Taking Care of Our Own:

lessons learned about engaging military families in youth mentoring

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A Publication of Amachi, Inc.

Acknowledgments

The Amachi Expansion for Military and Civilian Families (AEMCF) project and the study of this initiative were made possible by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. We are indebted to Dr. W. Wilson Goode, Sr. and Muna Walker of Amachi, Inc. for their support and commitment to this research. Ms. Walker's efforts throughout the planning and execution of the data collection process were particularly instrumental to the study's success.

We are grateful to all the youth, parents, mentors, program staff and community partners, in addition to staff from Dare Mighty Things, who took time to participate in our interviews. Their insights have been invaluable in expanding our knowledge of military family culture and how mentoring can meet the needs of military-connected youth.

This study would not have been possible without the efforts of numerous staff members from agencies across the five participating sites. Dozens of agency staff played a role in data collection, particularly for the on-site visits, which required the coordination of interviews with parents and youth. Roman Wagner and Lauren Ruvo were also helpful in preparing the interview data for analysis and review.

The contributions of several other colleagues were essential to completing this brief. Renée Spencer reviewed the report and offered helpful comments. Chelsea Farley edited the brief and provided excellent feedback that shaped its direction and tone. Clare O'Shea provided final copyediting, and Malish & Pagonis designed the brief.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, close to 2 million children in the U.S. had at least one parent who was serving in the U.S. military. More than 1.2 million had a parent who was on "active duty," and more than 50,000 military families were "dual-military," with both parents serving in the armed forces (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense 2012). Military youth face a number of challenges— for example, frequent moves and adjustment to new communities, separation from a parent during deployment, high levels of family stress during deployment periods and difficulties adjusting to a parent's return after deployment. Many of these youth also find that members of their community have little knowledge and understanding of what deployment is like for military families (Chandra et al. 2011).

For some children, these challenges manifest themselves in larger problems—ranging from emotional issues like anxiety (which military children experience at significantly higher levels) to problems in school (Chandra et al. 2010; Richardson et al. 2011). Military youth are also more likely than their peers to have difficulty getting along with family members (Chandra et al. 2010). Not surprisingly, the time leading up to, during and following deployment can be especially difficult for youth— and challenges with deployment and reintegration are exacerbated when deployment periods are extended (Chandra et al. 2010; Richardson et al. 2011). One study, for example, found that youth whose parents had deployed for 19 months or more had lower academic performance than those who experienced less (or no) deployment (Richardson et al. 2011). A parent's prolonged absence is clearly painful for a child, whatever the circumstances, and concern about the parent's safety almost certainly makes that experience harder.

Formal program-based mentoring—matching youth with adult mentors who can provide them with additional guidance and support—could be an ideal way to help these youth (and their families) during the many phases of military deployment, including preparing for deployment before the parent leaves, the deployment itself and the reintegration period after the parent returns home. Previous studies demonstrate that participation in mentoring programs can improve youth's academic performance and relationships with their parents (Tierney et al. 1995), reduce negative behaviors (Tierney et al. 1995; Herrera et al. 2007) and decrease symptoms of depression (Herrera et al. 2013)—all areas in which military children may be particularly vulnerable.

For these reasons, many mentoring programs have recently begun to direct their services toward youth in military families. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), for example, recently began formal efforts to reach out to this group through 30 of its programs across the country.

Yet, these efforts are still very young, and little is known about how mentoring can meet military youth's unique needs. It is quite possible that mentoring programs may have to be tailored to meet these needs effectively. In addition, it can be difficult for programs to find and engage military families. Indeed, in many communities, they are a somewhat invisible population. Most school systems, for example, currently do not track whether students have a parent or guardian in the military.[1] Frequent moves also make it difficult for youth to receive services consistently. Thus, mentoring programs may need guidance about how to locate and connect with military families, and how to support the resulting matches in ways that produce the most benefits for youth.

The Amachi mentoring model—with its history of flexibly reaching and serving youth from a wide range of backgrounds—provides a strong starting point from which to consider how best to serve this group of young people. Developed in 2000 to serve children affected by incarceration, the Amachi model was expanded in 2009 to include all "at-risk" youth. Amachi has been implemented by a wide variety of mentoring programs in all 50 states and has served, to date, more than 300,000 children nationwide. The Amachi Expansion for Military and Civilian Families (AEMCF) project was created to help mentoring agencies that are currently implementing the Amachi model to find and recruit military-connected families and provide their children (and other vulnerable groups of youth) with mentoring services. Overseen by Amachi, Inc. in partnership with Dare Mighty Things (DMT), and funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, AEMCF represents one of the first large-scale efforts to provide mentoring to this group of youth across multiple states.

Five organizations were selected as AEMCF project "sites" based on the proximity of their offices to military bases or training facilities within their state. These sites consisted of 19 participating "programs" (i.e., individual mentoring agencies or satellite locations).[2] Four of the sites served AEMCF youth exclusively through one-on-one community-based mentoring involving volunteer mentors (i.e., youth meet one-on-one with a volunteer mentor at locations of the match's choosing).[3] The fifth site provided mentoring at a specific location ("site-based mentoring"), and program staff served as mentors.

AEMCF programs were provided with contacts for military-affiliated entities within their communities and a letter from the U.S. Department of Defense affirming its support of the initiative. To inform the provision of technical assistance, DMT conducted a needs assessment with each site during the first few months of the project. DMT concluded that while AEMCF programs were well equipped to provide high-quality mentoring services, they had no experience and little preparation to recruit and work with military families. Subsequent technical assistance, which included an in-person training,[4] webinars and conference calls, thus focused on orienting project staff to the needs and strengths of military youth and their families. A mentor-training module was also developed to help programs prepare mentors for their role. DMT made this material available as both a two-and-a-half-hour in-person training and a self-paced online training. Although the training module was initially developed for mentors, sites were also

encouraged to use it to train staff working with military-connected families. In addition, programs had monthly meetings with Amachi, Inc., in which they discussed various project activities, challenges that had arisen and ideas about how to overcome them.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The AEMCF initiative provided a unique opportunity to document and learn from a very early national-level effort to provide mentoring to military-connected youth. The current study—conducted by independent researchers and overseen by Amachi, Inc. during the final year of the three-year AEMCF project—was designed to examine how programs are serving these youth and to illuminate strategies for reaching and serving them more effectively.

