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MILITARY PERSONNEL

Actions Needed to Achieve Greater Results From Air Force Family Need Assessments

GAO

Accountability ★ Integrity ★ Reliability

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Contents

United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

March 8, 2001

The Honorable George R. Nethercutt, Jr.
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Nethercutt:

The proportion of military personnel with spouses and children has risen dramatically since the military eliminated the draft and established an all-volunteer force. For example, 60 percent of Gulf War veterans versus 16 percent of Vietnam veterans were married with children during their service in these conflicts. The demands and stress of military life include frequent time away from family, recurrent moves that can disrupt family and social support networks, and the threat of family members' death or injury due to military service.

To meet the needs of military families so that they can adapt and function effectively in these circumstances, the Department of Defense (DOD) funds a wide variety of personnel and family support programs. These programs use a combination of direct assistance and information and referral to help with crises, deployments, moves, child care, personal financial management, parenting, and transition out of the service. In fiscal year 2000, $739 million was appropriated for such family support programs.

So that funds are efficiently distributed to those with the greatest need, DOD requires each service to assess the needs of military personnel and their families and their use of family support programs. In response to your request for information on the needs of military families, and as agreed with your office, this report focuses on the Air Force's family needs assessment process. Specifically, we determined (1) how the Air Force determines the needs of its military families, (2) what type of information about military family needs the Air Force obtains, and (3) how information from needs assessments affects the allocation of funding for Air Force family support programs.

In evaluating the Air Force's needs assessment process, we used criteria identified by research literature and experts as important in conducting need assessments that are used for program planning and resource decisions. These include the use of (1) a random sample survey to assess needs from the perspectives of servicemembers and their families;

(2) benchmarks to define when needs have increased, decreased, or emerged; (3) a framework to interpret the meaning of needs assessment results; (4) a strategy to determine which needs will receive priority for funding; and (5) information on the type and capacity of off base community and family support services.

Results in Brief

The Air Force has conducted assessments of its personnel's needs for family programs, as required by DOD regulations, every 2 years since 1993. It bases its assessments on a random sample survey distributed to active duty personnel and civilian spouses and has established a means of interpreting the results of the survey. However, this Air Force process does not meet other criteria generally recognized as important for needs assessments, including the use of benchmarks to determine whether needs have changed or emerged, a strategy to determine which needs will receive priority for funding, and information on the type and capacity of off base, or civilian, community and family support services. Neither the DOD nor Air Force family need assessment regulations include these criteria. The value and accuracy of the Air Force's needs assessments for designing, planning, continuing, expanding, or terminating family support programs, as required by DOD regulation, may consequently be diminished.

The Air Force's assessments cover needs related to deployments and mobility, family advocacy (i.e., domestic violence treatment and prevention), family life education, child care, parenting education, family members' employment, transitions and relocations, personal financial management, and dependents with special needs. Although DOD's guidance indicates that military families generally have needs in these areas, its regulations do not require that any particular issues or aspects of military family life be measured in needs assessments, and no single source conclusively demonstrates or defines the needs of military families. Data from the Air Force-wide 2000 needs assessment indicate that needs for support related to deployments and separations are far more commonly reported than needs associated with other family support. For example, more than 50 percent of both active duty members and spouses surveyed said that they needed to be able to make "morale" telephone calls during deployments and separations.[1]

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[1] "Morale" telephone calls are placed to the deployed spouse or parent, without charge, with the help of a military operator.

Although the Air Force has used needs assessment data to change family program policies and to conduct program planning and some training, it has inconsistently used the results to budget for family programs. DOD regulation states that such results should serve as the basis for the design, planning, continuation, expansion, or termination of family support services. On one hand, an Air Force child care program used data from the needs assessment to determine which of its bases had priority for a portion of $1 million for a new initiative to provide extended day care services. On the other hand, Air Force representatives for the family advocacy and family support center programs said that needs assessment data is not typically connected to family program funding decisions. Rather, family advocacy budgets are based on the number of people in the area that they expect to serve and an indicator of how long it takes to review domestic violence cases.

In light of DOD policy, we are recommending that the Secretary of Defense direct the Secretary of the Air Force to use criteria we have cited in this report in conducting family needs assessments and to use the results of the needs assessment process to budget for family support programs. To ensure that all the services conduct assessments that are useful for designing, planning, expanding, continuing, or terminating family support programs, we are also recommending that the Secretary of Defense include the criteria we have cited in its military family need assessment regulations and guidance.

Background

Twelve years after the end of the military draft, Congress passed the Military Family Act of 1985 (Title VIII of the Department of Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1986, Public Law 99-145). The law established an Office of Family Policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense to coordinate programs and activities of the military departments relating to military families. The law also gives DOD authority to make recommendations to the secretaries of the military departments with respect to programs and policies regarding military families.[2]

Since the passage of the act, increasing numbers of federal programs, contracts, laws, and regulations have been directed at providing and

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[2] The Military Family Act of 1985 was revised in 1996 (section 568 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1996, Public Law 104-106, as amended). The revision did not affect the described provisions pertaining to the Office of Family Policy.

enforcing support for military family members. In fiscal year 2000, Congress appropriated $739 million for DOD's family programs then under the jurisdiction of DOD's Office of Family Policy. These funds provide extensive information and referral services, counseling services, financial management education, spouse employment assistance, domestic violence treatment and prevention, and child care, among other services. These funds also support 260 family support centers that serve as focal points for the delivery of military family services in the United States and overseas.[3]

Nearly 10 years ago, in conjunction with the buildup of DOD's family support programs, DOD instructed each service to conduct servicewide needs assessments and to use the results as the basis for designing, planning, continuing, expanding, or terminating programs. In a 1999 update to this instruction, DOD reemphasized the need to validate military families' needs in relation to programs and services to support their well-being.

In the last few years alone, several new personnel and family support programs and related initiatives have been implemented or are under consideration by DOD or specific services, including the New Parent Support Program, the Healthy Parenting Initiative, the Combat Stress Control program, and increases in counselors in DOD schools (see app. III). In addition, active duty military and family quality of life issues have recently been topics of deliberation and study among DOD decisionmakers. For example:

- In May and June 2000, DOD sponsored two separate forums where, respectively, selected military personnel and family members and a group of senior enlisted military personnel were invited to the Pentagon to express their views on a range of military quality of life issues, including housing, health care, military readiness, youth services and programs, and general family support.
- In August 2000, DOD sponsored a family readiness conference at which the goal was to teach strategies for creating self-sustaining communities that provide effective family support in day-to-day living and in times of demanding rates of military activity and crises.

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[3] Due to reorganization, DOD's Office of Family Policy has jurisdiction over different programs than it did in fiscal year 2000. Currently, the office has jurisdiction over family support centers, spouse employment programs, relocation assistance programs, personal financial management programs, casualty and mortuary services, volunteer programs, adoption reimbursement, elder care, and family care plans.

- In its 2000 report to the President and Congress, DOD reports that its Quality of Life Executive Committee plans to expressly develop a needs assessment instrument to determine the needs of the top 20 high-tempo units and military specialties.[4]
- In October 2000, the Secretary of Defense launched a Military Quality of Life Summit to bring together corporate executives and senior defense officials to improve servicemembers' quality of life. A top priority of this partnership is to create job opportunities for military spouses and servicemembers leaving military service.

Providing the right type and amount of support for military family members is not a simple undertaking. Military family members outnumber total uniformed active duty personnel. Of the total number of active duty personnel and their family members, spouses, children, and adult "dependents" are about 60 percent (about 2 million), while 40 percent (about 1.3 million) are married and single active duty uniformed personnel. The active duty force is largely comprised of young people who are managing major personal responsibilities (i.e., marriage and children) and the demands of military service, which include frequent family separations; recurrent moves to new locations; and life in a culture that sets high expectations for personal responsibility, family responsibility, discipline, and performance. In 1999, 80 percent of the total force was younger than 35, 55 percent of the force was married, 48 percent of military spouses were 30 or younger, and 47 percent of all military members had children.

The Air Force Assessment Process Incorporates Some Key Elements but Not Others

DOD regulations require that the services conduct a family needs assessment survey and use the results for designing, planning, continuing, expanding, or terminating family support programs. The regulations do not require the services to use specific criteria or to use a specific process, method, timeline, or reporting format for needs assessments, and each service implements the regulations differently. The Air Force has conducted the required needs assessments by obtaining views from a random sample of active duty servicemembers and civilian spouses. Most recently, the Air Force offices with administrative responsibility for child care and youth programs, family advocacy programs, and family support center programs have contributed to the development of the

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[4] In 1995, the Secretary of Defense established the Quality of Life Executive Committee, comprising senior DOD officials and military leaders, to serve as his principal policy adviser on quality of life issues.

Air Force-wide needs assessment. The Air Force has established six measures that it applies to the results of its need assessment surveys to help determine and assess family needs. These measures represent short- and long-term goals that the Air Force has established for its family and community support programs, and they provide the framework for interpreting and assessing the results of the needs assessment survey. However, the assessment process does not include other elements recognized in research literature and by experts as important in conducting assessments that are used for program planning and resource decisions.

