Assessing the Needs of Service Members and Their Families

A New Approach

Since the advent of the all-volunteer force in the 1970s, military personnel support programs have grown and continue to grow. A 1988 Department of Defense (DoD) directive requires such programs to be responsive to the needs of service members and their families. Unfortunately, DoD does not have a systematic way to determine what those needs are. Traditional program evaluation focuses on the use of specific programs rather than the needs of DoD families. This shortfall is remedied in a new survey design framework developed by the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) and sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Framing an Approach for Understanding Military Family Needs

The approach taken by RAND puts the assessments of service members and their families at the center of the analysis. It connects their perceptions of their greatest problems and needs to available resources and to how well the resources they contacted meet their needs (see the figure on the back). Linked questions in the survey framework are as follows:

1. What is the context (e.g., demographic measures, deployment history)?
2. What did respondents experience as problems across several domains (e.g., health, finances, child well-being, spouse employment)?
3. What types of assistance (e.g., information, counseling, education) did respondents believe they needed to address their most significant problems?
4. What resources (military and nonmilitary) did personnel or their spouses contact to try to meet their needs?
5. What factors made these resources easier or more difficult to access?
6. Did the resources help the respondents meet their needs?

7. Is there a connection between needs met and service member and family satisfaction, readiness, and retention?

Designing a Survey to Help the Military Support Its Members and Their Families

Using the design framework, the NDRI project team developed a sample survey instrument to assess the needs of active-component single and married service members and spouses. To develop the survey content, the team synthesized information from a variety of sources: focus groups with Army and Marine Corps service members, spouses, and support providers; meetings with subject matter experts and military leadership; and a review of previous research and existing DoD survey instruments pertaining to military
A new approach to surveying service members and their families places their needs rather than evaluation of existing programs at the center of the inquiry. In this approach, military personnel and family members identify high-priority problems they face; these are linked to their high-priority needs, which are then linked to resources they have contacted and the effectiveness of those resources. A survey instrument embodying this approach was developed with input from service members, spouses, service providers military leadership, and program managers and was tested on two military bases. The new approach is adaptable to other instruments, for other populations, and in other contexts.
Managing Obstacles to Implementation

To benefit from the cohesive design of the proposed survey, the assessment should be implemented on a large scale (e.g., battalion, base, major command) and administered via the Internet. Smaller-scale implementation could provide some useful information in each of the categories of problems, needs, and resources. However, the value of linking the sections of the survey to each other would then be lost because too few data about each problem/need combination would be available to permit meaningful statistical analyses by demographic characteristics or types of resources used.

Because of the dynamic branching of the survey instrument to account for respondent-provided problem and need priorities, administration by paper is not feasible. For those without home Internet access, the military could provide respondents on-base access or information about nearby locations that provide free access.

The greatest implementation challenges lie in recruiting participants. Unit and installation commanders could promote participation in the survey by verifying its legitimacy, endorsing the effort, permitting service members to participate during the workday, providing the survey team with access to contact information for service members, and helping to solicit accurate spousal contact information.

Other Applications of the Framework

The RAND framework is flexible and adaptable. Questionnaire items can be modified to reflect evolving needs and concerns and to capture changes in resources available to help personnel or their families. The framework could easily be applied to other populations, such as veterans and their families, guard and reserve personnel and their families, or wounded service members—or for other purposes entirely, such as an assessment of the operational challenges, needs, and resources of military personnel serving in war zones.

This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute, documented in A New Approach for Assessing the Needs of Service Members and Their Families, by Laura L. Miller, Bernard D. Rostker, Rachel M. Burns, Dioneen Barnes-Proby, Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo, and Terry R. West, MG-1124-Osd, 2011, 158 pp., $29.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-5874-4 (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1124.html). This research brief was written by James Chiesa. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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