The study is based on interviews with 62 program staff, community and broader initiative partners (e.g., DMT), mentored youth, parents and mentors matched with military-connected youth (only some of whom were also study participants) (see Table 1). Interviews with children, parents[5] and mentors focused on understanding their needs, expectations and mentoring experiences. Interviews with program staff and community partners focused on learning about challenges and promising practices related to working with military families. The 12 staff interviewed represented 8 of the 19 individual agencies or satellite locations and all 5 sites involved in the initiative.

Table 1: People Interviewed for the Study

Sites (# of agencies or satellite locations participating in the study)	Staff	Community/ Initiative Partners	Mentors	Parents	Youth
Arizona (4)	2	1	3	3	4
Minnesota (1)	3	0	1	0	2
Pennsylvania (1)	2	0	4	3	3
New York (4)	3	1	3	3	4
Texas (9)	2	1	6	4	2
Initiative Partners (i.e., Amachi, Inc.; DMT)		2			
TOTAL = 62 Interviews	12	5	17	13	15

The study addressed four overarching questions:

- What did programs do to reach and serve military families?
- What challenges did they face in these efforts?
- What strategies and practices were effective?
- What were the experiences of the mentors, youth and parents?

Generally, we found that the programs involved in the study had great difficulty reaching military families—often due to a "clash" between the perceived culture of mentoring and that of military families. As a result of these challenges, only one relatively large site, which serves a broad geographic area through numerous offices, reached its goal of recruiting 78 military-connected youth by the end of the three-year initiative. Programs experimented with different strategies to improve recruitment efforts, but otherwise did not report making many programmatic adjustments.[6]

These recruitment challenges affected the types of families programs were able to reach (e.g., very few were experiencing deployment during the study) and, by extension, the types of families we were able to interview. For example, we interviewed parents from just 5 of the 19 participating programs and 4 of the 5 sites. Thus, the families in this study are likely not representative of all of the types of families programs may try to reach as these efforts unfold at a national level.[7] However, they do represent the types of military families that programs are likely to reach when they implement recruitment efforts such as those described in this report. Furthermore, the experiences of these families, as well as the experiences of the mentors, program staff and community partners, produced rich lessons that can inform future mentoring efforts for military youth. This includes lessons about how mentoring programs can develop relevant partnerships, engage military families and prepare and support mentors—and families—in ways that yield strong mentoring matches. This brief summarizes these experiences and proposes next steps for the field, as policymakers, funders and program staff alike consider how to best serve these youth and their families.

FINDING & ENGAGING FAMILIES

To increase the odds that participating programs would be successful, AEMCF sites were selected for the initiative based on community need, demonstrated capacity to enhance and expand their services to youth facing a range of challenges, and geographic proximity to a military installation. AEMCF programs not only had prior experience recruiting and serving vulnerable groups of youth, they also had a strong history of fruitful relationships with community partners who helped them reach these youth. Combined, the 5 selected sites were serving close to 6,500 mentoring matches at the start of the AEMCF project.

Given this experience, AEMCF programs began the initiative with confidence that they would be able to develop relevant community partnerships—which would serve as a springboard for recruiting military-connected youth. They surmised that, through these partnerships, they would connect directly with a large pool of military families, let them know how the program could benefit their children and enroll a substantial number of them in mentoring.

Programs quickly found, however, that this "tried-and-true" approach was not effective in recruiting military-connected families. AEMCF programs struggled at each stage of the recruitment process—from gaining initial buy-in from military-affiliated organizations to getting referrals for youth and effectively engaging families.

These challenges are reflected in the fact that sites had reached less than half of the original collective recruitment goal of 390 youth by the time our study was conducted (28 months into the 36-month initiative). In fact, 8 of the 13 families we interviewed were not recruited through the outreach efforts described here, but rather, their military status was discovered when programs retroactively examined matches they had made since recruitment for the AEMCF project began. Some of these youth lived with their military-connected parent/guardian, but not all (see Table 2).

Table 2: Characteristics of Interviewed Families

Characteristic	Number of Families Interviewed
Marital status	
Single/divorced	7
Married	6
Family not newly recruited for this initative (e.g., the child or sibling was previously enrolled in the program's school-based mentoring program)	8
Military parent living with child	8
Veteran/retired*	3
Active duty/deployed	5
Military parent not living with child	5
Veteran/retired	1
Active duty/deployed	3
National Guard/reserves	1
Parent's report of mentor's military connection	
No connection to military	4
Currently serving in the military	3
Retired/veteran	1
Parent served in military	1
Don't know	4
Total number of families interviewed	13

*In one case, a child's mother and father are both military connected, but the child lives only with his mother.

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The approach most AEMCF programs took to reach military families was to develop partnerships with military-affiliated entities, similar to the partnerships they had developed with other community organizations. Programs reached out to military recruitment offices, providers of family and children services within local military institutions, and other military-affiliated community contacts. In communities with no active base or training facility, programs reached out to chaplains, local school systems, veterans' services, ROTC and other organizations that worked with active-duty and veteran populations (e.g., American Red Cross, American Legion, United Way). Programs faced two main challenges in developing and tapping into these partnerships: gaining buy-in from potential partners and actually finding and engaging the families once these partnerships were formed.

When making contact with military-affiliated organizations, most AEMCF programs encountered personnel who were not initially convinced that a formal civilian mentoring program was a good fit for military families. The staff at these organizations tended to believe that mentoring programs serve "needy" or "high-risk" children who lack positive role models. This did not fit with the traits they ascribed to military families—for example, already *having* strong role models, belonging to a tight-knit community that looked out for its members and being resilient in the face of life's stresses (see Table 3).

Programs reported using two approaches that helped to overcome these reservations. First, most programs hired staff who had some personal connection to the military—for example, individuals who had a parent in the military or were currently part of a military family or a member of the military themselves. This connection provided staff with some credibility within the military community. These staff were able to speak from a position of shared knowledge and comprehension of military culture. Thus, they could more easily connect and communicate with potential partners. One staff member we interviewed credited her own military affiliation and personal connections within the military community for gaining access to military-related networks:

> *"…[it was helpful] being able to send those e-mails saying, 'Hey how's it going? How's your family?' And then lead into 'I need some help here. I'm fresh on the block. Can you welcome me into your group?' "*

Second, program staff without existing military partnerships made efforts to meet face-to-face with military-affiliated personnel (i.e., beyond sending letters of introduction or having a phone conversation). These face-to-face encounters enabled staff to develop a personal connection with partners, answer questions, outline the program's purpose and structure and quickly dispel myths about program eligibility and the mentor's purpose. One partner shared her initial hesitation about the mentoring program—and how meeting a representative from the program changed her perspective:

> *"I didn't realize [the] extensive background check that [they do]. I'm a parent of three and, of course, all those usual things are running through your mind when somebody offers you this. Your first reaction is, 'Ah, No.' But, I must say, once I went out and personally met*

[the mentoring program staff member], sat down with her, and went through the whole program….and it just so happened…my husband was deployed…I had my youngest son with me…and I realized how helpful a Big could've been to him…. I had a better vision of what [the mentoring programs] were trying to do."

