Understanding the Importance of Elder Care Preparations in the Context of 21st Century Military Service

by James A. Martin, Ph.D., BCD and Michael Parker, DSW, BCD, LCSW

Introduction

Accompanying the tremendous growth in America’s aging population are concerns and frustrations experienced by adult children who provide care to their aging parents. The needs of elderly parents may erupt in periodic crises that often stretch out for several years. While such crises can thrust caregivers into a bureaucratic maze of trying to make successful care arrangements in a badly fragmented long term care system, research with military families suggests that those with a comprehensive parent care plan are at reduced risk for stress-related problems (Parker, Call, Dunkle, & Vaitkus, 2002).

Military families, perhaps more than other American families, need to be prepared for the necessary tasks associated with the well being of their elderly parents. Nowhere in our society are the challenges of parent care more apparent and complicated than those experienced by career military members. As highlighted in Table 1, career military members and their spouses face a wide variety of military unique life challenges including residing great distances from their aging parents. Military members are frequently stationed or deployed overseas for extended periods. Over the course of a military career and various military assignments, members and their spouses often become quite removed from their parent’s day-to-day life. Finally, despite the military’s increasing focus on personal readiness, members are typically not well prepared to respond to the needs of their aging parents—especially needs that occur in the context of a sudden life crisis.

Table 2 provides a demographic sketch of this military population and these characteristics provide added insight into the many challenges that are represented by such a large and diverse group.

Unfortunately, the normal life course and career stages often result in military members being confronted by parental needs (member’s and spouse’s) at the same time that they are advancing into senior level assignments—the peak moments of their military career and the period of their greatest overall value to the Armed Forces. Similar to the

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experience of their civilian peers in business and government, there is no easy way to balance the conflicting requirements of work and family life—especially elder care requirements. The primary difference is that military service represents a more encompassing set of roles and responsibilities and is often a less accommodating career setting in which to experience elder care challenges. This is especially true for women serving in the officer and senior enlisted ranks. Military women face a cultural expectation of “fulfilling a daughter’s role,” like their civilian counterparts, while trying to meet the demands of a career that expects members to be “committed to service and sacrifice before self” (Parker, Call, Toseland, Vaitkus, & Roff, in press).

Military members receive a range of entitlements and benefits intended to moderate the challenges of military duty and service life (GAO, 2002). Unfortunately, while the Family Leave Bill enables many men and women to take time from work without pay to meet the needs associated with caregiving, military personnel are not included in this federal legislation (Parker, Aldwin, Vaitkus, Barko, & Call, 2001). For military members, time off is only accommodated by the availability of military leave (typically 30 days per year). Rather than waiting to react to a crisis, career military members (and their spouses) need to develop a well-coordinated plan that involves the completion of specific life tasks, each of which addresses contingencies tailored to their parents’ unique life course needs (Parker et al., 2002; Parker, Fuller, Koenig, Bellis, Vaitkus, & Eitzen, 2001). Research indicates that over 95 percent of senior military officers have at least one parent or in-law alive during the late stages of their military career (Parker, Call, & Barko, 1999; Parker, Roff, Toseland, & Klemmack, 2003).

While the preponderance of care giving research has focused on proximate care giving (Parker, Call, Dunkle, & Vaitkus, 2002), this special edition addresses the impact of distance on the different forms and patterns of inter-generational contact and care. We intentionally incorporate web-based, educational and long distance care and information services because of their obvious value to long distance care providers. Our research suggests that utilization of this information, when guided by a proper assessment tailored to a specific family and parent, will enhance the confidence of care givers, reduce care giver burden and associated work-related spillover, and favorably influence the quality of life and care aging parents receive (Parker, Roff, Toseland, & Klemmack, 2003; Parker, Call, Dunkle, & Vaitkus, 2002). Table 3 provides readers with a list of the various military-sponsored Internet sites that serve as public gateways into a vast network of human services information for military members and families.

An overview of the primary program elements representing our model of intervention is provided in Figure 1. The development of a long term care plan involves the completion of specific tasks viewed as most important and relevant to elderly parents, their family, and geriatric consultants of different disciplines. Although the intervention has expected outcomes (completed tasks), it is best understood as a dynamic process that involves the completion of specific tasks, and a
TABLE 2

Demographic Profile of the Military Community *

The total number of Department of Defense personnel is over 3.3 million, including 1.4 million active duty military personnel. Active duty members comprise the largest portion of the total force (41.2 percent), supplemented by Ready Reserve members (37.6 percent), DOD civilian personnel sponsored with appropriated funds (20.1 percent), and active duty Coast Guard members (1.0 percent).

Active Duty Member and Family Highlights

- **Service Branch.** The Army has the largest number of active duty members (479,026), followed by the Navy (367,371), the Air Force (351,326) and the Marine Corps (172,955).

