every four to six hours, and she’s on a lot of devices to help clear her lungs,” White said. “Caregiving has taken a toll on us financially. It was a tough time for us financially and spiritually.”

But they are a family grounded in faith, and she is quick to tell you that God has provided through upheavals and in unexpected ways.

Among caregivers in the military and

Veteran Directed Care

www.va.gov/geriatrics/pages/Veteran-Directed_Care.asp

Provides funds to veterans who need help with activities of daily living (ADLs) or personal care services so they can hire workers to come into their home. It also supports military and veteran caregivers who are experiencing burdens of caring for the veteran, as well as helping veterans who are isolated and need care.

veteran community, more than a quarter, 27%, experience workplace disruptions and more than half are unable to work from home. A third do not have flexible work hours and almost half do not have the option of paid family medical leave. White's husband lost his job in a corporate downsizing, which happened during Kimmy's hospitalizations while he was managing the homefront, so he transitioned to doing his own business and she's worked as a writer and fitness instructor.

Even after they began receiving support from Veteran Directed Care the funding wasn't covering what it cost to manage Kimmy's caregiving in their home. "Jim and I are both Elizabeth Dole Foundation Caregiver Fellows, so we'd both been in D.C. and talked to them about how important this program has been to us and our livelihood. But we were spending a lot of our money, too, to be able to keep her in the home," White said. (She's a Dole Foundation Fellow from the 2018 cohort and Jim White is a 2020 Fellow.) "We've taken out loans and it has been a financial burden like you wouldn't believe."

But after 12 years of extreme financial stress, the last 12 months have started to give them some financial relief.

The Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act of 2025, which became law in January of 2025, raised the ceiling for what caregivers could receive. "Originally the funds were capped at around 60% of what the cost would be in a skilled nursing facility, the new law raised it to 100%, so this past year it's made care so much more affordable," White said. Roughly estimating their "round numbers," it went from about $100,000 a year (not even approaching the cost of care for 168 hours a week at $20 to $25 an hour), to upwards of $200,000. "We were only getting about 50% of what it was costing for 24/7 home care, so I think we're getting doubled based on that ceiling being raised. And Kimmy is a tier 3, based on her extreme needs, it is total care that's required."

Financial stress weighs heavy on a family, but so does the social isolation, the physical exhaustion and the mental anxieties of having 24/7 care for someone you love. The RAND Health Quarterly reported that 43% of military and veteran caregivers who are caring for someone under the age of 60

"What I've learned after Kimmy's catastrophic injury is that hope changes shape. In the beginning, we were hoping for a complete recovery. Over time, we began thinking about what might actually be possible."

KAREE VAN WERT WHITE,
Veteran, Caregiver and Author

struggle with depression, and two-thirds of them felt isolated, like there was no one they could turn to for support. White sees a lot of benefit in the fitness classes she teaches, which are physically strengthening but also an outlet for socialization. "The isolating effect of caregiving is not good for me because I like to be around people. My battery drains when I'm alone," she said.

For the family, caregiving is a foundational fact of life. Their youngest daughter, Delaney, now 16, has been part of the caregiving process since she was a toddler, and one of her biggest roles has been to serve as a "sister" to Kimmy's daughter, Rory, who lives with her father.

"Rory was here for two weeks this summer and she's good friends with Delaney, which is honestly the best. But she's never got to know her mom; she sees Kimmy as someone incapacitated," White said. "An outsider sees Kimmy as this incredibly disabled female in a wheelchair. Kimmy has aphasia so she doesn't speak, and sometimes she doesn't even look at you."

As painfully hard as this is, White puts it into the resiliency perspective of military service: "It's not so different, confidence in caregiving as it is in going to war. Facing fear is the same in either situation." ■

Family Impacts of Caregiving

39%

of children under 18 in miliary/veteran caregiving homes assume some of the caregiving responsibilities

$8,583

annual out-of-pocket costs incurred by military/veteran caregivers

$4,522

average amount that military/ veteran caregivers forego in annual household income

Source: NIH, RAND Health Quarterly / Elizabeth Dole Foundation 2025 Impact Report

Ash Woven

A memoir of one family's caregiving journey by U.S. Army veteran Karee Van Wert White, as she shares her family's story across generations of military service to the tragic accident that left her daughter, also an Army veteran, completely disabled. Twelve years later, White and her husband continue to care for their daughter – the oldest of their nine children – and in the prologue to her book, White writes: "Kimmy lives at home with us. She communicates in glances, gestures, and moments that feel like miracles. Her laughter — rare but radiant — is proof that light can return even to the darkest rooms. … It's about how love builds muscle, faith becomes breath, and legacy becomes the thread that keeps us upright when the weight of the world tries to bend us."

Available at Amazon.com


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