The Air Force's Needs Assessment Process Is Set in a Results Management Framework

The Air Force's establishment of short- and long-term measures for its family support programs is consistent with practices we have identified as useful in developing performance plans required in the Government Performance and Results Act.[5] The three short-term measures are:

- *Informal Community Connections*: what kind of informal networks and resources (e.g. friends, spouses, coworkers, and neighbors) servicemembers and their family members use, if any, for personal or family problems and how supportive these connections are.
- *Leadership Support*: how supportive various leaders (e.g., unit and wing leaders and base commanders) are in the lives of the servicemembers and their families.
- *Interagency Collaboration*: whether officials from the various base family support programs work collaboratively to support families and collaborate with off base community service providers.

The three long-term measures are:

- *Personnel Preparedness*: whether servicemembers plan to stay in the military, what their concerns and problems are, how servicemembers and their families are functioning, and how successful servicemembers are at managing work and family responsibilities.

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[5] As we reported in *Agency Performance Plans: Examples of Practices Than Can Improve Usefulness to Decisionmakers* (GAO/GGD/AIMD-99-69, Feb. 1999), an agency may not see results of its programs for years; thus, intermediate goals and measures can provide information on interim results and can be used to show progress or a contribution to intended results.

- *Family Adaptation*: how well families have adapted to the Air Force way of life, including how well they work together to solve problems; what the degree of family conflict is; what parents' concerns about their children are; and whether and where families seek help when they have problems.
- *Sense of Community*: whether servicemembers and their families are satisfied with the Air Force as a way of life, whether they perceive a positive sense of community on the base, and whether they use support services.

During on-site training led by contractors and Air Force family support officials, family support program staff at each Air Force base collaboratively review and interpret need assessment results using the six measures to help determine whether program goals are being met and to develop an appropriate action plan. This all-day training allows the professional staff from the base family support program offices and key military personnel to interact and discuss their views on the meaning and significance of the need assessment results. In addition, base program staff acquire skills and knowledge on how to use the needs assessment data to develop community action plans. Family support professional staff who have participated in this training believe that the needs assessment data provide them with a concrete tool to validate adjustments and improvements in base services. They stated that base leaders who provide essential support for changes in programs and services attach a great deal of weight to the needs assessment data.

Assessment Does Not Include All Elements to Support Program Planning and Funding Allocation

The Air Force's needs assessment process and DOD's regulations, lack three elements that would support program planning and resource allocation. These elements are the use of benchmarks to determine whether needs have changed or emerged, a strategy to determine which needs will receive priority for funding, and information on the type and capacity of off base, or civilian, community and family support services.

Using Benchmarks to Determine Needed Community Services

A primary purpose of need assessments is to identify services a community lacks relative to some generally accepted standard. Some private sector communities use such standards to assess community needs. For example, they compare local and statewide indicators of health (e.g., birth rate, teen pregnancy rate, and percent of uninsured adults); economic well-being (e.g., unemployment rate, per capita income, and poverty rate); and social welfare (e.g., percent of residents receiving Medicaid, food stamps, or other public assistance; rate of child abuse and neglect; and incidence of

child delinquency). By establishing measures of comparison, program administrators can more accurately determine how well their programs are doing and the needs of their clients. Without regular assessments of the needs of servicemembers and their families and the success of the programs in meeting these needs, the Air Force cannot maintain quality programs.

In a 1990 inspection of DOD family centers, the DOD Inspector General criticized the Department for failing to compare yearly results of needs assessments to determine whether programs were still needed and how successful the programs had been. And during our review, Air Force family support program staff said that it was difficult to evaluate how negative or positive the results of their needs assessments were because they did not have a basis for comparison. In addition, they said that base leaders want to know how their base is doing relative to some standard (e.g., other similar Air Force bases or the previous year's results). This information is key to base leaders when they review and evaluate budget requests for family support programs.

In reporting results to determine needs, the Air Force considers only the percent of the population that responded a certain way to an item in the needs assessment survey.[6] For example, members' taking time off from work to solve family-related problems is an indicator of personnel readiness that comes from the needs assessment. The random sample survey done in 2000 indicates that 8 percent of the total active duty servicemembers had to take either scheduled or unscheduled time off from work to take care of youth behavioral problems. Without a measure of comparison, however, it is not possible to determine whether a need has surfaced or changed. Eight percent may be perceived as a small number that does not indicate a need and that action is therefore not required. However, a comparison of the 2000 survey to the prior year's survey (1998) shows that the percent of active duty personnel who said they took unscheduled or scheduled time off from work to take care of youth behavioral problems increased from 3 to 8 percent, or more than

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[6] In the two prior need assessments (1995 and 1998), the Air Force reported changes over time on some need assessment results. For example, some 1995 results were compared to 1993 results and 1998 results were compared to 1995 results. The 2000 servicewide need assessment reported no such comparisons.

160 percent.[7] Viewing the results from the standpoint of prior year results—one measure of comparison—may signal cause for attention.

Prioritizing Needs Based on Assessments

Because funds for some family support programs are limited and can be redirected to other base activities, at the commander's discretion, it is important for the Air Force to prioritize the results of the family needs assessment. The Air Force's final report on its needs assessment includes needs associated with at least 65 family and community support programs or services and 14 child care-specific services, among other issues. The majority of these programs and services do not appear to be required by law and therefore would not have dedicated funding. Rather, non-mandated programs like these are funded through the base operations account, which also funds other operations on the base. Depending on the circumstances, the base commander may take funds that are budgeted for a family support program and use them elsewhere.[8]

A determination of priority may be based on the programs that servicemembers identify on the survey as most needed. It also may be based on legal mandates (i.e., programs that are required by law) or overall organization or strategic goals. In a military environment, if the Air Force were to prioritize programs based on organizational goals, it would look for the needs assessment results that directly link to military readiness. For example, direct implications for readiness are personal or family problems that require time off from work, problems in meeting family responsibilities, the need for assistance during deployments and unaccompanied tours, and risks that servicemembers may be placed in nondeployable status, because of family matters.[9]

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[7] The 1998 and 2000 servicewide need assessments had the same margin of error.

[8] As we reported in *Defense Budget: Real Property Maintenance and Base Operations Fund Movements* (GAO/T-NSIAD-00-101, Mar. 1, 2000), the services have considerable flexibility in using operations and maintenance funds (which includes the base operations account), and they move funds in and out of base operations accounts for different priorities. Base operations funding is used for services such as utilities, base communications, snow removal, security, and recreation.

[9] Annually, DOD is required to report information concerning permanent and temporary limitations on the deployability of servicemembers. DOD has defined a category of family matters that can result in a servicemember being classified as temporarily nondeployable, including adoption, humanitarian deferment issues, physical/mental handicap of family member, problems with a family care plan, domestic violence issues, financial stability, and other unspecified family issues.

Determining Off Base Resources for Family Support	During its need assessment process, the Air Force does not factor in what civilian community support resources are available, but its survey does ask respondents whether they received support on or off base. DOD regulations do not explicitly require the services to assess and factor civilian resources in, but they do require the services to provide family support programs only to the extent that local area services are not available, accessible, affordable, or appropriate to meet the needs of military families. During our review, DOD family support program officials said that it is important to link military families with community resources to meet their needs, if possible. Moreover, private sector family support organizations advocate the use of surveys to determine the capacity of the agencies and social service providers in local communities. Unless the Air Force determines what support services are available in the civilian community, how many people they can accommodate, and how they are used, its base family support staff cannot know whether they are duplicating services, underusing or overwhelming their own programs, or concentrating funds on the right programs.

Nonprofit organizations such as the United Way and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) provide assistance to families in civilian communities. About 1,400 United Way organizations finance youth development and recreation, parent support and education, and early childhood development services, among other things. The Armed Services YMCA, with 24 branches servicing the 50 states, provides a range of services to improve the quality of life for military personnel and their spouses and children. For example, the Armed Services YMCA in Norfolk, Virginia, provides services specifically targeted to junior enlisted personnel for social, recreational, personal, and child development; crisis prevention; and deployment separation.

Because at least more than 50 percent of Air Force personnel live in the civilian communities outside of Air Force bases, knowledge of available family support services would be valuable. Data from the 2000 Air Force needs assessment indicates that military family members use off base support services. For example, in 26 of 28 areas of concern related to children (e.g., abuse by a family member, adjusting to new schools, and divorce of parents), more civilian military spouses said they sought help off base.

Military families may seek support from civilian community services because they are more conveniently located. However, according to active duty personnel and civilian spouses, a leading reason for not using base

services is the perception that they provide limited confidentiality. For example, according to the 1998 Air Force needs assessment, more active duty personnel (20 percent) and civilian spouses (22 percent) said that limited confidentiality was a barrier to using Air Force family support services than any other reason, including "too busy," "stigma of using services," "lack of child care," "staff not knowledgeable," "not interested in services," and "inconvenient location," among others.[10] In addition, we previously reported that a military dependent seeking counseling on domestic violence issues cannot be assured that the information provided will not be disclosed.[11] In focus groups we conducted during this review, military spouses said that there is a general lack of confidence and trust in the military family support system. The perception among some military spouses is that those who seek help from military providers will be labeled as "problem wives" or "complainers," although other spouses indicated that assistance such as provided by the Airman's Attic (i.e., loaner program for clothing, toys, and household appliances) is a positive experience and benefit.

