

# Canada's Military Families and the Military Family Services Program

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Canadian families have become increasingly diverse, as social, economic and demographic shifts have led to a greater recognition of the many family types that contribute to the fabric of Canadian society. One such family type is the military family, an often overlooked family model that is characterized by a multitude of challenges and unique experiences that require specialized resources and support.

While the Canadian Forces (CF) have received more attention in the past decade due to the war in Afghanistan, the efforts and sacrifices made by the *families* of CF members are often overlooked or forgotten. Little do we think about the day-to-day lives of CF families who have given up the normalcy of civilian family life so that their loved one can protect and defend that very civilian lifestyle.

## History of military family support in Canada

The ability of CF members to do their job is highly dependent on the assurance that their family is cared for while they protect and serve the country. The Government of Canada's expectation that CF members "place service to country and needs of the CF ahead of

personal considerations,"<sup>1</sup> as well as its need for a positive image of the CF, requires that we acknowledge the importance of the unpaid work that CF family members perform on a daily basis.

To this end, the Department of National Defence (DND) initiated the Family Support Program Project (FSPP) in April 1987.<sup>2</sup> The mandate of the FSPP was to gather information, make recommendations and provide a plan that would make support and resources available to military spouses and family members.<sup>3</sup>

The findings and recommendations of the FSPP culminated in the creation of the Military Family Support Program (MFSP), which was established to assist spouses and family members in dealing with the challenges associated with the military family. Under the MFSP, Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs) were opened as non-profit, stand-alone organizations on military bases, wings and support units across Canada.

At the core of the MFSP is the health and well-being of military families. The MFSP is built on the foundation of community development and involvement that provides the philosophical framework for the Family Resource Program (FRP) in Canada.<sup>4</sup> Research on community development has indicated that communities fare better and are more enduring when community members are involved in the work of development and support.<sup>5</sup> The MFSP philosophy therefore endorses and promotes volunteer involvement at all levels from the "governance/advisory capacity at the Board of Directors/Advisory Committee level, to the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of services."<sup>6</sup>

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Services built upon recognition of the unique needs of Canadian Forces members and their families can be tailored to help in the most effective way possible.

#### Unique supports for unique families

It is essential for the well-being of the Canadian Forces that we not only remember the efforts and sacrifices made by CF members and their families, but also that they are provided with adequate institutional supports. Services built upon recognition of the unique needs of CF members, their spouses/partners and their children can be tailored to help in the most effective way possible. The MFSP and MFRCs act as a service delivery mechanism, helping military families to face these obstacles while assuring CF members that their loved ones are being supported. By recognizing and helping CF families, these institutions are helping bring to life the national commitment of supporting all family types in Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> National Defence, "DAOD 5044-1, Families," *Defence Administrative Orders and Directives* (February 2002), accessed November 25, 2013, <http://bit.ly/19WSQhs>.

<sup>2</sup> Thunder Bay Military Family Resource Centre, *Military Family Services Program*, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1fyGNwz>.

<sup>3</sup> Military Family Resource Centres, "About Us," *MFRC Suffield* (no date), accessed November 20, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1939758>.

<sup>4</sup> Director Military Family Services (DMFS), "Parameters for Practice," *Military Family Services Program* (2004), accessed November 20, 2013, <http://bit.ly/18330gP>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## Services provided by Military Family Resource Centres

As outlined in the 2013 ombudsman report *On the Homefront: Assessing the Well-Being of Canada's Military Families in the New Millennium*, the primary challenges associated with being a military family member typically relate to relocations, child care, health care, spousal employment, housing and spousal/family support while CF members are away.\* To help military family members deal with these issues, MFRCs across the country provide the following services:

### Personal Development and Community Integration

Provides military families with information about the community they have been posted to. Depending on the location of the base and the specific MFRC, families can find information about education, health, spiritual, recreational and shopping services located in the civilian community, and can also have access to second-language services. MFRCs also provide support for family members regarding job search strategies, resumé writing and support in accessing post-secondary education.

### Child and Youth Support and Parenting Development

Includes parent and toddler drop-in programs and formal drop-off child care for parents so they can attend to personal appointments or simply have some well-deserved respite while the military member is away on training or deployed. These programs offer parents the opportunity to connect with others who understand the challenges that come with military life, including those associated with frequent moves and lone parenting. Parent education workshops and groups may also be a component of this program. Support for parents of children who have special needs has also been developed over the past several years.

### Prevention, Support and Intervention

Includes mental health support for family members who may be challenged by the military family lifestyle. This program helps to deal with feelings of isolation, loneliness, abuse, deployment and/or reintegration issues for the family, operational stress injury (OSI) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of the military member and the effect on the family member/spouse. Support may come in the form of referral to civilian mental health agencies, individual counselling or support groups.

### Family Separation and Reunion

Offers support through something as simple as a mail program for family members to mail care packages to their deployed loved ones to the more intricate pre-deployment, deployment, reintegration and post-deployment information briefings. The information sessions are offered in coordination with information provided from the military unit to the MFRC program coordinator.

\*National Defence and Canadian Forces, *On the Homefront: Assessing the Well-Being of Canada's Military Families in the New Millennium*, accessed November 18, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1iLApnQ>.