It is notable that while partnerships were being developed, a few programs experienced turnover in the management of the AEMCF project, sometimes leaving a vacancy while new staff were being assigned. This was difficult both for the programs and their partners. New staff found themselves having to rediscover and re-pursue military connections, often from the ground up. And partners who had begun to form a relationship with the program, only to have staff "disappear" and be replaced by someone new to the military community, generally came away feeling the program was disorganized and not truly committed to serving military families.

Unfortunately, even when programs were successful in *forming* partnerships, these connections did not typically provide them with immediate access to military families or a solid list of families to reach out to. Across all sites, only a small handful of families were referred directly from community partners. In fact, several partners themselves struggled to locate and engage military families. Programs that reached out to school systems quickly learned that most schools did not track children by military affiliation and so did not have a process in place for identifying these youth. Challenges in finding potential pools of families were especially acute when military families were dispersed throughout the broader community, as opposed to being localized on a military base. These families were the hardest to reach and, at the same time, may have represented a particularly vulnerable group—several of those we spoke with reported feeling disconnected from other military families.

AEMCF programs were thus challenged to use more creative strategies to reach these families, and partner organizations proved helpful in devising and carrying out these strategies. For example, in communities with military installations (i.e., a military base or training facility), partners invited staff to pre-deployment events to help them establish a presence in the military community, or to other venues where they could make formal presentations to military service members. Most partners were also willing to pass along program brochures and recruitment materials to families. And in a few cases, partners worked with programs to help them understand how their messaging should be changed to highlight the strengths and resilience of military families rather than their vulnerabilities (a theme we discuss in more depth below); these programs were able to reframe their materials to emphasize the fit between mentoring and the characteristics and interests of military families.

Across programs, staff held that communities needed to be treated as distinct; a program could not expect the strategies used in one community to be appropriate for another. Determining which military-affiliated entities to approach required broad networking efforts to become familiar with the military culture in each community. Several programs found that the more fruitful partnerships were those with entities that held some authority to access military families—for example, military-branch-specific Family Programs or Family/Spouse Readiness Centers, which provide a variety of services to military members and their families.

★ LESSONS LEARNED ★

Although community partnerships did not immediately pay off in terms of recruiting military families, gaining buy-in and acceptance among programs that served these families was a crucial first step. Buy-in was often more easily obtained when program staff had a personal connection to the military, as they were better able to convey to community partners the "fit" between mentoring and military families. Even when partnerships did not provide direct access to families, they conferred credibility and informed program efforts in important ways.

Strong military partnerships may demand that programs commit to a long-term presence and persistence in the military community. This consistent, enduring presence is essential, but difficult in programs that experience high turnover and uncertain funding. It is important for programs to keep partners abreast of staffing changes and transition plans. New staff should also be well-trained and supported and demonstrate knowledge of and commitment to the military community.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS WITH MILITARY FAMILIES

Despite concerted efforts to recruit youth from military families, few were directly recruited into an AEMCF program through this type of outreach. In fact, eight of the families we interviewed sought out the program, unaware of any targeted efforts to recruit youth with a military connection. Half of these eight families, led by single parents, came to the program because they recognized that their child could benefit from additional adult support (but not because of issues they associated with their military status). Two others had been introduced to school-based mentoring in years prior and had agreed to transition their child to the community-based program because of their positive experience. The remaining two families wanted support for their child because of the impact of the family's military situation (however, they did not know that the program was making specific efforts to recruit this group of youth).

Of the five families recruited through a military family outreach event, two learned about the program at a pre-deployment event and enrolled because of their military situation. The other three families (led by single parents) learned of the effort through a program presentation at their local church; while their military connection was not as pertinent to their current lives (i.e., the military parent did not live with his children in two cases, and in the third case, the mother had become a veteran before her children were born), they saw the virtue of having another adult with whom their child could do things. (See text box on the next page.)

While all of the families we interviewed had been somewhat aware of mentoring, they often knew very little about these programs, and some carried preconceived notions about their eligibility for, or "fit" with, mentoring. When asked why mentoring programs struggle to engage military families, most parents cited the perceived focus on at-risk youth and concerns over the role of

Diversity of Participating Military Families

The 13 military families interviewed for this study represent a diverse spectrum of family dynamics. In the six two-parent homes, the military parent was either deployed, working at a military base or a veteran. Five of these families described experiencing stress related to deployment, coping with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at reintegration, and/or difficult transitions accompanying a military job-related relocation. These families had wanted a mentor who would support their child with issues that directly or indirectly related to their military life experience.

The seven other homes were headed by single parents who were divorced or separated from the child's military parent or, in two cases, were military veterans themselves. A few of these families did not consider themselves a "military family," as it had been several years since the military parent was consistently in the home. Nearly all of the single parents wanted their child to have a mentor because they could not spend as much time with him or her as they wanted or they felt their child could use a trusted confidant—both situations that were unrelated to the family's military experience.

the mentor. Some parents reported being surprised when they learned of the program's focus on mentoring for military families. A deployed National Guardsman's wife, who was introduced to the program at a pre-deployment event, said she took notice because it sounded distinct from her image of traditional mentoring:

> *"I was familiar with the program, but when she said that they had a program where they were specifically going toward military families…to deployed families, I figured it would be something a little bit different and maybe a little bit better."*

Most of the parents we spoke with believed initially that mentoring programs serve families that are struggling financially, are headed by a single parent or lack proper role models. Further, numerous parents believed that these attributes were also criteria for *eligibility* for services and thus that their family was not eligible to participate.