Need Assessments Provide Information About the Demands and Challenges Associated With Military Life

The Air Force needs assessment survey includes questions designed to measure needs for crisis assistance, deployment and mobility support, family advocacy, family life education, parenting education, information referral and assistance, family member employment, transition and relocation assistance, personal financial management education and information, and help with elder care responsibilities and family members with physical and/or mental handicaps. DOD guidance indicates that military family needs are generally met by programs providing assistance in

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[10] The Air Force did not include a question about possible barriers to the use of family support programs in the 2000 needs assessment; therefore, the needs assessment for 1998 provides the most recent data.

[11] *Military Dependents: Services Provide Limited Confidentiality in Family Abuse Cases* (GAO/NSIAD-00-127, Apr. 5, 2000).

these areas.[12] However, despite the emphasis in DOD family policy regulations (i.e., DOD Directive 1342.17, issued Dec. 30, 1988) that military family research and program evaluation be directed at understanding the needs of DOD personnel and their families, there is no authoritative description of military community and family needs across the diverse military population. Table 1 shows the results from the Air Force's 2000 survey of active duty personnel and civilian spouses regarding the major needs DOD has identified.

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[12] DOD regulations addressing these military family needs concern programs and services offered primarily through military family support centers. DOD has other programs designed to support family needs, including, child care and various morale, welfare, and recreation activities. Although the latter issues may be touched on in need assessments, these programs are not under the jurisdiction of the Office of Family Policy, and therefore, under the regulation we refer to here (DOD Instruction 1342.22, issued Dec. 30, 1992), they are not required to be included in the needs assessment.

Table 1: Results From the Air Force 2000 Community Needs Assessment

Support service or program	Active duty personnel that reported a need (percent)	Civilian spouses that reported a need (percent)[a]
Deployment support		
Morale calls	56	54
E-mail communications	51	49
Support during separations	30	37
Calls from unit to family	29	37
Car maintenance help	28	38
Predeployment support	23	17
Newsletters	14	23
Post-deployment assistance	12	7
Help with child care costs	11	13
Family support groups	10	17
Financial planning	10	7
Emergency financial assistance	9	8
Spouse employment support	8	13
Family care plan help	6	5
Youth supervision	6	9
Family reunion training	4	5
Workshops about family life/parenting	2	3
Respite care	2	4
Family advocacy[b]		
Family maltreatment services	2	2
Family violence prevention information	2	2
Family life education	4	4
Parenting classes	4	6
Information and referral		
Housing referral	23	21
Directory of community services/programs	15	23
Family member employment assistance	12	16
Transition assistance[c]		
Retirement employment information	5	5

Support service or program	Active duty personnel that reported a need (percent)	Civilian spouses that reported a need (percent)[a]
Retirement/separation workshops	7	6
Relocation assistance[d]		
Moving services/assistance	20	22
Relocation assistance	15	14
Relocation information	11	14
Financial help with relocation expenses	6	6
Sponsorship assistance	14	10
Personal financial management		
Budget counseling	9	7
Financial education/information	12	10
Emergency financial assistance	9	7
Special needs		
Elder care services	2	2
Exceptional family member[e]	5	6

Note: The percentages do not add to 100 because respondents could select more than one item. Based on Air Force calculations, the margin of error for active duty members' responses is less than 1 percentage point, and the margin of error for spouse responses is plus or minus 1 percentage point. The 2000 needs assessment was used at all Air Force bases. A total of 58,732 surveys were completed—35,732 among active duty members (55 percent response rate) and 22,194 among spouses (25 percent response rate). The random sample of active duty members was drawn by the Air Force Personnel Center, oversampling members in ranks E1 to E4 to compensate for typically low response rates from this group. Surveys of active duty members were distributed and collected at their duty stations. The random spouse sample, also oversampled to account for typically low response rates from civilian spouses, was drawn from Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System data provided by the Defense Manpower Data Center. Spouse surveys were mailed directly to spouses, who then returned their completed surveys by mail.

[a] Differences between active duty members' and spouses' responses cannot be attributed to differences between married couples because the members and spouses were randomly selected. In addition, not all the active duty respondents were married.

[b] The Family Advocacy Program is a mandatory program.

[c] The Transition Assistance Program is a mandatory program.

[d] The Relocation Assistance Program is a mandatory program.

[e] The Air Force's Exceptional Family Member Program identifies family members who have exceptional medical and/or educational needs so that personnel can be assigned to locations with adequate medical and educational resources to meet the family member's need.

Considering only the number of responses, table 1 shows that Air Force-wide, needs for support related to deployments and separations were far more commonly reported than needs associated with other key

family support areas.[13] More than 50 percent of both active duty members and spouses said that they needed morale telephone calls during deployments and separations. In a focus group we conducted at one Air Force base, spouses of enlisted Air Force members specifically highlighted a need for morale calls and an increase in the use of videophones and phone cards for these purposes.[14] The top five most commonly reported needs for deployment-related support—needs for morale calls, email communication, support during separations, calls from units to families, and car maintenance help—are fairly consistent between the servicemembers and the spouses. The exception is car maintenance help, which ranks third among spouses and fifth among active duty members.

Considering all the different types of community and family support programs and services where needs were measured, Air Force-wide, the top five most reported needed by active duty members were morale calls during deployments/separations (56 percent), email communication during deployments/separations (51 percent), adult fitness activities (49 percent), full-day child care on base (40 percent), and adult continuing education (37 percent).[15] The top five most reported needed programs and services by military spouses, Air Force-wide, were morale calls during deployments/separations (54 percent), email communication during deployments/separations (49 percent), adult fitness activities (42 percent),

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[13] This is consistent with Air Force data on the pace of military air operations and deployments. In recent congressional testimony, the Air Force Chief of Staff reported that Air Force personnel are deploying over three times more often with a force 60 percent smaller than its former size.

[14] While morale calls are highly valued by Air Force spouses, they said that they have concerns about the privacy of their conversations, since these calls must be placed by operators and are monitored, to some degree, for time. Videophones, which involve a telephone and video connection, provide another option for making morale calls. Air Force spouses told us that more resources are needed for videophones as well as phone cards, which would presumably allow them to make calls directly, without the use of an operator.

[15] The Air Force needs assessment also includes background questions to develop a statistical/demographic profile of the respondents and includes other questions about what causes stress, ways of relieving stress, top concerns Air Force-wide and at the base (e.g., housing, safety, pace of military operations, health care, and spouse employment), supportiveness of the Air Force community, satisfaction with multiple characteristics of the Air Force way of life, and problems encountered in the family in the past 12 months.

car maintenance help during deployments/separations (38 percent), and support during separations (37 percent).[16]

Needs Assessment Results and Budgets for Family Support Programs Are Not Consistently Linked

The Air Force has used need assessment results to budget for some family support programs but not for others, even though DOD regulations state that designing, planning, continuing, expanding, or terminating programs should be based on the results. For example, it has used the assessments as a basis for budgeting for some child care programs but has not generally used them for family advocacy programs (e.g., programs to prevent and treat domestic violence) and for programs under the family support centers (e.g., deployment support, spouse employment assistance, general family readiness services, and financial management education and information, among others). An Air Force family support center official who develops budgets for one command's base programs said that the Air Force has no requirement to use needs assessment data to help in budgeting for the programs.

According to an Air Force child care program official, in the past needs assessment data was used to allocate funds for a new child care initiative. Specifically, the results were used to determine which bases should receive priority for $1 million provided for an extended day care program. Though child care programs provide 10 hours of child care a day, according to the Air Force official, the Air Force downsizing had resulted in members' having to work longer hours and needing extended care for their children. According to the Air Force, the needs assessment results were used to determine which bases would have priority in receiving additional funds for extended day care services. In addition, the Air Force uses assessment data to project the need for child care. In the early 1990s, DOD established a formula for estimating the need of its military families for child care services that was based on the number of children up to age 12 in military families whose parents worked outside the home and needed some type of child care.

On the other hand, Air Force officials from the family advocacy and family support center programs said that needs assessment data had no direct impact and is not typically connected to family program budgets or resource allocations. An Air Force family advocacy official indicated that

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[16] The same percent of spouses said that they needed support during separations and calls from the unit to the family.

the need assessment results are primarily used for research and evaluation purposes. For example, the results have been used to understand community functioning, to establish prevention-related initiatives in the family support area, and to support Air Force research on techniques to estimate the prevalence of domestic violence. According to an Air Force official, family advocacy program budgets are determined on the basis of a formula that accounts for the number of people in the area they expect to serve and an indicator of how long it takes to review a domestic violence case.

An Air Force family support center official said that there is not normally a direct connection between the results of the need assessments and family program budgets, but cited one example in which need assessment results had been used to create new family support services. Several years ago, a personnel readiness position was created to respond to emerging family needs associated with an increase in Air Force deployments. However, the Air Force was unable to obtain money to fund an additional civilian staff member for the position and assigned duties associated with the position to an existing active duty member.

