The third and final breakout session focused on action planning to address the top five consensus goals. At the conclusion of this breakout session, a final presentation in the main auditorium provided an opportunity for each group to describe their top 3 action steps. Using the process described previously, all Summit participants registered their vote on which of these steps should represent the top priorities for DoD family support and readiness programs. The top three action steps are listed below, and can be considered a roadmap for ensuring that military support professionals working into the next decade can continue to build on the accomplishments made since the beginning of the post 9/11 era:

**Action Step 1:** Create a coordinated, strategic map of all existing programs to identify redundancies and opportunities for consolidation; develop metrics of success and evaluate all programs to determine which are working.

**Action Step 2:** Design and implement a strategic communications plan to (A) improve service member and family awareness of existing resources/programs; (B) communicate realistic expectations about military life and the role of programs in supporting families; (C) share information and best practices; (D) optimize collaboration with community and non-governmental partners; and (E) employ cross-channel marketing and new media (e.g., social networking sites, Web 2.0) to reach diverse groups.

**Action Step 3:** Reinforce the Department's focus on behavioral health services to ensure access, availability, and education to encourage early identification and to reduce the stigma associated with treatment of mental health.

**Summary**

More than 150 military family policy makers, senior leaders, service providers, practitioners, researchers, and family members participated in the National Leadership Summit on Military Families, offering their diverse insights and experiences. With a focus on the unique needs of military families in this “era of persistent conflict,” the participants worked productively with their colleagues during the course of the two-day event to craft proactive recommendations for DoD’s family support and readiness programs. Throughout the Summit, organizers encouraged participants to come up with innovative ways to enhance collaboration and partnership between agencies, both within and outside of the military. This would help in better meeting the current needs of military families and strengthening the capacity of the support system to anticipate and respond to future challenges.

Informed by the results of recent research on the impact of OEF/OIF on military families, Summit participants first defined and prioritized the specific challenges that military families are facing the stress of repeated deployments, access to support for psychological health, obtaining information about the specific resources available, and how to access them, the lack of consistency and predictability in support services, and issues related to frequent transition and relocation.

With a general consensus built around the major challenges, participants then worked to articulate the appropriate goals and scope of DoD family readiness and support programs, outlining specifically what families should be able to expect, and which areas are outside the limits of what can realistically be provided.

Among the major themes that surfaced included the requirement for evaluation to determine the effectiveness of programs (i.e., are programs meeting the goals for which they were created?); enhancing the DoD’s ability to communicate effectively with a range of stakeholders (including family members, service members, leaders, support providers and staff, NGOs, and the general public); establishing and strengthening partnerships with community resources and agencies (such as the Cooperative Extension Service) to fill gaps and deliver the most effective solutions; addressing the psychological health of families and service members; and ensuring that effective programs exist to engage military children and youth.

Participants in the final breakout session were charged with identifying their group’s top three priorities for action. At the final general session on the Summit’s second day, representatives from each group articulated these priorities for the full audience regarding the top action steps for DoD’s military family support and readiness programs. In this final session, the Summit participants put forward the following three priorities:

1. Categorize and evaluate programs to enhance effectiveness, consistency and return on investment;
2. Develop and implement a strategic communications strategy that reaches families with what they need to know, and connects them with those who have the capacity and resources to provide support;
3. Strengthen the Department’s ability to provide for the psychological well-being of military personnel and their families (with a particular focus on the health of children in these families).

The major themes, challenges, and action steps—articulated over the course of the Summit by more than 150 individuals involved in policy and provision of services for military families—incorporated with the input from military family listening sessions and other data, can be seen as an organizational blueprint for improvement and change for the DoD family support and readiness community. The National Leadership Summit on Military Families Final Report is recommended reading for those interested in a more detailed description of all of the ideas and recommended action steps that were expressed at the Summit.
Unique issues and challenges faced by military families and their support communities. These organizations include those that focus on improving the quality of life of military personnel and their families. The Summit was a partnership between the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Department of the Army, the Department of the Navy, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of the Marine Corps, the National Guard and Reserve components, as well as land-grant universities and other non-governmental partners.

Summit Objectives

The objectives of the Summit were to bring together these most knowledgeable about contemporary military family programming and to discuss the programs and services in place to support service members and their families. The goals were to identify barriers to effective support and to create specific action steps based on group consensus. The action steps developed at the Summit, which are described in this document, represent the participants’ conclusions on those issues which are in need of collective support.

Summit Activities and Process

The Summit was kicked off by a “call to action” by Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Mr. Tommy Thompson, who emphasized their role as active contributors in helping to craft the way forward for military family support, and encouraged them to work together to define the top issues and challenges facing military families and their support communities, and to craft and prioritize the actions required to address these needs. Mr. Thomas also opened the Summit’s second day of work by summarizing the action steps reached and to address the specific activities, including the DoD Joint Family Readiness Conference held in Chicago in September 2009.

The Summit keynote address was delivered by the Deputy Secretary of Defense for Plans, Dr. Gail M. McGinn, then performing the duties of the Under Secretary of the Army, Mr. John W. McHugh. Dr. McGinn emphasized the progress that has been made in supporting military families since Army Chief of Staff General John W. Warden’s “The Army Family” was published in 1983. Ms. McGinn acknowledged that the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are placing military families under more strain than at any time in the era of All-Volunteer forces. There is much more to be done to ensure that programs and policies are able to meet current challenges. Among the challenges addressed were:

1. Need to communicate the resources/information provided and the services available.
2. Need for standard, consistent, predictable programming.
3. Need to address mental health and psychological issues.
4. Need to address needs of women and military families who are single parents.

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