In addition, parents also described a more fundamental misalignment between how military families perceive themselves and their needs and how they perceive the population targeted for mentoring services. Namely, echoing what we heard from partner organizations, military families defined themselves based on their resilience, not their risk. Being part of the military creates stressful situations—like relocating frequently or enduring prolonged or multiple deployments—which require families to be adaptable and develop resourcefulness and flexibility. As a result, military families tend to see themselves as strong and capable. In contrast, families historically targeted by mentoring programs have been predominantly identified in terms of their struggles and vulnerabilities. The oldest and most established formal mentoring program in the U.S., Big Brothers Big Sisters, for example, until fairly recently, served children from single-parent families almost exclusively. In fact, the recent success of the mentoring movement in promoting the effectiveness of the program to serve needy and "high-risk" youth and families may have helped create this perceived mismatch between the families and youth served by mentoring programs and the needs and strengths of military-connected families (see Table 3).

Table 3: Goodness of Fit: Perceptions of Mentoring and Military Cultures

Mentoring	Military Families
Complementary features:	
Mentors can be another caring adult, outside the family, whom youth can turn to for support.	Military experiences can place stress and strain on the family.
Mentors can facilitate new experiences and perspectives.	Military life encourages flexibility and openness to new experiences.
Programs conduct rigorous volunteer screening and background checks.	Military families put a high premium on safety.
Mentors can provide consistent, dedicated friendship.	Military life can be transient and unstable.
Seemingly incompatible features:	
Mentors provide a positive role model to youth.	Military families do not lack positive role models.
Many families originally served by mentoring were single-parent families.	Military families do not need or want a replacement for a deployed parent.
Programs concentrate on recruiting mentors; families generally seek out mentoring services or are referred.	Military families “take care of themselves” and are hesitant to ask for support.

Changing the program’s messaging was important when connecting with these families. One staff member, whose husband had been active in the military for more than 20 years, noted the ineffectiveness of introducing the program to individual service members and their spouses by discussing the needs and troubles experienced by military youth (e.g., sharing statistics about the percentage of youth experiencing depression or having trouble in school). The focus on youth risks and vulnerabilities ran counter to military culture. This staff member and several others who understood this issue adjusted their language accordingly, to align with the military ethos of perseverance and strength. They simply described mentoring as a resilience-building tool.

Connecting with military families also required an understanding of the parent’s motivation for, and potential reservations about, pursuing a mentor for their child. Among the families in our study, only four parents directly related their family’s military status (e.g., getting extra support for a child whose military parent is deployed) as a reason for wanting a mentor for their child. Most parents (and youth) were looking for the types of support sought after by other families involved in mentoring—that is, a trusted adult who is committed to the child and can listen, provide guidance, offer a new perspective and share new experiences.

At the same time, a few parents in two-parent homes were concerned about the specific *role* a formal mentor would play in their child’s life. The same spouse of a National Guardsman quoted in the previous example recounted:

"…every time I heard [about the] Big Brother Big Sister program, I always heard it was for the big cities, and for the kids that were at risk, or kids that really didn't have a strong role model. And I'm like, 'Well, he's got a strong role model—it's just his role model is leaving for a year…' "

Several military parents noted that their spouse feared that a mentor would *replace* him or her, especially during deployment (in the one case where we spoke with both parents, the military parent himself voiced this concern). Although several of the at-home parents indicated that it was ultimately their decision to engage the child in mentoring, support from both parents was key to ensuring a strong match. Not having the military parent on board could disrupt the mentoring relationship—for example, if the parent didn't see a need for the match to continue when he/she returned from deployment. One parent, whose husband is a merchant marine and is frequently away from home, hoped to get her husband actively engaged in the match when he returns:

"…when he comes home, it probably wouldn't hurt [for the mentor, my husband and our son] to get together and discuss what [the mentor and our son] have been doing, and let [his father] know what's been going on…. Continuing the relationship while [his] father is home is good, so there's no break. But I think also the mentor and [his] father need to get together and discuss what they feel [our] child needs…"

Gaining the military parent's buy-in, support and understanding of the mentor's role was thus an important element of connecting with a family. To gain this buy-in, staff stressed the mentor's role as simply that of a trusted friend outside of the family—someone the child could talk to—as opposed to promoting the mentor as a "positive role model." At-home parents also helped build this buy-in with their spouses. For instance, one mother framed the mentor's role as helping to keep the children's activities and interests alive while the military parent was away.

Other aspects of military life made it difficult to establish and maintain a connection with families. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of privacy—and even described a "need to know" mentality—in military culture. In fact, some families were not *allowed* to share details about the service member's deployment, for security reasons. In this context, concerns and vulnerabilities weren't easily shared. To engage in mentoring, parents often had to put aside reservations about exposing their family to scrutiny by outsiders. One staff member noted that military families "don't just trust anyone." And even if an individual staff member succeeded in gaining confidence and trust, that trust was not always readily transferable to other staff within the same agency. This could create problems when cases were moved from one phase of the enrollment process to the next (e.g., if one staff member provided the initial introduction to the program, while another followed up to complete intake).

In general, programs reported that they needed to use more active and persistent recruitment strategies to engage military families than those they typically used with other families. In one case, after meeting a military family through a pre-deployment event, program staff pursued the mother with sensitive persistence until she was able to enroll the child; the program was then able to match her daughter with a mentor prior to her husband's deployment—which provided the

child with support during an important transition period. This mother believed that the staff's persistence was critical in ensuring her involvement, as she likely would not have pursued getting her daughter a mentor on her own.

★ LESSONS LEARNED ★

Programs had to invest significant time and effort into *actively* recruiting families. Youth recruitment is not a major challenge for most mentoring programs; in fact many programs have large numbers of families on their wait list. It is not surprising, then, that most AEMCF programs were not set up to devote significant resources to this activity. The bulk of the programs' recruitment efforts was ultimately spent on finding, creating, fostering and learning from partnerships in the community. This laid the groundwork for more direct recruitment efforts but required significant staff time. Given the importance of privacy, safety and trust within military culture, once a family is recruited, programs need to be careful about "handing off" interested families from one staff member to another.

Programs had to highlight how mentoring "fits" with military culture. All programs adopted strategies to better align their recruitment message to military families. This included developing promotional materials that explicitly emphasized their interest in serving youth with parents who were in the military. Many families said they looked positively upon organizations that characterized themselves as "Serving Military Families," as this suggested an understanding of military life and culture. This emphasis also eliminated any questions families might have had about their eligibility for services. Families believed a targeted media campaign was necessary to increase awareness about mentoring for military families.