The Air Force has also used needs assessment data for policy changes, knowledge building, planning, and some training. For example:

- The Air Force changed its policy on the minimum age for using base fitness centers because data showed a desire for teens to have access to the centers.
- Recommendations on the Air Force's "home alone" policy were based on data concerning the age that parents believe it is safe to leave children at home alone, unsupervised, for about 2 hours.
- Family support staff at one base use the data to provide a "big picture" view of the needs of military personnel and family members connected to the base community.
- Family support professionals use the data to inform Air Force leaders and at one base used data showing that servicemembers did not believe the base leaders support family programs to encourage the leaders to participate in an annual family-oriented base-wide event.
- Air Force Education and Training Command family support staff include needs assessment results in squadron commander training briefings.
- Needs assessment results have been used to help develop installation plans for family support services.

According to private sector organizations like the United Way, the failure to use needs assessments in resource allocation decisions casts serious doubt on the value of the assessments, from the perspective of both program clients and managers. The extent to which the assessments are used for resource allocation plays a role in clients' commitment to the process and therefore the quality of the results. For example, family support staff at one base believed that a reason for the civilian spouses' low response rate to the assessment survey (i.e., 27 percent) was that there was no indication that the sponsor of the survey directly influenced base activities; there was no cover letter from the base commander indicating sponsorship of the survey.

Conclusions

Because the Air Force need assessment process does not meet criteria recognized as important in conducting needs assessments that are used for program planning and resource allocation, its assessment process may not be useful for designing, continuing, expanding, or terminating family support services, as required by DOD regulation. Using these criteria in designing and implementing its needs assessment process would give the Air Force more and better information on which to determine what programs it should reduce, expand, or eliminate based on information that needs have increased, decreased, or emerged; the type of support available in the civilian community; and the programs that have funding priority. In addition, the Air Force's inconsistent use of need assessment results for family program budgeting purposes does not fully support the DOD requirement that needs assessments be used to design, plan, continue, expand, or terminate family support programs.

DOD's regulation is broad and lacks specific requirements for conducting military family need assessments. With specific guidance on conducting need assessments, including the criteria we have cited in this report, the Department could ensure that the Air Force and other services' need assessments processes provide useful information on which to determine what programs should be reduced, expanded or eliminated, as generally required by DOD.

Recommendations for Executive Action

In light of DOD policy, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the Secretary of the Air Force to require the following in conducting its needs assessments: (1) the use of benchmarks to define when needs have increased or decreased, (2) the use of a plan to determine how need

assessment results will be prioritized in supporting resource allocation decisions, (3) the use and integration of information on the type and capacity of off base family support resources, and (4) a consistent and defined role for the results of the need assessment process in supporting family programs' budget development and resource allocations. We also recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy to include the same four requirements in current DOD regulations and guidance pertaining to the services' family need assessments.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

In written comments on a draft of this report, DOD agreed with our recommendations and stated specific actions they will take to implement each one. Specifically, DOD indicated it would revise family support program instructions to require the use of benchmarks in determining needs and program effectiveness; review policy guidance and, as appropriate, require the Air Force and other services to prioritize the results of their need assessments and use data on the capacity of off base resources as a variable in determining the priority for family support programs; and develop a process to ensure the use of quantitative and qualitative data, including need assessment results, in resource allocation decisions. Although the Department concurred with the recommendations, it expressed concern about some general implications and conclusions drawn in our report. DOD's principal concerns and our response are summarized below. The full text of DOD's comments is in appendix V.

DOD acknowledged that there is value in using benchmarks as a means of measuring need in family support programs and that benchmarks can aid installation commanders in making resource allocation decisions. However, the Department said that our report implied that a needs assessment survey is the only way that this can be accomplished. Although our report focuses on the principal needs assessment instrument identified by the Air Force, this is not intended as an exclusive endorsement of that method. One of our criteria in evaluating the Air Force's needs assessment process was the use of a random sample survey. However, we state in our report, "These criteria are not exhaustive, but represent core elements of need assessment processes. They do not exclude the use of supplementary need assessment practices or tools including such things as focus groups or forums, where appropriate…".

DOD also stated that the assessment process is complex and is only one factor in the budget development and resource allocation process. We

agree that the budget development and resource allocation processes may be responsive to factors other than need assessments. However, need assessment results must be among these factors, given that in the Air Force's case, it is the principal tool for obtaining feedback from program users about the need for family support services and programs. The number of surveys completed in the Air Force's 2000 needs assessment was 58,000, and as we report, the survey itself covers needs associated with at least 65 family and community support programs and services and 14 child care-specific services, among other issues.

DOD stated that our study was limited in scope, including only one service and two bases, and therefore may not present a complete picture of the process involved in program prioritization and resource allocation decisions. Nonetheless, the Department agreed to our recommendations to revise family need assessment procedures for all services, including incorporating provisions to use need assessment results in budget development and resource allocation. With respect to scope, our report states that the focus and scope of this study was the Air Force's family need assessment process. We met with the primary Air Force sponsors of the needs assessment. These officials have key managerial responsibilities for Air Force family support programs covered in the needs assessment. They provided us with information on the extent to which the Air Force needs assessment data is used to support budget and resource allocation decisions. We also contacted additional Air Force personnel that these officials said we should contact. We visited one Air Force base to observe how the Air Force was training local staff on the use and interpretation of Air Force needs assessment results and were told that this process was consistent throughout the Air Force. Earlier, in conducting background research for this report, we traveled to another Air Force base. In addition, our background research for this work involved interviews with family support officials from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Reserves and site visits or contacts with family support staff at three other military installations.

We conducted our review from January 2000 to January 2001 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Appendix I contains information on the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps needs assessment processes; appendix II includes a list of literature we reviewed on needs assessments; appendix III contains examples of recent family support programs and initiatives; and appendix IV shows the results of needs assessments Air Force-wide, from a U.S. base and from an

overseas base. Appendix V contains the full text of DOD's comments and our detailed response to them.

Scope and Methodology

In conducting our work, we met with family and community support officials from DOD's Office of Family Policy and the Air Force to obtain information on the requirements to conduct family and community need assessments, discuss how family needs are determined, obtain copies of the tools and instruments used to assess needs and to obtain need assessment results. We interviewed officials to determine how results of needs assessments were used in family support program budget decisions. In addition, we visited or contacted family and community support professional staff at three Air Force bases and interviewed them on the need assessment process and how need assessments impacted program budget decisions. At the bases, we conducted focus groups with military family members to gain additional insights into military family needs, issues and concerns and we met with senior base leadership. We observed needs assessment training of family support professional staff at an Air Force base to gain a detailed understanding of the Air Force process. Finally, we reviewed studies conducted by nonprofit and/or private sector, academic, and government organizations that describe central features and practices of community needs assessments.

List of offices contacted and locations visited:

- Department of Defense, Office of Family Policy, Washington, D.C.
- Department of Defense Family Readiness Conference, Phoenix, Arizona
- Air Force Family Advocacy, Brooks Air Force Base, Texas
- Air Force Child Development, Youth and Community Center Programs, Crystal City, Virginia
- Air Force Family Matters, Headquarters, Washington, D.C.
- Air Force Family Matters, Air Education and Training Command, Randolph Air Force Base, Texas
- Charleston Air Force Base, South Carolina
- Hanscom Air Force Base, Massachusetts
- National Military Family Association, Alexandria, Virginia
- Caliber Associates, Fairfax, Virginia

We focused on the broad issues concerning the assessment of military family and community needs rather than the techniques used to collect needs information (e.g., surveys). For example, we did not assess the strengths and weaknesses of the specific content, scope, or overall validity

of the Air Force's family and community needs assessment instrument. We also did not review the use of potentially more objective indicators of need, which some literature recommends should be incorporated into community needs assessments, for example, statistical indicators of economic health or family well-being such as the number of families receiving/eligible for public assistance, the numbers of households with various family configurations, the median age of women giving birth, the educational level of persons 18 and over, and housing problems, among others.