- **Women and Racial Minorities.** In 2000, 14.4 percent of officers and 14.7 percent of enlisted members were women. In 2000, 16.8 percent of officers and 38.2 percent of enlisted members identified themselves as a minority (i.e., African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Alaskan Natives and Pacific Islanders).

- **Geographic Location.** The three primary areas in which members are assigned are the United States and its territories (85.3 percent), Europe (7.6 percent) and East Asia (5.7 percent). While assigned in these locations, members are often deployed around the globe for days, weeks, or months at a time.

- **Age.** Nearly 80 percent (78.9 percent) of active duty personnel are below age 35.

- **Education Level.** Most officers (69.9 percent) have at least a baccalaureate degree. Almost all enlisted members have at least a high school diploma (97.4 percent).

- **Family Structure.** Just over half (53.0 percent) of active duty military members are married. Less than half of active duty military members have children (45.3 percent). Small percentages (6.2 percent) of military members are single parents. Just over 79,000 are in joint-service marriages (where both spouses are either in the active duty or in the Reserve and Guard). The 1,370,678 active duty members have 1,934,272 family members, including spouses, children and adult dependents. The majority of children are between birth and five years old (478,180) or six and 11 years old (414,899).

- **Housing:** Nearly two-thirds of military families (in the U.S.) reside in off-base (civilian community) housing.

- **Spouse Employment:** Just under half (48.0 percent) of officer spouses stationed in the continental U.S. are employed and an additional seven percent of spouses are seeking work. Over half (55.0 percent) of enlisted spouses in the continental U.S. are working and eight percent are looking for employment.

- **Parent Care:** Little is known about the incidence and impact of parent care on the military. The impact is likely to emulate society in that parent care is an age-graded task associated with higher probability with midlife, and that the onset of parent care can have adverse effects on the health and vocational capacities of adult children who provide care to aging parents. Over 35 percent of career officers at the U.S. Army War College indicated significant worry and concern about the health of their aging parents and in-laws, and over one-third were not satisfied with the aging plans of their parents. Research suggests that almost all senior military personnel have at least one parent or in-law alive during the late stages of their career, and that most officers have not completed the majority of parent care tasks (Parker et al, 1999; & Parker, Roff, Toseland, & Klemmaek, 2003).

* Data from the Military Family Resource Center www.mfrc.cellb.com, Arlington, VA 22202-3424. Updated on August 12, 2002 by mfrcquest@celib.com. Taken (and edited for length) from the Internet on October 23, 2002.

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continuous reassessment and appraisal as circumstances change. The tasks of parent care, applied here to military members and families, are organized into four categories: medical, legal-insurance-financial, family-social, and spiritual-emotional tasks. Each reflects a real life challenge that potentially comprises an important aspect of a parent's long term care plan. The model underscores the importance of timely professional consultation, and the supreme value of preparation that values and honors the preferences of mother and father.

This population—soldiers, airmen and airwomen, sailors, Marines, and their families—faithfully and unselfishly serve our nation. Whether on active duty, on reserve status, or retired, these military members and their spouses deserve our gratitude and need our professional services. As a nation we have a social compact (New Social Compact, 2002) with these individuals. This social compact is represented in their service and sacrifice and in our corresponding individual and collective commitment to their well being including adequately addressing parent care requirements.

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### Table 3

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military Sponsored Public Access Internet Web Sites</th>
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<tr>
<td>Army (A to Z News) – With quick links to a wide variety of Army information and documents. <a href="http://www.army.mil">www.army.mil</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossroads – The U.S. Air Force official web site with fast access search capacity. <a href="http://www.afcrossroads.com">www.afcrossroads.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Defense Link – Defense news, links to other military websites, access military related articles and reports. <a href="http://www.defenselink.mil">www.defenselink.mil</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Family Resource Center – A DOD sponsored clearinghouse for military family information. <a href="http://www.mfrc.oalib.com">www.mfrc.oalib.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>SITES: The Marine Corps web page <a href="http://www.usmc.mil">www.usmc.mil</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Welcome Aboard Navy OnLine (NOL) - A comprehensive source of Navy information. <a href="http://www.navy.mil">www.navy.mil</a></td>
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### Figure 1

A Model for developing and sustaining a comprehensive Parent Care Plan (PCP)

Achieving PCP goals requires the sustained, cooperative efforts of the parent, their spouse or significant other, their adult children, and a number of trusted professional advisors.

- Individual Parent Care tasks are often interrelated

**Necessary Steps:**

- Acknowledgment of the developmental task of parent care.
- Completion of initial assessment with health, legal, financial, and spiritual advisors.
- Identification of high priority tasks.
- Initiation and completion of all required tasks.
- Ongoing reassessment and task completion as conditions change.