Programs had to reframe their presentation of the mentor's role. Parents and youth were interested in the same types of support sought after by other families, but chafed at some of the language that is often used to describe a mentor. In general, families strongly held that the military parent *is* the role model, someone whom the youth looks up to, and one that did not need replacing. To gain buy-in from military families, programs had to emphasize how a mentor could complement—rather than supplant—the child's existing support structure.

PREPARING FOR MILITARY MENTORING MATCHES

Across sites, there were few instances in which programs described differences between how they prepared, oriented and trained families and mentors for their regular programming versus the AEMCF program; most focused their AEMCF resources largely on recruiting the families, as opposed to augmenting other practices. Two sites did change their parent/caregiver intake form to capture more details about the military family experience. However, this was the only formal change we documented in the preparation of mentors and families for the mentoring match. A training module that could be used in both an in-person and online format was developed for the mentors at the beginning of the second year of the project. An administrator from each site participated in a webinar, which introduced these resources and encouraged their use. As a result, some agencies offered the resources to their mentors. However, participation in this training was voluntary, and there was no evidence from the interviews we conducted that it had actually been *completed* by the volunteer mentors or by all of the program staff interacting with military matches. Below we discuss some of the challenges that arose in this area of programming—as well as additions or changes that families and mentors said would have been helpful in their program experience.

PREPARING MENTORS

Most mentors were recruited through the program's general volunteer recruitment process. While programs that were close to a military installation sought out military-connected volunteers to serve as mentors, these volunteers were not necessarily paired with military-connected youth. Fewer than half of the mentors interviewed had a personal military connection (e.g., had a parent in the military or had served in the military themselves), and almost all mentors were unaware that the program was making an effort to reach and serve the military population. The exceptions to this were two programs in which the staff person responsible for recruiting military families also recruited volunteers to mentor the youth and explicitly informed potential volunteers about the program's efforts to serve military families.

Neither programs nor families explicitly stated that they believed children from military families should be matched only with mentors with military experience. Parents didn't want to exclude any potential mentors, yet many did note that understanding military culture (and the experiences of military families) was important, whether that understanding came through direct experience

or training. Some parents also noted advantages to pairing a military-connected mentor with a child who was experiencing a military-related transition (e.g., deployment or reintegration). They believed that the mentor would understand what a child might go through with an active-duty/deployed parent. For one parent, envisioning that his child might be matched with a mentor who had military experience or had been raised in a military family made it easier for him to support the match, believing the mentor would understand not only military life but also the importance of *not* being a "replacement" role model.

While there are potential benefits to recruiting mentors with a military background, mentors who are in the military also present some challenges. In communities where programs are recruiting volunteers and youth from the same branch of the military, some staff noted that the chain of command and the military rank of the volunteer mentor and the military parent need to be considered to minimize any potential conflict. Another challenge is the possibility that the mentor could be deployed. In one case, though matched for more than a year, one youth's mentor had been deployed for the last six months. The program had offered to match the youth with another mentor, but both the parent and the youth felt the match was strong, and they were willing to wait for the mentor to return.

Once mentors were recruited, they underwent the program's standard intake process, including a background check and pre-match training. In all but one program, mentors reported receiving no specific orientation to military culture or training about mentoring a military-connected youth. (The exception was the site-based mentoring program in which staff also served as mentors. These staff reported receiving an orientation to military culture as part of the AEMCF project overview.)

There were a number of reasons mentors may not have received the training developed by DMT (or other additional training). First, several program staff said they were unaware that military-specific training for mentors was even available to them. This was typically true in programs that had experienced staff turnover in the lead AEMCF position over the course of the project. Second, during the recruitment period, it was frequently not clear which mentors would ultimately be matched with a child from a military family—and thus which would need additional pre-match training. The family's military connection would be shared with the mentor during the matching process—but, by this time, pre-match training had already been completed, and it was difficult to get mentors to take advantage of training once the match was made. Finally, as noted, some youth were identified as military connected after the match had already begun meeting, at which point it was difficult to bring the mentors in for additional training or require them to follow through with online training.[8]

Our findings suggest that some kind of required training would be helpful, especially in those cases where the family's military experience has the clear potential to affect the child's well-being (e.g., families in which an active-duty military parent lives with the child). Most mentors said they were unsure of how a family's military status might affect the development of the relationship. This contrasts with the feelings expressed by many of the parents we interviewed, who felt that being in a military family and part of a military *culture* were defining characteristics. This was true even in a few of the families where the military parent no longer lived with the child, but the child had grown up in a home influenced by a military lifestyle. These parents felt that mentors should have some

understanding of military life and culture before being matched. Most of the youth we interviewed did not articulate any strong preference regarding the mentor's military background. However, a few described the potential benefits of being mentored by someone who had a clear understanding of the military experience. One identified his mentor's own military family upbringing as one of the reasons she was a good match for him. Another youth, whose father is in the airforce, shared:

> *"I think it's easier if they already…understand the situation a little. It's like, 'Oh so you do know how I feel. Okay, well this is happening too.' But if it's like 'This is what happens when mommy and daddy leave,' it's not fun to explain stuff, especially once you know it and you've been living with it for a while."*

In addition, although parents felt that mentors needed to understand how the military lifestyle and experience could play out in the child's life, most did not believe that the family's military connection should take the forefront in the development of the mentoring relationship. Parents wanted the mentor to focus on being a friend to, and fun outlet for, the child and to distract the child from the stresses associated with the family's military status, especially around deployment or post-deployment. The same youth described above saw the mentor's role as that of a committed friend:

> *"…when you're in the military, you move a lot, and one of the big issues is you don't get to make a lot of friends because you keep moving. And you're not going to be able to have this long-term relationship. So, with this program, you have a friend that is obligated to be there for you because they signed up. And even if you don't have friends at school, it is someone you can still count on and have that relationship with."*

★ LESSONS LEARNED ★

Some orientation or training about military families is important for volunteers matched with military-connected youth. Parents believed that mentors should receive training (if they do not have firsthand experience) that provides them with a general orientation to military culture and the potential impact military life has on youth development. When a family's military status was prominent or played an active role in family functioning, parents felt this training was even more important. Mentors may not see the need to pursue such training if it is not required.

Recruiting mentors with military experience, while not crucial, may benefit some youth and families. Mentors who have been in the military or in a military family are likely to understand the challenges faced by military-connected youth. They may also increase some parents' comfort with mentoring. Further, while youth may not request a mentor with a military background, we heard some hints that it can be a valued characteristic (e.g., when the mentor understands the experience of growing up with military parents, without the youth having to explain it).