We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees; the Honorable Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense; the Honorable Gail H. McGinn, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy; and the Honorable Lawrence J. Delaney, Acting Secretary of the Air Force. Copies will also be made available to other interested parties upon request.
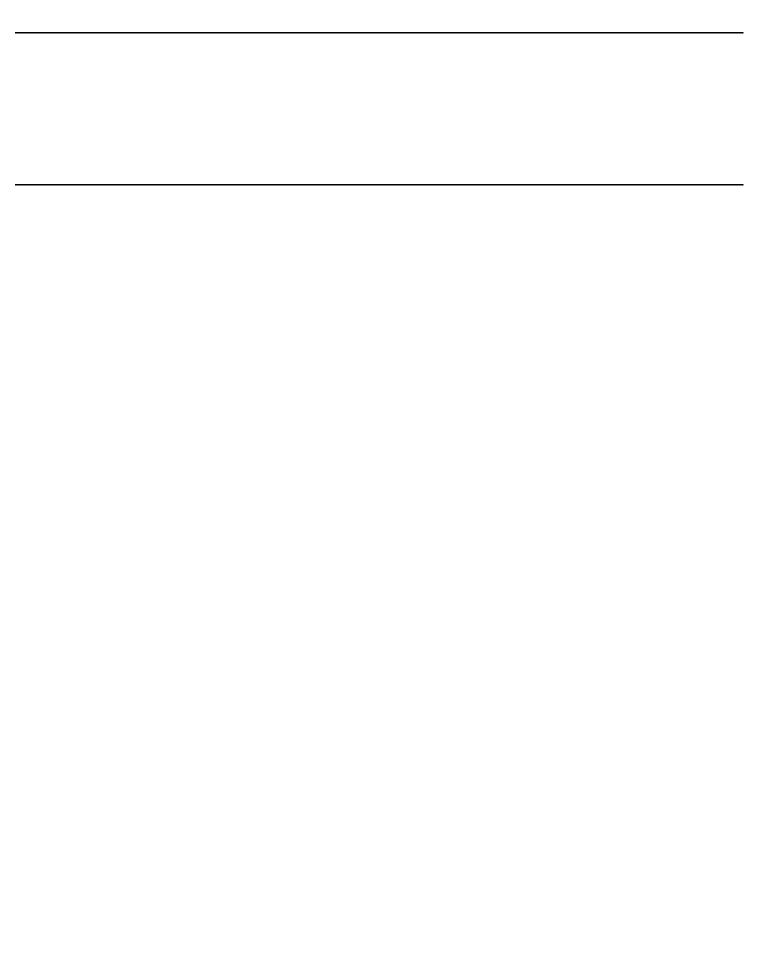
If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2700. A list of additional contacts and staff acknowledgments is in appendix VI.

Sincerely yours,

Nancy Kingsbury
Managing Director
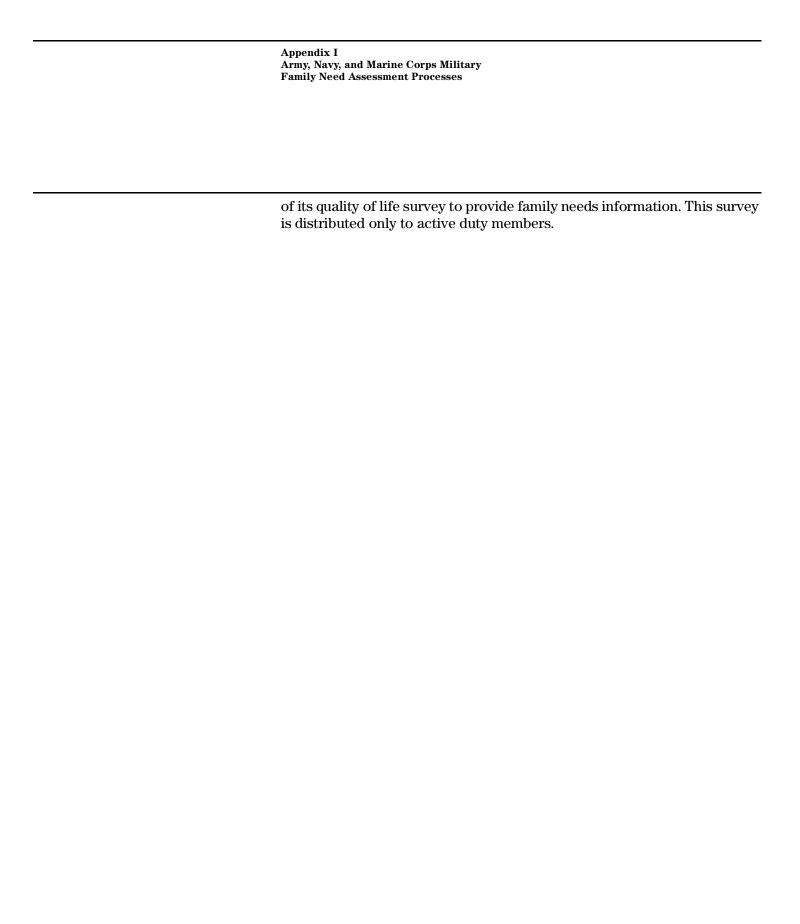Applied Research and Methods

Army, Navy, and Marine Corps Military Family Need Assessment Processes

The Army uses surveys to identify the servicewide needs of military family members. They include, the Survey of Army Families (SAF), in use since 1987; the Sample Survey of Military Personnel (SSMP), in use since 1958; and the Department of Defense (DOD) survey of active duty personnel and spouses. These surveys are distributed at different times, to different audiences, and differ considerably in content. The SAF is distributed about every 4 years to civilian spouses of active duty Army personnel, and the SSMP is distributed every fall and spring to active duty Army personnel. The DOD-wide survey of active duty personnel and spouses is sent out every 7 years and is designed to broadly assess attitudes and perspectives of military life across all the services. Separate survey instruments are used for active duty personnel and spouses of military personnel.

The Army also relies on information collected during its annual Family Action Plan process. This process was implemented in 1984 and involves holding forums with military family members to identify issues of concern to Army families or issues that detract from their quality of life. The forums are held at Army bases, major commands, and at headquarters. Issues that cannot be addressed at lower levels are passed on to officials at higher levels. From forums, the Army produces its annual Family Action Plan, which prioritizes top concerns and issues for Army families and lays out a strategy and vehicle to address them. Open forums like these have recently become more widely used in DOD and are also used by state governments to determine needs for services. While useful for obtaining grassroots input, this process does not involve the use of representative surveys or random or representative selection of forum participants to ensure representative input about Army family needs.

The Navy also uses surveys to identify family member needs. Since 1994 the Navy has implemented three needs surveys, each of which has a different focus and target audience. The 1994 and 1996 need assessment surveys were distributed to active duty Navy personnel and spouses. The emphasis in the 1994 survey was on housing and morale, welfare, and recreation issues, while the emphasis in the 1996 survey was on broad family support issues and concerns, including the use of and satisfaction with family support programs. The Navy's 2000 needs survey had a different focus from that in prior years–it was distributed to senior Navy leaders to assess their views of military family needs.

The Marine Corps does not have a dedicated servicewide family needs assessment instrument or process. The Marine Corps relies on the results

of its quality of life survey to provide family needs information. This survey is distributed only to active duty members.

Needs Assessment Literature

There is no authoritative study or body of research concerning how best to conduct military family need assessments. In developing criteria, we reviewed studies and research conducted by nonprofit and/or private, academic, and government organizations. These criteria are not exhaustive but represent core elements of need assessment processes. They do not exclude the use of supplementary need assessment practices or tools, including such things as focus groups or forums, where appropriate, and they do not involve specific issues of survey methodology. To identify principal elements of need assessment processes, we focused on research conducted by organizations experienced and familiar with providing family support services, such as the United Way and Family Support America, formerly known as the Family Resource Coalition of America. United Ways help meet health and human-care needs through approximately 1,400 community-based United Way organizations across the country. Family Support America, formed in 1981, builds networks, produces resources, advocates for family supportive public policy, provides consulting services, gathers knowledge on family support, and offers a national certification for family support centers and programs.

Literature Reviewed

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Watkins, R., and others. "Needs Assessment: A Digest, Review, and Comparison of Needs Assessment Literature." *Performance Improvement,* September, 1998, pp. 40-53.

Recent Military Family and Personnel Support Programs and Initiatives

New Parent Support Program

In fiscal year 1998, new parent support programs became a line item in the DOD budget. Each service has initiated a voluntary program to provide (1) personal support for new parents, (2) reinforcement of the skills and strengths needed for quality parenting, (3) facilitation of emotional preparation for parenthood, (4) increased awareness of the available community resources, (5) reduced isolation of new parents, (6) identification of families with the potential for problem parenting, and (7) early referral to appropriate support services. Each program offers basic support services to all parents who request services, while focusing more intensively on families where there is a higher risk for child abuse. Each program offers a set of core services to every expecting family served by a military medical treatment facility, including a prenatal hospital visit and assessment, one prenatal home visit, postnatal visits in the hospital and at home, and education and support groups.

Healthy Parenting Initiative

The healthy parenting initiative was established to provide military-specific parenting resources that are readily accessible and to address parenting of children from infancy through adolescence in connection with the military lifestyle. DOD believed that the challenges of military life were not adequately addressed in the existing civilian-based parenting curricula used in DOD family support programs. For example, for military parents who have little time to attend traditional parent education classes, parenting materials must be flexible and readily accessible. DOD believes that as a result of an increasing level of military operations, many families struggle with intermittent single parenting and helping their children cope with loss and separation. Moreover, they indicate that because most active duty members' families, even when intact, are usually separated from extended family members, family-based parenting guidance is limited.

DOD's Office of Family Policy, in partnership with the Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension System, chartered the initiative to develop military-specific parenting resources. The Air Force is designated as the Executive Agent for the project. The initiative will produce material that can be used in a classroom and also made available to parents through a variety of other formats (e.g., Web-based material, one-page flyers, and audiotapes). In September 1999, the Air Force developed three specific proposals outlining the following parenting resources: (1) educational materials to address parenting in the military and strategies to ensure ease of access to the materials, (2) materials and strategies to improve communications between teens and

parents, and (3) command educational materials on links between healthy families and mission readiness.

