

# Research *focus*

*Making Canadian Research Meaningful to Better Serve Military Families  
Issue 6 – September 2017*

## Military Families: CAF Community Needs

Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (CFMWS) is responsible for delivering public morale and welfare programs, services and activities to Canadian military communities. In order to be responsive to Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members and their families, and to assist Base/Wing Commanders in determining the unique needs of their community, Military Family Services (MFS) partnered with Personnel Support Programs (PSP) to develop and implement a new comprehensive CAF community needs assessment (CNA) tool based on externally validated measures developed by the RAND National Defense Research Institute.

MFS received approval from the Department of National Defence Social Sciences Research Review Board to conduct full-scale implementation of the universal online CNA survey in September 2016. The survey was promoted through PSP, MFRCs, CFMWS, and Base/Wing/Unit Commanders. Over 11,600 respondents completed the CAF CNA over the course of one month. Respondents included Regular Force members, Reservists, Spouses, Veterans, Parents of single serving members and DND/NPF civilian employees. Of those, 3,607 were removed because they were either under 18 years of age, over 18 but did not accept to complete the survey, or did not complete the survey. This left 8,049 completed surveys for analysis and reporting.

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### Research Objectives

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The CAF CNA focused on 7 main components:

1. Context (e.g. location, demographics).
2. What have respondents experienced as problems? The framework captures experiences across nine different domains that military families self-define as rising to the level of a problem. For those with problems in multiple domains, this approach includes asking for prioritization of the most significant problems. The nine different domains include:
  - i. Work/life balance problems (e.g., finding nearby/affordable recreation, family time, stress relief, educational opportunities)
  - ii. Household management problems (e.g., finding suitable housing, housework/yard work problems)
  - iii. Financial problems (e.g., trouble paying bills, finding suitable employment)
  - iv. Legal problems (e.g., child custody/family legal problems, filing for divorce)
  - v. Health care system problems (e.g., getting access to health care or specialized mental health care, managing health care needs of family members)
  - vi. Relationship problems (e.g., arguments, changing roles/responsibilities, growing apart)
  - vii. Child well-being problems (e.g., school problems, emotional/behavioural problems)
  - viii. Problems with your own well-being (e.g., stress, loneliness, mood changes, physical illness/injury, substance abuse)
  - ix. Problems with your spouse's/partner's well-being (e.g., stress, loneliness, mood changes, physical illness/injury, substance abuse).
3. What types of help did respondents need in order to address their most significant problems (e.g., the need for information, advocate, counselling)?
4. What resources did families contact to try to meet the most important needs?
5. What factors made resources easier or more difficult to access? What barriers and bridges did the respondents perceive or encounter?
6. Did the resources that respondents contacted actually help them meet their problem-related needs?
7. What is the connection between met needs and outcomes?

**Over 8,000 CAF community members  
completed the 2016 Community Needs  
Assessment Survey**

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## Demographics

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The typical respondent was a male (61%) Regular Force member (60%) between the ages of 25 and 54. For a large majority of the respondents (81%), English is their primary language. Respondents are most likely with the Canadian Army (46%) or the Royal Canadian Air Force (37%). Approximately 14% of respondents were spouses.

One in 10 (10%) respondents have caregiver responsibilities for elderly or disabled family members; 6 in 10 respondents have dependents who depend on them or their spouse for more than half of their financial support.

Overall, 14% of respondents have returned from a deployment in the past year, and over 4 in 10 have been deployed in the past three years, with an average deployment of about four months. About 27% of respondents have attended a deployment-related briefing through the military and about 13% through MFRC.



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## Top Needs

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When asked to identify the most significant problem they faced in the past year, almost one-quarter (24%) of respondents indicated they did not face any significant problems. By far the most common area was *work/life balance* (25%), followed by *problems with their own well-being* (10%) and *financial problems* (10%).

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## Work / Life Balance Needs

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The most common work/life balance problems identified by respondents (n=6,535) include:

- *Mental fatigue* (50%)
- *Finding time for physical exercise and activity* (47%)
- *Being able to pursue learning opportunities* (37%)
- *Maintaining a healthy diet* (37%)
- *Finding time to spend with your family* (35%)
- *Coping with stress* (34%)

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## Own Well-Being Needs

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Of respondents who identified struggling with personal well-being (n=6,486), more than half experienced *feeling stressed, overwhelmed or tired* (56%). Many respondents also had *trouble sleeping* (37%) and *suffered mood changes* (33%).

*Almost one-quarter of all respondents indicated they did not face any significant problems*

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## Financial Needs

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Although only about 43% of respondents identified having financial problems (n=6,367), three areas related to finances were commonly selected:

- *Finding suitable employment for non-military spouse* (22%)
- *Unable to afford extracurricular activities* (20%)
- *Trouble paying debt or bills* (18%)

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## Relationship Needs

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Many respondents (n=5,468) cited relationship problems, with issues such as *problems communicating/expressing feelings* (26%), *arguments* (23%), *growing apart or in different directions* (19%), and *little or no physical affection* (18%) as the most common problems affecting them.