PREPARING FAMILIES

All of the families we interviewed underwent a standard intake and orientation process as part of their involvement in the mentoring program. Although the family's basic military status was noted during enrollment at all of the programs (e.g., National Guard, reserves, veteran, active duty), only two programs adopted a modified intake form that gathered *detailed* information about the family's military connection. In most cases, details about the family's military situation and history and how they had affected family and youth functioning did not appear to be a prominent focus of the intake process. For example, most intake forms asked families about their preferences for certain mentor characteristics (like religion, sexual orientation, or age), but did not ask about preferences regarding the mentor's military background. Perhaps in part because of the small numbers of military families recruited and enrolled in the programs, these families generally passed through normal intake channels, without experiencing any particular enhancements because of their military situation.

All of the families felt that the orientation left them well prepared for their child's mentoring match, with a clear understanding of expectations surrounding their role in supporting the match. However, several seemed unsure of how their family's military situation might affect the match process and the mentoring relationship.

Indeed, our findings suggest that open, upfront conversations during enrollment about the transitions and disruptions associated with military life could have produced valuable insights for families, including about the best timing for starting the match and how and when to talk with the mentor about expected transitions. Recommendations would likely vary across family situations. For example, several families with deployment experience believed that having a mentor in place *prior* to deployment was helpful. Yet, one parent, whose daughter was matched shortly before deployment, described serious challenges in the mentoring relationship related to the father's deployment. Although the relationship was going well, the parent wished she had coordinated better with the mentor to anticipate some of the struggles that resulted from her daughter's attempt to develop a new relationship while adjusting to the recent absence of her father. Likewise, reintegration after deployment can be a time when youth might benefit from additional support—but also a time that poses distinct challenges to new mentoring relationships. One mother, whose husband was struggling with military-related PTSD after being discharged from the army, was unsure how she should discuss the family's situation with the mentor. The parent was aware that her husband's illness was affecting the child and the family dynamics and wanted the mentor to be aware of this, but she was anxious about discussing it. Although she planned to reach out to program staff, she wished she had had some guidance *prior* to the start of the match:

> *"…I wouldn't exactly know how to explain our situation to the mentor, maybe [the staff] could even tell parents, 'This is how you need to do it'…that initial meeting when they come, [they could] have something for the parents on the ways to talk [with the mentor]. Because when that time does come for me to talk to [the mentor] about our situation, I don't know how to exactly put it."*

This suggests that, prior to a match being made, it may be important for programs to elicit information about challenges children are facing—or are likely to face—as a result of the family's military situation. Staff can then help families think about how the mentoring relationship might be affected by these challenges as well as potential strategies to keep the relationship on track.

★ LESSONS LEARNED ★

Programs should collect detailed information about the family's military situation at enrollment. Most mentoring programs gather general background information from families, as well as information about youth interests and preferences prior to making a match. With military-connected youth, several additional pieces of information could be helpful, including, for example, details about the military duty status of the service member, current and upcoming deployments, the family's deployment or military relocation history and its impact on the youth, the parents' preferences for the mentor's military background or experience, the military parent's role in the match and any preferences they have about sharing information with the mentor regarding the family's military status.

Staff should prepare families, before the match begins, for how to discuss important events and transitions with the mentor. Military families face many experiences that can affect the child and the mentoring relationship. Parents may need guidance (starting before the match begins) about how to discuss these experiences with the mentor to help ensure that youth get the support they need as these situations arise.

PREPARING STAFF

Almost all of the AEMCF staff we interviewed were tasked primarily with locating and recruiting military families. Several had a personal connection to the military and had joined the project midway through, after programs began to realize that this type of connection might improve recruitment efforts. At the beginning of the project, two administrators from each AEMCF site attended an in-person training on the experiences of military families, including an overview of military structure and family culture. This, however, was not the case for staff who were hired to work on the project in subsequent years—or for staff who were not involved directly in the AEMCF initiative. For the most part, staff who were not engaged in recruiting military families had little or no training on military life and culture.

Once a match was made, it was generally transitioned to these other program staff. Our findings suggest that after this transition occurred, there was little attention paid to the unique characteristics of military families. Most programs had a mechanism in place to "flag" military matches, but it did not always work—at one program, the staff person responsible for match support reported that she was unaware that a particular family on her caseload was involved in the military. While families did not

expect staff to be military-connected themselves, they did believe that staff who would be working with them should have a general understanding of military culture and how being part of a military family might affect a child.

By and large, the families we interviewed believed that program staff understood their situations and were invested in helping their children. But some of the challenges they faced probably could have been better anticipated, had all staff been better prepared to work with military families.

★ LESSONS LEARNED ★

Promoting a program as "serving military families" suggests staff awareness of military culture and sensitivity toward the military family experience. This awareness was cultivated in key AEMCF staff, but mainly through previous firsthand experience (i.e., being in the military or being from a military family) or "learning on the job," as opposed to training or other formal, structured program supports. Staff comprehension of military culture and life was very important to the families we interviewed. And they expected that a program serving military families would know and understand military language and the implications of different aspects of the military "cycle"—for example, preparing for military deployment, transitioning home from active duty or simply having little control over where you live and when you will move. Mentoring programs should prepare staff, so they can live up to these expectations.

SUPPORTING THE MENTORING MATCH

Support for the matches involved in the AEMCF initiative typically consisted of monthly or biweekly phone calls to parents, youth and mentors to check in about the types of activities youth and mentors were engaging in, how often they were meeting and how the relationship was developing overall. Most families agreed that they received these calls regularly, although some noted that they seemed to come from a number of different staff members. Parents were generally understanding of this, remarking that they found these staff to be friendly and supportive. However, they did note that they often had to describe their situation several different times to different staff.

In two programs, the staff member who recruited and matched the military families also provided match support. This organizational structure allowed these staff to deepen their understanding of the families' needs and provide continuity and stability, often in the midst of challenging transitions in other areas of the child's life. This was noted as particularly valuable by one mother, whose child had begun her new mentoring relationship in the same month her father was deployed. The mother appreciated having the same contact person throughout the family's involvement with the program. However, few programs were able to provide this match support model.