Combat Stress Control Program

DOD issued regulations on the Combat Stress Control Program in February 1999. This program is designed to ensure appropriate prevention and management of combat stress reaction casualties to preserve mission effectiveness and warfighting and to minimize the short- and long-term adverse effects of combat on the physical, psychological, intellectual, and social health of servicemembers. The program is to include curricula, training, and exercise requirements for joint and service-specific operations that focus on primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention of combat stress reactions in settings from the barracks to the battlefield. The program includes training in the principles of combat stress management and training that addresses leadership, communication with troops, unit morale and cohesion, and individual psychological stressors before, during, and after deployment.

Suicide Prevention

In June 1999, the President announced expansion of the Air Force suicide prevention pilot program throughout the military by the end of 1999. The prevention program considers nine risk factors that were found to be frequently associated with suicide victims and four factors believed to protect people from suicide attempts. These factors include a history of mental health problems, substance abuse, relationship problems, poor coping skills, legal problems, previous suicide attempts, financial problems, poor job performance, and social isolation. The protective factors include establishing social support in units, teaching individual coping skills, establishing the belief among military personnel that seeking mental health care is acceptable, and ensuring privacy protection. The program involves the following: (1) distributing public service messages by DOD senior leaders that express concern about suicide and the importance of encouraging and protecting members who seek help; (2) debriefing individuals and units following traumatic events; (3) establishing annual suicide awareness and prevention training for all military personnel; (4) integrating the delivery of preventive services from six agencies— mental health, family advocacy, health and wellness centers, family support centers, child and youth centers, and chaplains; (5) including suicide prevention training in all professional military education programs; (6) developing a more robust database of those who committed and attempted suicide so that risk factors and trends can be analyzed and

preventive measures taken; and (7) conducting unit risk assessment surveys and unit intervention as required.

Increase in DOD School Counselors

In September 1999, the DOD Education Activity announced that it planned to nearly double the number of counselors and psychologists in its schools by June 2000 to help students deal with increasing stresses in military life. This amounts to an increase of 200 counselors and psychologists. According to the Education Activity, this increase was in response to parents' concerns about their children, particularly in Europe, where the high rate of deployments had increased family disruptions. In addition, the counselors were to increase their contact with students to help them plan for the future, including college or vocational educational programs.

Increase in Technology-Based Family Support Delivery Mechanisms

In 1996, DOD's Office of Family Policy stated a commitment to the development of technology strategies to improve access to and use of family program information as part of its Family Program Internet Initiatives. Examples of the Web sites that have been developed follow:

MAPsite *(http://dticaw.dtic.mil/mapsite)*. This is a customer-oriented public site that provides military members, civilians, and their families self-assessment tools, advice, and links to family program areas.

Military Teens on the Move *(http://dticaw.dtic.mil/mtom)*. This site was designed to help military teens meet the challenges of frequent moves and the demands of their parents' mobile lifestyle.

DOD Job Search *(http://dod.jobsearch.org)*. This site features want ads, resume writing, and referral systems geared to transitioning military personnel and their spouses, DOD federal civilian employees, and the spouses of relocating active duty members.

In addition, the Army, Navy and Air Force have public access Web sites designed to provide information on a range of quality of life and family support-related services and information. The Army's Web site is called the Virtual Army Community Service Center *(http://trol.redstone.army.mil/acs/virtual/target.html*). The Navy's site is known as LIFELines (http://www.lifelines4qol.org). The Air Force's family support-related Web site is known as Crossroads *(http://www.afcrossroads.com/home.cfm)*.

Results of Some Air Force Needs Assessments (2000)

Table 2: Results of the Air Force 2000 Needs Assessment Air Force-Wide and for Air Force Bases in Aviano, Italy and Bedford, Massachusetts.

Support service or program	Percent of active duty personnel that reported a need[a]			Percent of civilian spouses that reported a need[b]		
	All Air Force	Aviano Air base	Hanscom Air base	All Air Force	Aviano Air base	Hanscom Air base
Deployment						
Morale calls	56	63	47	54	64	42
Email communications	51	56	50	49	51	43
Support during separations	30	28	28	37	43	28
Calls from unit to family	29	28	25	37	43	27
Car maintenance help	28	32	22	38	57	32
Predeployment support	23	25	22	17	16	14
Newsletters	14	14	9	23	25	14
Post-deployment assistance	12	14	13	7	5	6
Help with child care costs	11	14	8	13	8	12
Family support groups	10	10	9	17	17	19
Financial planning	10	11	8	7	7	5
Emergency financial assistance	9	10	6	8	9	4
Spouse employment support	8	8	7	13	22	12
Family care plan help	6	6	4	5	4	5
Youth supervision	6	6	7	9	10	10
Family reunion training	4	3	5	5	4	7
Workshops about family life/parenting	2	2	2	3	2	3
Respite care	2	3	3	4	3	5
Family advocacy						
Family maltreatment services	2	3	2	2	0	2
Family violence prevention information	2	2	2	2	0	2
Family life education	4	5	5	4	5	6
Parenting classes	4	5	5	6	8	5
Information and referral						
Housing referral	23	33	21	21	27	17
Directory of community services/programs	15	18	21	23	31	27
Family member employment assistance	12	13	12	16	19	15
Transition assistance						
Retirement employment information	5	4	5	5	4	7

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(Continued From Previous Page)

Support service or program	Percent of active duty personnel that reported a need[a]			Percent of civilian spouses that reported a need[b]		
	All Air Force	Aviano Air base	Hanscom Air base	All Air Force	Aviano Air base	Hanscom Air base
Relocation assistance						
Retirement/separation workshops	7	5	8	6	4	7
Moving services/assistance	20	21	24	22	20	22
Relocation assistance	15	15	18	14	10	15
Relocation information	11	12	15	14	13	16
Financial help with relocation expenses	6	8	5	6	6	3
Sponsorship assistance	14	16	17	10	15	11
Personal financial management						
Budget counseling	9	8	7	7	4	4
Financial education/information	12	14	11	10	10	8
Emergency financial assistance	9	9	6	7	8	2
Special needs						
Elder care services	2	2	2	2	0	0
Exceptional family member	5	9	6	6	6	7

Note: The percents do not add to 100 because respondents could select more than one item.

[a] The margin of error for active duty responses from Aviano is plus or minus 5 percentage points and from Hanscom is 4 percentage points. The margin of error for spouse responses at Aviano and Hanscom is plus or minus 6 percentage points.

[b] Differences between active duty members and civilian spouses cannot be attributed to differences between married couples. Survey participants were randomly selected. In addition, not all active duty respondents were married.

Considering only the number of responses, the needs most commonly reported by active duty members at Aviano and Hanscom were for morale calls and email communication during deployments, separations, and unaccompanied tours. Nearly two-thirds of active duty respondents at Aviano said that they needed morale calls, and more than 50 percent said that they needed email communication. At Hanscom Air Force Base, 50 percent of active duty respondents said that they needed email communication during deployments, separations, or unaccompanied tours, and 47 percent said they needed morale calls. The same pattern of results was found for spouses, with the exception that morale calls and car maintenance help were the needs most commonly reported by spouses at Aviano Air Force Base. Specifically, nearly two-thirds of spouses at Aviano said they needed morale calls during deployments, separations, and unaccompanied tours, and nearly 60 percent said they needed car maintenance help during these periods. Consistent with other findings,

more spouses at Hanscom Air Force Base said they had needs for morale calls (42 percent) and email communication (43 percent) compared to other support needs.

The Air Force-wide results show that when comparing among the different categories of need, more active duty personnel and spouses indicated a need for some services or support concerning deployments and separations, relocation, and information and referral, compared to other areas. These results are also reflected in the data for Hanscom and Aviano. The greatest numbers of both active duty members and spouses indicated the need for some type of deployment/separation-related support (i.e., maximum percent of active duty is 63 percent and maximum percent of spouses is 64 percent). Comparatively, the next greatest numbers of active duty members and spouses indicated needs for housing referrals (i.e., maximum percent of active duty is 33 percent and maximum percent of spouses is 27 percent) or a directory of community services (i.e., maximum percent of active duty is 21 percent and maximum percent of spouses is 31 percent) and moving services (i.e., maximum percent of active duty is 24 percent and maximum percent of spouses is 22 percent) .

Similar to the Air Force-wide need assessment results, needs expressed by active duty personnel and spouses at Hanscom and Aviano in some cases exceeded expressed needs for the conventional family support programs and services listed in table 2. In considering all the different types of community and family support programs and services where needs were specifically measured, the five most commonly reported for active duty members at Hanscom were full-day child care on base (51 percent), email communication during deployments/separations (50 percent), adult fitness activities (50 percent), morale calls during deployments/separations (47 percent), and adult continuing education (35 percent). The five most commonly reported needs for active duty members at Aviano were the same as the results for Hanscom—only the order was different: morale calls during deployments/separation (63 percent), email communication during deployment/separation (56 percent), adult fitness activities (54 percent), full-day child care on base (50 percent), and adult continuing education (41 percent).

Spouses at Hanscom and Aviano had three top five needs in common with each other and with active duty members–morale calls and email communication during deployments/separations and adult fitness activities. The top five most commonly reported needs by spouses at Hanscom were adult fitness activities (45 percent), email communication

during deployments/separation (43 percent), morale calls during deployments/separations (42 percent), chapel services (39 percent), and couples communication (36 percent). The top five most commonly reported needs by spouses at Aviano were morale calls during deployments/separations (64 percent), car maintenance help during deployments/separations (57 percent), email communication during deployments/separations (51 percent), adult fitness activities (44 percent), and children/youth/programs and services (36 percent).