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## Other Problems

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The other most significant problems experienced by a lower number of respondents included:

- *Problems with your spouse's/partner's well-being* (7%)
- *Child well-being problems* (6%)
- *Health care system problems* (6%)
- *Household management problems* (3%)
- *Legal problems* (1%)



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## Accessing Support

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When identifying the help CAF members or their spouses required to deal with problems, the help often matched the problem. For example, with work/life balance, the most common help required was activities (e.g. fitness, recreation, stress relief), whereas for personal problems (i.e. relationship or child well-being) it was counselling or emotional support.

When members or their spouses were asked what support or services they used to deal with their issues, in most cases the majority did not use any. Even when they did, the most common tended to be non-military sources, such as personal networks, private doctor/counsellor or the internet. When understanding why respondents did not access military supports, the most common reason tended to be that they did not think the support was required to deal with their problem. Smaller secondary reasons included the program/service did not meet their needs or they were not aware of the support.

When understanding why members and/or their spouses did not access military supports, the most common reason tended to be that they did not think the support was required to deal with their problem, perhaps indicating they did not believe the issue was serious enough to require supports. In terms of aspects CFMWS could likely impact were some smaller secondary reasons, such as the program/service not meeting their needs or not being aware of the support.

When assessing how well military services met the needs of those who used them, MFRC was consistently rated highly in this area across almost all areas; however, the degree to which the supports are meeting needs seems to be low across areas, as rarely did more than half of those using each service rate them as helping them well or very well (top two boxes on a five-point scale).

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## Implications for Service Delivery

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► **Improve community outreach efforts –** Given this was the initial implementation of the CFMWS CAF Community Needs Assessment, and with only one month of data collection, the average location response rate (based on total responses per Regular Force population) of approximately 20% is encouraging. However, dependent on location, response rate ranged from 0% to 70%. As such, those locations who had less than 5% response rate will not receive location-specific reports as the results are not

representative of that community. CFMWS is committed to evaluating the various recruitment strategies initiated by different locations in order to share best practices for future Community Needs Assessment outreach efforts, as well as for general service promotion strategies to the military community.

► **Understand diversity of military community members –** The vast majority of respondents to this CAF Community Needs Assessment were Regular Force members (58% overall). Other members of the CAF community are not well represented, including spouses and parents, Reservists and Veterans. This could reflect a generalized lack of outreach efforts to these populations, or perhaps to a perception among these populations that the services provided are not available or relevant to them. CFMWS is committed to examining the relevancy of programs and services available to all members of the CAF community, as well as increasing promotional efforts at both the national and local levels to all members of the CAF community.

► **Appreciate CAF community resilience –** One-quarter of respondents indicated that they did not face any significant problems in the past year. This suggests that a sizeable portion of the military community are resilient in spite of unique challenges of the military lifestyle.

► **Address work / life balance problems –** Many of these problem areas overlap across CFMWS divisional areas of responsibility, but also with other CAF and DND divisions. These problems may be a reflection of the CAF operational and perstempo. As the identified needs cross over so many different program lines, CFMWS recommends that divisions work closely with each other to leverage resource efforts, avoid duplication of services and enhance cross-divisional communication, promotion and outreach efforts. Local PSP and MFRC should review their local Family Services Partnership Delivery Model to ensure it still meets the needs of the community.

► **Address problems with own well-being –** Some of these problems overlap with those stress-related problems also identified in the work / life balance domain, and may reflect CAF operational and perstempo. CFMWS will collaboratively review programs and services across its divisions to streamline effective supports for personal well-being, specifically MFS (e.g. mental health and well-being, etc.) and PSP (e.g. health promotion).

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- ▶ **Address financial problems** – CFMWS is committed to reviewing its current support programs, specifically MFS (e.g. spousal employment) and PSP (e.g. national pricing strategy), as well as determining strategies to enhance financial management literacy. CFMWS will also look at other divisions that may be able to provide positive impact on addressing CAF community members' financial problems, for example, SISIP and Canadian Defence Community Banking.
- ▶ **Address relationship problems** – CFMWS is committed to reviewing its current support programs, specifically MFS (e.g. mental health and relationship counselling, etc.) and the Inter-Comm program.
- ▶ **Overcome barriers to accessing supports** – Respondents for the most part indicated they did not access military supports as they did not think the support was required. However they also commonly indicated that the program / service did not meet their needs, and that they were not aware of the supports. CFMWS is committed to reviewing its current support programs, not only for their relevancy in meeting identified needs, but also their availability when CAF community members need those services (e.g. location, hours of operation). CFMWS recommends that each location examine their own programs, locations and hours in light of this CAF Community Needs Assessment and their own Community Profiles and customer satisfaction ratings, to be sure that they are relevant and accessible when and how their community needs them. CFMWS also recommends that each location examine the demographics of their community to understand how best to provide services. The working assumption is that most military members live off Base / Wings in civilian communities; however the results from this CAF Community Needs Assessment shows that almost 25% live on base and almost 60% only live less than a 30-minute drive away from the nearest base. This suggests that most CAF community members can geographically access CFMWS services available on base, but may be choosing not to for a variety of other reasons (e.g. not relevant, not available when and how they need to access services, not aware of services due to unleveraged or fractured communications and marketing efforts, etc.).

## Sources

Prairie Research Associates. (2017). *CAF Community Needs Assessment 2016 Overall Results*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services.

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