Many of the match relationships we heard about were positive—mentors, parents and youth alike described great satisfaction with their mentoring relationships. And, at least on the surface, these matches appeared to be fairly similar to matches with non-military-connected youth. All of the youth enjoyed opportunities to engage in and try new activities with their mentors, and mentors liked the time they spent with their mentees. Also similar to mentors in other programs (e.g., Spencer, 2007), some mentors shared that the role was more work than they had anticipated (e.g., finding time to meet with their mentees required a lot of effort, either because of their own schedule or the family's). At first glance, these similarities might suggest that match support does not need to be tailored to the unique needs of military families.

Yet, more than half of the parents we interviewed believed that the family's military situation affected the development or strength of the mentoring relationship or the types of goals parents had for the match. These issues could very well affect the challenges experienced by matches and the strategies staff might suggest to help matches thrive. For example, in one case, a child who moved often due to her family's military situation appreciated being matched with a mentor who understood military life; she found it comforting that the mentor (who lived in the new community) could help her adjust to her

new hometown. In another case, a mentor felt the prolonged time it was taking for the youth to feel comfortable enough to "open up" was connected to her father's deployment. Similarly, a parent shared that her son struggled with building relationships because of his father's repeated absence throughout much of his childhood—the result of regular deployments of several months at a time. This information was shared with the mentor only after the relationship wasn't developing as expected:

> *"There was a concern that [my son] didn't like [the mentor], and I explained to [the staff] that [my son] is hard to get to know. You have to really pull it out of him. And it takes a long time before he feels…that he can trust you. And I think that is part of the fact that his dad comes and leaves, and comes and leaves…he thinks anybody that comes in his life is gonna leave."*

We heard from several families (five of the six married, active-military families) that their military situation (e.g., deployment, recent military-related relocation or reintegration back into the home) was affecting the child. Many of these parents hoped that the mentor would become someone their child could talk to about their experience. It is possible that mentors with a military background had a leg up in playing this role. As one mentor explained:

> *"…when I told [my mentee] that my dad was in the military, and I know where he's coming from, it made him open up a lot more to me, because I knew, and I've been in that situation before."*

This level of awareness on the part of the mentor was atypical, however. More often, the mentors did not fully understand how the family's military situation might affect the mentoring relationship. In one case, in which we interviewed both the parent and the mentor, we were able to garner a rich picture of how the military situation affected the match. In this case, the mentor started the match feeling that details about the family's military situation were not "her business" to ask or know about. Within a few months, the youth became withdrawn during match outings, and the mentor interpreted this as a sign of disinterest. When the mentor related this to program staff, a conversation was mediated with the parent to determine the youth's true feelings about the match. The parent attributed the child's behavior to her father's recent deployment. Program staff helped the mentor and parent develop a plan to support the child through her father's absence. However, both mentor and parent likely could have benefited from greater preparation and consistent coaching specific to the family's military situation: for the mentor—training on how a family's military situation can affect a child's behavior; and for the parent—guidance at enrollment (as noted above) and coaching throughout the relationship about how to talk to the mentor about deployment (and other military experiences that might affect the child's relationship and general well-being). The mentor herself reflected on the type of support that might have helped preempt this relationship hurdle:

> *"…maybe if I had talked to her mother before [her father] left, but she was so busy with getting everything ready and preparing her kids and stuff. Maybe if she and I had talked, if she made a little time to talk about it. And I didn't think about it at the time, but*

[it would have been helpful] if we had talked about how [her daughter] might react and how she does in situations like this and things that would help her—and her and I."

Our study also revealed other kinds of match support that might be useful. More than half of the parents and mentors suggested that the program could offer group activities just for military matches and their families. Some mentors thought these activities could help facilitate the initial "getting to know each other" phase. Attending activities with other military matches might ease any awkwardness in the early stages of the relationship. Parents also reported a desire to connect with other military families involved in mentoring, to help them build their local network of support.

★ LESSONS LEARNED ★

Changes in the family's military situation may affect the child and the mentoring match. Although most parents could reflect on how military life might play out in their child's mentoring match, not all of them had disclosed this information to the mentor. Given military cultural norms around privacy and solving problems independently, match support staff will likely need to be proactive and check in periodically about the family's military status and experience. This can inform support provided for the mentoring relationship as it evolves.

Additional types of support may be helpful for military matches and their families. While both parents and mentors appreciated the match support they received from program staff, they wished for more support related specifically to the family's military connection (e.g., how to talk about the family's experiences to ensure youth are supported through crucial transitions). Parents also expressed interest in meeting other military-connected families engaged in mentoring. Similarly, mentors wanted to be able to meet with other mentors and attend events with other military matches.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Mentoring intuitively makes sense to most people. As one program staff member noted, almost everyone has had a relationship with a mentor—formal or informal—that has helped them in their life. Research has confirmed that mentoring can yield a host of concrete benefits for youth, including improved academic performance, relationships and behavior (Tierney et al. 1995). For young people growing up in military homes, these benefits may be especially valuable. Youth in military families encounter unique kinds of stress—particularly when one or both parents are facing deployment. Mentoring may be able to support and reinforce the resilience of families that are coping with the challenges of military life.

However, a perceived misalignment between the culture and values of military families and the purpose and role of formal mentoring may be keeping some families at bay. Our study found that mentoring matches made with military-connected youth were similar in many ways to those with other youth. However, effectively recruiting and engaging military families—and supporting mentoring matches involving these youth—clearly requires effort, planning and new skills and knowledge for mentoring programs. Intentional training, coaching and support related to military culture and the experiences of youth in military families are important, for staff and mentors alike. While having a military background does not appear to be an essential mentor characteristic, our findings suggest that programs should at least provide some orientation or preparation focused on working with military families.

The experiences of the families, mentors and staff in our study suggest several specific recommendations for mentoring programs that want to serve military-connected youth:

Finding and Engaging Families

- Programs should develop and nurture relationships within the military community to establish a presence there and demonstrate a commitment to serving military youth and their families by:
  - Ensuring that program staff who are responsible for building these relationships and engaging families have some personal experience or knowledge about military culture and life (e.g., through training);
  - Managing staff turnover carefully, so relationships with organizations and individual families can be sustained through staff transitions;

- Creating a specialized program or division that becomes recognizable among military families and military-affiliated organizations in the local community;
- Getting input from military-connected personnel, parents and families in the development of the program's structure and recruitment plan; and
- Hosting military family events where families can learn about the mentoring program in a supportive, comfortable, informal atmosphere.

