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TECHNICAL REPORT

# Strategically Aligned Family Research

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## Supporting Soldier and Family Quality of Life Research for Policy Decisionmaking

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Prepared for the United States Army

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## Summary

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### Background

The Army spends more than \$2.3 billion annually on soldier and family support or quality of life (QOL) programs that are intended to ease the stress of military life and thus enhance well-being, improve readiness, and sustain recruiting and retention. However, research in support of these programs to determine needs, access, and effectiveness is fragmented, duplicative, and at times lacking in quality or depth of analysis.

The Army leadership wants to develop a research agenda to inform policy and program decisionmaking to align its strategic goals in recruiting, retention, and readiness with the needs of soldiers and families. Such an agenda is expected to inform the Army of the QOL needs of soldiers and families, help gauge the success of programs, improve coordination of research efforts, and determine how best to allocate resources.

### Purpose

The Army asked RAND Arroyo Center to help improve its use of research on soldier and family quality of life matters to inform policy and programming decisions. The Army wanted a better assessment of the support programs that soldiers and families need and a research agenda to determine effective support services in light of resource availability and the need for accountability. The Army asked Arroyo to pay particular attention to recruiting, retention, and readiness as strategic outcomes for QOL. The goal of this study is to take a first, high-level look at how QOL research is currently used, to identify gaps in knowledge to suggest areas for new research, and to consider how the Army should think strategically about using research, including its investment in new research. The ultimate objective is an organizational mechanism that strategically aligns research. This first phase can begin to address the Army's objective to make research-informed QOL policy and program decisions and support its research needs. In some ways, the course we undertook for this analysis is similar to the process the Army itself will need to undertake in greater depth and represents the first iteration of a QOL policy and program agenda-setting or roadmapping exercise.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

We reviewed of a wide range of literature on QOL, its measurement and linkage to strategic goals, as well as literature on research roadmapping. We also interviewed various policy and program officials to determine how and why they used research. We summarize our findings

from these approaches below and provide references to relevant chapters for more detailed discussion.

**The relationship between strategic goals and QOL is not well established (see Chapter Two).** The Army's strategic goals for QOL lie in the areas of recruiting, retention, and readiness. Assessing the relationship between QOL and these outcomes is complicated by the lack of precision surrounding just how QOL is defined and measured. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern relationships between QOL and the Army's goals.

With regard to recruiting, the evidence is scarce. The Army offers many benefits, from monetary bonuses to join the military to free or subsidized access to health, recreation, education, housing, relationship counseling, and childcare and youth services. These benefits, which can affect individual views of QOL, are seen by the Army leadership as important to recruiting. Also, how soldiers and their spouses perceive and experience Army life can affect their children's consideration of the Army as a potential future employer.

Research reviewed indicates that how well families adapt to the stresses associated with Army life, in part by using QOL programs and services, can affect retention. For example, the relationship between spousal support and retention is strong, and programs that help spouses cope with the demands of Army life can foster such support.

"Readiness" is a multidimensional concept, with little consensus on its definition. Because readiness is difficult to define, it is difficult to identify what influences it. Nevertheless, some research indicates that the same factors that influence spousal support promote readiness. Other work also shows that satisfied families have higher levels of readiness (however defined).

Beyond the Army's strategic goals, research on other QOL topics indicates relatively consistent findings. For example, junior enlisted members and their households tend to experience more stress and are less able to address problems.

**Research currently does not meet the needs of users (see Chapter Three).** Typically, policymakers and those who run programs are the users of research. They need research to inform budget decisions, to evaluate programs, and to serve purposes such as identifying the best practices in given areas. They are generally not satisfied with what is available to them. It is also difficult for them to *find out* what research is available that might help them make informed decisions.

**Research alignment can help improve decisionmaking (see Chapter Four).** Roadmapping is a technique that can help align goals and strategies, and it has been used effectively in a range of venues. The practice would likely benefit the Army as it attempts to match research with its strategic goals. The Army itself is best positioned to construct such a roadmap, since it will require substantial work across multiple organizational boundaries to construct one. Additionally, it will take a collaborative effort and a mandate (and new resources) to develop and implement a roadmap that would involve and affect a number of organizations within the Army and across the Department of Defense that have roles and responsibilities for QOL policy and programs.