The need assessment reports for Aviano and Hanscom were selected on the basis of convenience, with no attempt to match or contrast the bases on select criteria. However, the two bases are distinctly different in mission. An Air Force official indicated that the single most important factor that accounts for differences in base need assessments is mission, as differences in mission translate to differences in individual/unit behaviors, work styles, staffing, and resource distribution. Hanscom Air Force Base, located approximately 20 miles from Boston, is part of Air Force Materiel Command. Its primary mission is to manage the development and acquisition of electronic command and control systems, which gather and analyze information on potentially hostile forces. In short, Hanscom is primarily concerned with the business functions involved in developing and procuring electronics. On the other hand, Aviano, located in Italy, is home to the 16th Air Force which is part of Air Force European Command. Its mission is to execute air operations in support of the European Command and NATO. The 16th Air Force supports enforcement of peace in the Balkans and enforcement of the no-fly zone in northern Iraq. In spite of these distinctly different missions, needs assessment results appear remarkably similar.

Comments From the Department of Defense

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

FORCE MANAGEMENT
POLICY

Mr. Kwai-Cheung Chan   FEB 1 2001
Director
Applied Research and Methods
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20584

Dear Mr. Chan:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO draft report, "MILITARY PERSONNEL: Actions Needed to Achieve Greater Results from Air Force Needs Assessments," December 18, 2000 (GAO Code 713066/OSD Case 3020). Overall, the Department concurs with the draft report recommendations, but would like to express concern with some general implications and conclusions that are drawn in the report.

The Department recognizes the value of using benchmarks as a means of measuring need in family support programs. We also recognize that the use of benchmarks is a valuable strategy that can aid installation commanders in making resource allocation decisions.

The draft report, as written, indicates these goals can be met through a simple needs assessment survey. In fact, the assessment process is complex and is only one factor in the budget development and resource allocation process. We have concerns that this study is limited in scope, studying only one Service and two bases. This approach may not present a complete picture of the process involved in program prioritization and resource allocation decisions.

The Department is committed to meeting the needs of service members and their families and to providing quality of life services that produce measurable results. Each of the Services is working toward an assessment process that results in both quantitative and qualitative data for commanders to use in budget formulation and making resource allocation decisions. The Air Force, in particular, has made significant progress in developing a results-oriented management strategy that matches services to need and targets resources to those needs at the local level.

Please see the attached comments for a detailed response to the draft report.

Sincerely,

Gail H. McGinn
Acting Assistant Secretary

Attachment:
As stated

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED DECEMBER 18, 2000
(GAO CODE 713066/ OSD CASE 3020)"**

**"MILITARY PERSONNEL: ACTIONS NEEDED TO ACHIEVE GREATER RESULT
FROM AIR FORCE FAMILY NEED ASSESSMENTS"**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS TO
THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS**

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the
Secretary of the Air Force to require the following in conducting its need assessments:

1. The use of benchmarks to define when needs have increased or decreased;
2. The use of a plan to determine how need assessment results will be prioritized in supporting
resource allocation decisions;
3. The use and integration of information on the type and capacity of off-base family support
resources; and
4. A consistent and defined role for the results of the need assessment process in supporting
family program budget development and resource allocation. (p. 21/GAO Draft Report)

DoD RESPONSE:

General Comments:
1. The Department of Defense (DoD) concurs with Recommendation 1 and the four sub-
recommendations in the draft report. A detailed response is contained in the next section.
2. The Needs Assessment (NA) Process and Needs Assessment (NA) Survey referenced
throughout the draft report seem to be used interchangeably. There is a distinct difference
between the specific *survey* instrument used biannually by two of the Services and the
complex NA *process* used by all the Services.
3. The report does not fully capture current Air Force practices in assessing needs,
benchmarking and linking the results of the needs assessment process to program and
resource allocation decisions. The report occurs at a time when the Air Force is
implementing a specific strategy to build integrated delivery systems to foster collaboration
among providers, increase program effectiveness, and cut unnecessary duplication in
services. This strategy is aimed entirely at gaining the most benefit from limited funding
while directly targeting the areas of greatest need.
4. The report refers to family support regulations as though they apply to all family programs.
The instruction to which the report refers applies only to Family Centers and does not apply
to Child and Youth, Education or Family Advocacy programs.
5. The report refers to "DoD needs assessment instructions." DoD Family Center policy does
not direct the Services to use a "needs assessment survey" to assess needs. Rather the policy
broadly requires assessments to be conducted by the Services and states that "results should
serve as a basis for the design, planning, continuation, expansion, or termination of family
support services." This policy does not require the resource allocation process to be based on
needs assessments.

See comment 1.

See comment 2.

See comment 3

See comment 4.

See comment 5.

See comment 6.

See comment 7.

See comment 8.

6. The report states that the Air Force does not tie the results of the NA process to the development of budget and resource allocation decisions. This statement in the report does not reflect the entire process and the various elements that the Air Force uses when making budget and resource allocation decisions. In fact, the NA process, not the NA survey alone, plays a role in resource allocation decisions. These decisions are often made at the local level since the budget is built from the "bottom up" as well as from the "top down."

Recommendation 1.1. Concur that the use of benchmarks is one of many important strategies that should be used in assessing needs and program effectiveness.

Comments:
- The report does not indicate whether required benchmarking refers to measuring only increases and decreases in needs based solely on the NA Survey. The Services use various methods to assess need and compare data from these sources to benchmark progress. The survey instrument is only one of many indicators for assessing need. Using it exclusively may omit other important data or information that should be considered in the decision making process.
- All Services are currently using a variety of benchmarks in measuring need and program effectiveness where standards are available and/or comparable to military community needs.
- Air Force makes NA Survey benchmark data available, upon request, at the installation level for commanders to use in conjunction with other data to determine program priority.
- Air Force recently implemented a strategy based on a decision making model to train officials at base level to use a consistent process to develop local standards.

Actions to be taken:
OSD Office of Family Policy will revise the Family Support program instruction to require the use of benchmarks as one of many qualitative and quantitative measures that should be used to determine need and program effectiveness. Please note that this instruction applies only to the programs that are normally provided through the Family Centers.

Recommendation 1.2. Partially concur that each Service should have a plan to prioritize the results of the assessment process and use that data as one of many criteria in the resource allocation decision process.

Comments:
- It would be inappropriate to base resource allocations solely on the results of any NA survey. Such decisions cannot be based on the results of a single NA instrument, nor based on a review of the process of a single Service.
- Ultimately, resource allocation decisions must be made at the local level since it is the primary place where there is enough flexibility in the system to meet emerging needs in a timely manner.
- Service and local community needs vary depending on many factors such as mission, location, demographics, availability of community resources, emergent requirements, contingency operations, and Congressional or DoD/Service mandates.
- The report states (page 11, para. 1) that the majority of family support programs are not required by law. While it is difficult to quantify the number of programs required by law, it

should be noted that many of the programs are, in fact, required by law. This results in very little discretionary funding available for reallocation among these programs. Within these constraints, commanders often make adjustments at the local level to meet emerging needs.

Actions to be taken:
OSD will review policy guidance and, as appropriate, will require the Services to prioritize the results of their needs assessment process and to use results as one element in supporting resource allocation decisions.

Recommendation 1.3. Concur that commanders should, to the extent possible, integrate information on the type and capacity of off-base resources.

Comments:
- DoD policy already requires communities to assess the capacity of off-base resources and to use that data in determining the allocation of resources for programs.
- The report implies that the Air Force does not accomplish this objective. In fact, the Air Force has specific guidance to ensure that such information is obtained and available. This is an integral part of the larger needs assessment process developed by the Air Force.
- A rigid quantification of the capacity of such resources to deal with needs of military members and families is difficult if not impossible. Often, civilian community resources are limited as well. Where possible, all the Services partner with the civilian and military communities.
- Assessing capacity alone does not take into consideration the accessibility, affordability, and appropriateness of such services for military families.
- Such determinations must be done at the local level since any aggregating of this data at the headquarters and OSD level would not reflect a micro level view of capacity or need at individual installations. Each community differs in need and availability of resources.

Actions to be taken:
- OSD policy guidance will require the other Services to use data on capacity of off-base resources as one variable for determining the priority for family support programs.
- OSD will post Service methodologies and best practices for assessing community resources on various Department web sites to ensure all Services have access to information.

Recommendation 1.4. Concur that needs assessment data, along with other assessment data, should have a consistent and defined role and should influence the budget development and resource allocation process. However, this data must be considered within the context of the overall needs of the military community.

Comments:
- The NA *process* (of which needs assessment surveys are only one tool) should play a significant role in the family program budget development and resource allocation process.
- Since Desert Storm, the Air Force and the Services have regularly used NA process results to tailor and adjust programs to meet the emerging needs of military families. Commanders routinely take funds "out-of-hide" to address specific needs such as morale calls and 24-hour operations to support families when mission requirements warrant such expanded operations.

See comment 9.