* Programs should think creatively about what approaches will be most attractive to military families. For example, programs might consider expanding school- or site-based mentoring for military families, as the contained nature and structure of these programs can feel more natural and comfortable for those who are new to formal mentoring. This approach may require advocating for better identification and tracking of military-connected youth in schools.
* Programs should promote mentoring in ways that emphasize the strength and resilience of military families and show how mentoring can support and reinforce this resilience; they should highlight the features of mentoring that may resonate with military families (e.g., careful screening of mentors, opportunities for youth to have new experiences and learn about new perspectives, consistent friendship in the midst of disruptive life events).
* Programs should try to keep staff as consistent as possible across all phases of enrollment, matching and support. In cases where staffing changes need to be made, staff should inform families of these changes before they occur.

Preparing for Military Mentoring Matches

* Programs need to foster the knowledge and skills of *all* staff involved in expanding mentoring for military families. Programs can do this by:
  - Generating or locating listservs (or establishing connections between networks) of other programs reaching out to military families;
  - Sharing insights, training materials, recruitment strategies and practices that accommodate military family needs with other programs focused on expanding their services to this population; and
  - Providing training that helps build "cultural competence" about the military family experience for all staff who will be interacting with military families.
* Programs should develop policies and practices that are sensitive to the needs and culture of military families. For example, programs should:
  - Maintain regular contact with military families that are waiting to be matched, as they might be required to move to a different community with very little notice;
  - Ensure that the intake and orientation process includes conversations with families about their military situation, how it may affect their child and what information they want to share with the mentor, and help families anticipate any direct or indirect effects of this situation on the mentoring relationship;

  - Ask parents about their preferences regarding the mentor's military background (parents who have the opportunity for their child to be matched with an active service member should be made aware of the possibility that the mentor could be called away or deployed, pulling him or her out of a match); and
  - Require mentors to undergo some orientation or training about the family experience of military-connected youth and the potential impact of having a parent in the military; this orientation should be provided even if a mentor has already undergone the program's standard preparation and training.

- Program staff should create an expectation of strong communication between parents and mentors to ensure that the needs of young people are anticipated and addressed.
- Staff should secure the support of the military parent and clarify how they can help the match develop, even in their absence.
- Before the match is made, staff should discuss with the family and mentor how a match ending will be handled, given that matches may need to end earlier than expected if the family has to move to a new community.

Supporting the Match

- Programs should provide mentors with *ongoing* guidance about the family's military situation, especially if it has the potential to affect the mentoring relationship. This requires monitoring and assessing a family's military status over time, discussing any expected changes with parents and ensuring that the mentor is informed.
- Staff should coach families on how to talk with the mentor about military-related issues and be prepared to facilitate discussions about these issues if needed.
- Programs should consider providing opportunities for matches (and families) to meet with others being served by the program.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of young people in military families certainly warrant greater attention from community programs, policymakers and funders. Mentoring can be a valuable resource, one of several helpful services in a larger web of support for military youth and their families. However, our study suggests that great effort and persistence are needed to reach and engage military families in mentoring. Raising awareness within the military community about the potential benefits of mentoring and the "fit" for some military families may be an important first step. And to serve these families effectively, programs will need to ensure that they are sensitive to the strengths and needs of military families, including providing specialized training and preparation for all involved.

These changes will likely require significant investments of time and money—investments that, we suspect, many communities will be willing to make. After all, this is just one way to better care for those who serve our country and the families that support them at home.

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Endnotes

1 Some noteworthy efforts are under way that may change this. For example, the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (MIC3) is encouraging state legislatures around the nation to adopt and enact a Compact aimed at eliminating barriers in the enrollment, placement and educational opportunities of military children who move across school districts and states. This change would require schools to document the military family status of enrolling students. However, only one site in this study noted that it worked with school systems that already had such tracking processes in place. As of the 2013–2014 school year, the State of Texas now tracks military students through its statewide Public Education Information Management System, identifying military families and potentially making it easier for community programs to reach out to them.

2 The five entities involved in the project represent five different states and are referred to in this report as project *sites*. These entities represent either single agencies or, in three sites (all BBBS organizations), a group of affiliated agencies or satellite locations throughout the state. We use the term *program* to refer to the individual mentoring agencies or satellite locations engaged in the project.

3 These agencies implemented other mentoring models as well, but used only one-on-one community-based mentoring with their AEMCF youth.

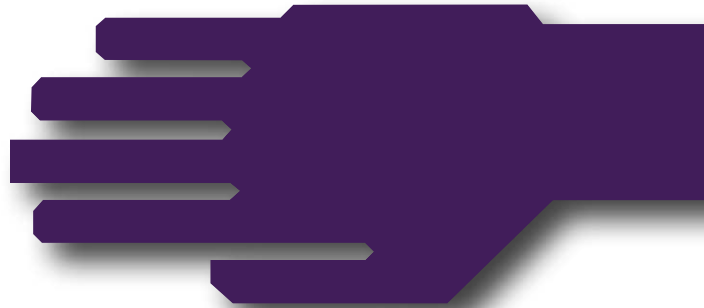
4 In-person training was provided to two representatives from each of the five AEMCF sites.

5 All parents were mothers, except one case in which a father joined the interview being conducted with the mother.

6 Study data were collected during the first half of the final year of the initiative. Continued efforts to meet recruitment goals and other adjustments made by programs during the final months of the initiative are not captured in this report.

7 The researchers selected the families and mentors to interview from each program's full list of AEMCF matches with the intention of selecting a random sample of families in different stages of deployment (for a total of four youth, parents and mentors from each program site). However, at the time the study was conducted, most programs were not serving large numbers of military-connected youth. Further, because every effort was made to interview parents and youth face-to-face, we were also constrained geographically in our selection of families. Thus, we were very limited in the families we could interview, and, in most cases, we simply interviewed all of the families that were available at a given site or whose military connection was seemingly pertinent to their family life. The program staff involved in the study were those directly involved in the implementation of the AEMCF project. These staff provided the names of community partners whom we could contact for interviews. We asked staff to identify a partner with a military affiliation who could tell us about the needs and strengths of military families. Not all community partners were available to be interviewed.

8 We asked mentors to describe the training they received in preparation for their match with a military-connected youth. Follow-up questions asked mentors to describe how much they felt they knew and understood about what growing up with a military parent may be like and how they came to know this. It is possible that some mentors may have thought of "training" as only in-person training, and may not have mentioned web-based materials and resources they were provided (like those in the DMT online training).



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