## Conclusions

Our analysis of the data resulted in four overarching conclusions:

**Some prerequisites for a rigorous roadmapping exercise are missing.** A thorough understanding of the current state of the art and established findings is missing. Also absent is an agreed-upon definition of the key terms relevant to a discussion of QOL for soldiers and families and strategic goals for the Army. Resources are needed to enable major organizations

involved in promoting QOL for soldiers and families in various domains to undertake an active roadmapping process. The resulting research agenda would reflect their concerns and would be designed to achieve their objectives at the program level and support strategic Army vision at the policy level.

**Domain-specific research remains central to developing solutions and assessing their effectiveness.** Even though QOL requires a big-picture understanding, domain-specific research remains critical. “Domain-specific research” refers to data and analysis covering a defined area, e.g., health, childcare, and spouse employment. This type of research offers the best practices to respond to issues and to measure the effectiveness of programs.

**Assessing QOL needs requires a big-picture understanding of stressors within and across multiple domains in life.** QOL is a cumulative expression of wellness, and it cuts across multiple domains, from physical and emotional health to wellness in relationships, personal finance, and other areas. The relationship of these domains to one another and the interactions among them are complex; thus, research that improves the big-picture view is especially valuable.

**Current needs assessments are not broad enough.** Current soldier and family needs assessments do not provide the holistic perspective and rigorous evidence-based research that policy and program officials need to inform planning and budgeting decisions. A needs assessment that tries to understand what support services are needed from the beneficiary’s perspective rather than a program-centric one will offer insight into potential redundancies and gaps in what is currently offered by the Army and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).

## Recommendations

Therefore, we offer the following recommendations.

**Develop an agreed-upon QOL lexicon, outcomes, and metrics.** The Army needs to identify within and across domains the key terms and agree on their meanings. When different terms are used to talk about the same thing and, conversely, the same terms are used but with different meanings, it hinders communication among Army leaders, QOL policy and program officials, and soldiers and families. Similarly, there should be explicit agreement among these stakeholders on the desired outcomes for QOL programs and activities. After there is agreement on the lexicon and desired outcomes, metrics can be developed to measure effectiveness in ways that all can find meaningful and reflective of their goals.

**Focus research on individual domains to build the big picture.** QOL research should not merely take an amalgamated approach. Domain-specific research is critical to tease out complexities. For a big-picture view, a holistic perspective encompassing multiple domains is essential to appreciate the complexity of relationships between stressors, problems, needs, and effective solutions. Moreover, simultaneous examination of multiple domains enables consideration of coordinated solutions.

**Take a comprehensive approach to needs assessment.** This approach should be less program-based and focus more on individual soldiers and families. Soldiers do not tend to deal with problems in terms of programs. Soldiers and their families, like their civilian peers, approach life as a set of interrelated issues. Relationship stress, for example, may result from multiple issues including finances, childcare issues, and marital discord. Thus, assessments need to take into account multiple influences and their linkages to determine what the needs are, e.g., for relationship counseling, personal finance education, and the right QOL support services to provide in terms of quality and quantity.

**Improve knowledge management to expand research use and identify important areas for new research.** A deliberate approach supported by adequate resources will help the Army determine what research is available, how well it answers questions about needs, and what constitutes effective responses in a given domain. A sense for the relative impact of various domains on QOL and even on strategic goals would enable more targeted research to areas where policy programs and services can have the most potential influence.

**Make Army QOL research roadmapping a socialization and knowledge-sharing process.** The process of building a roadmap is as important as the roadmap itself. The roadmapping process would bring together different viewpoints and organizations relevant to the building, implementation, and evaluation of a research roadmap. For some of these participants, the roadmapping process may be the first time they meet other relevant organizational representatives and learn about their viewpoints. Their interaction over time could foster common understanding of problems, lead to agreement on lexicon, desired outcomes, and metrics for evaluation, and help them to leverage resources for coordinated actions. Other important benefits include increased professional networking and knowledge sharing, which can help engender a community of interest in QOL research and its application to inform policy and programming decisions.

**Target research in areas where the Army can make a difference.** Some things are beyond what the Army can influence. The Army should focus its research efforts where it can make a difference. This includes interventions in the form of policies, programs, or services to mitigate stressors. It should also take steps to manage QOL expectations among soldiers and families when Army resources are finite and priorities should be given to areas where widespread and unmet needs can negatively affect the Army's strategic interests in recruitment, retention, and readiness.