See comment 10.

See comment 11.

- The fact that the Air Force is providing "morale calls" is a prime example of linking NA results to a reallocation of resources as well as the establishment of creative partnerships to meet need when funds are not available for reallocation.

Actions to be taken:
- OSD will reissue Family Support (Family Center) policy to ensure that the Services use quantifying and qualifying data to assess programs and resources as part of their decision making processes.
- OSD will direct the Services to identify NA processes and methodologies and to document those processes so they can be shared among the Services.
- OSD will establish, in conjunction with the Services, criteria for benchmarks, assessment plans and use of results in budget and resource allocation decisions.

Recommendation 2: The GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy) to include the following requirements in current DoD regulations and guidance pertaining to the Services' family needs assessments:

1. The use of benchmarks to define when needs have increased or decreased;
2. The use of a plan to determine how needs assessment results will be prioritized in supporting resource allocation decisions;
3. The use and integration of information on the type and capacity of off-base family support resources; and
4. A consistent and defined role for the results of the need assessment process in supporting family program budget development and resource allocation. (p. 21/GAO Draft Report)

DoD RESPONSE:
Concur with Recommendation 2, applying the same approach as addressed in Recommendation 1. In addition, DoD will extend the requirements to apply to all the Services.

The following are GAO's comments on DOD's letter dated February 1, 2001.

GAO Comments

1. DOD comments that we seemed to use the terms "needs assessment process" and "needs assessment survey" interchangeably in our report. It noted that there is a distinct difference between the survey that two of the services use and the complex process that all the services use. The focus of our report is the Air Force family need assessment process. We did not conduct a detailed assessment of other services' processes, although we obtained some information on these during our background research (see app. I). In addition, we reviewed DOD need assessment requirements that pertain to all the services. During our review, the Air Force presented its family and community needs assessment survey as its primary method of determining the needs of its families. In technical comments on our draft report, the Air Force identified additional tools and methods, including the Air Force Quality of Life Survey, Leisure Needs Survey, DOD Worldwide Survey, and administrative data, among others. While these additional sources may be useful, the Air Force did not indicate how they are integrated, assessed, or prioritized to arrive at a representative and reliable indication of Air Force family and community needs. As we report here, there is such a process, although with limitations, associated with the Air Force's family and community needs assessment survey.

2. DOD states that we have not fully captured Air Force practices in assessing needs, benchmarking, and linking the results of the needs assessment process to program and resource allocation decisions. However, the comment identifies no specific Air Force benchmarking practices or needs assessment results that are linked to program and resource allocation decisions.

3. DOD notes in its comments that its family support regulations apply only to family centers and do not apply to child and youth, education, or family advocacy programs. We note in our report, however, that DOD family center regulations do not apply to all DOD family support programs, including such programs as child care and various morale, welfare, and recreation programs. They also do not apply to family advocacy programs. However, the Air Force offices that oversee child and youth and family advocacy programs contribute to the development of the Air Force needs assessment survey and submit questions related to needs for these programs. Thus, while these programs are not required to conduct a needs assessment under the

regulation, they are engaged in the process, and it is not unreasonable to inquire how they use the information derived from it. Therefore, we included these offices in our review.

4. DOD notes that its policy does not direct the services to use a needs assessment survey to assess needs, but rather, broadly requires the services to assess the needs of its members. It also notes that policy does not require resource allocations to be based on needs assessments. However, DOD Instruction 1342.22, issued December 30, 1992, states on page 4 that the secretaries of the military departments will develop a comprehensive evaluation system, including a needs assessment survey, to measure the effectiveness of family centers. Further, the regulation states that the survey is to be designed, constructed, and conducted to provide scientifically valid and reliable information about the needs and use patterns of individuals and families. The survey results are also to serve as the "basis for the design and planning of future services and the continuation, expansion, or termination of others." While DOD released a "directive-type memorandum" on March 23, 1999, that modified the requirements under this instruction to establish baseline services at military installations, this change did not alter any other requirements under the instruction, including those related to family needs assessments. Therefore, on balance, it appears that DOD did, and continues to intend for the needs assessment to serve as the basis for resource allocation.

5. DOD notes that our report generally does not reflect the complete process the Air Force uses when making budget and resource allocation decisions. They also comment that we state in our report that the Air Force does not tie the results of the needs assessment process to budget and resource allocation. As requested, we determined how information from needs assessments affects the allocation of funding for Air Force family support programs. We note that the Air Force has used needs assessment results to budget for some family support programs but not for others, even though the DOD regulations state that designing, planning, continuing, expanding, or terminating programs should be based on the results. We state that the Air Force has used the assessments as a basis for budgeting for some child care programs but has not generally used them for family advocacy programs and for programs under the family support centers. Air Force family advocacy officials indicated that family advocacy program budgets are determined based on the number of people they expect to serve and how long it takes to review a domestic violence case. We also

note that, according to Air Force family support center officials, there is not normally a direct connection between the results of the need assessments and family program budgets. However, we report that need assessment results recently impacted budget decisions, specifically regarding the creation of a personnel readiness position in family centers.

6. DOD notes that the services use various methods to assess need and compare data from these sources to benchmark progress. Its comments further say that our report does not indicate whether required benchmarking refers to measuring only increases and decreases in needs solely based on the needs assessment survey. DOD comments that only using the survey may omit other important data that should be considered. Although our report focuses on the principal needs assessment instrument identified by the Air Force, we are not exclusively endorsing survey methods for development of benchmarks. One of our criteria in evaluating the Air Force's needs assessment process was the use of a random sample survey. However, as we state in our report, these criteria represent core elements of need assessment processes, but do not exclude the use of supplementary need assessment practices or tools. In our observation of feedback and training based on the needs assessment, scattered reference was made to service-wide results, but base staff did not appear to have easy access to benchmarks or comparative information and expressed a desire for such information to better understand their own base's results. As indicated in the Department's comments, such information would have been made available on specific request.

7. DOD commented that base resource allocation decisions cannot be based on the results of a single need assessment instrument nor based on a review of a single service's process. We do not state or imply that family support resource allocation decisions should be based solely on the results of any one need assessment survey. As requested, we determined how information from needs assessments affects the allocation of funding for Air Force family support programs. As noted in our report, the Air Force has used needs assessment results to budget for some family support programs but not for others. We also note that, "according to private sector organizations like the United Way, the failure to use needs assessments in resource allocation decisions casts serious doubt on the value of the assessments, from the perspective of both program clients and managers."

8. DOD commented that, while it is difficult to determine the number of programs required by law, many of the programs are required by law and that leaves very little discretionary funding available for reallocation among these programs. We agree that it is difficult to quantify the number of family support programs that are required by law, and DOD did not provide us with a specific number. Our reference to the number of programs required by law was made in the context of the list of programs and services that are included in the Air Force needs assessment report and for which respondents to the needs assessment are asked to indicate a need. We note that the Air Force's final report on its 2000 needs assessment includes needs associated with at least 65 family and community support programs or services and 14 child care-specific services, among others. Specifically, among the 65 programs and services we reference, a minority of them appear to be linked to the three known mandated family support programs–Family Advocacy, Transition Assistance, and Relocation Assistance.

9. DOD notes that its policy requires communities to assess the capacity of off base resources and to use that data in determining the allocation of resources for programs. The policies we reviewed required that family centers coordinate with local services to avoid duplication and that family needs be partially based on the services available in the local community. Thus, they did not explicitly require an assessment of local capacities but implied one for the type of services typically provided by family centers. Air Force personnel and their family members must reside in areas that range from major metropolitan areas to fairly isolated ones. This underscores the need for systematic consideration of the capacity of community services in supporting family needs. In communities of substantial size, such information should be readily available. In addition, existing published resources such as, *The National Directory of Children, Youth and Families Services,* may be useful, comprehensive resources to help identify and learn basic information about family support providers in locations across the United States.

10. According to DOD, we imply that the Air Force does not assess the capacity of off base resources and use the results of the assessments. DOD states that in determining the allocation of resources for programs the Air Force has specific guidance to ensure that such information is obtained and available. It is not clear what Air Force guidance is being referred to. During our review, the Air Force provided us with policy guidance (Air Force Instruction 90-500, Feb. 1, 2000),

related to the authority and criteria for establishing groups to promote cross-organizational collaboration in addressing individual, family, and community concerns. However, we found no references to integrating information on the type and capacity of off base resources into the community needs assessment. During our observation of needs assessment training at one Air Force base and our review of the training documents, we did not find that family support staff were required to integrate information on the capacity of off base resources in reaching conclusions about what actions were to be taken based on the need assessment results.

11. DOD noted that rigidly quantifying the capacity of off base resources to deal with the needs of military members and families would be difficult if not impossible, but that where possible, all the services partner with the civilian communities. We neither state nor imply that the Air Force should make a rigid quantification. Rather, we state that if the Air Force does not determine what support services are available in the civilian community, how many people they can accommodate, and how they are used, its base family support staff cannot know whether they are duplicating services, underusing or overwhelming their own programs, or concentrating funds on the right programs. Existing publications such as, *The National Directory of Children, Youth and Families Services,* may help identify professional family support providers across the United States and provide basic information to support these efforts.

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