

Strengthening Military Child & Family Research Through Stakeholder Engagement

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Introduction

- Military families face unique stressors related to frequent relocations, family separation due to deployment, and overall risk to service member.
- These experiences can affect child well-being, family functioning, and military readiness.
- Lived experience is often underrepresented in research and program development, which can limit relevance and impact.

Objective

The Military Child & Family Collaboratory (MCFC) established a Stakeholder Engagement Group (SEG) "to incorporate the voices of families with lived experience navigating mental, emotional, developmental, and behavioral (MEDB) healthcare in the larger efforts of the collaboratory."

Design/Methods

- The MCFC was established in 2023 and guided by a collective impact model, with over 125 academic, advocacy, and community organizations collaborating to support the mental health and wellness of military-connected youth.
- We recruited a SEG of 12 military-connected parents with experience navigating MEDB healthcare. Recruitment leveraged MCFC partnerships, military family networks, and social media.
- The SEG convenes monthly, virtually for 75 minutes.
- Members sign a participation agreement and are compensated for each meeting.
- The SEG is Federal Advisory Committee Act compliant.

Results and Impact

- Established a sustained partnership of military-connected caregivers to guide MCFC research priorities and activities.
- Conducted 27 SEG meetings between April 2024–June 2026.
- Provided consultation on 4 MCFC research projects, including big data studies, survey development, and qualitative interview guides.
- Contributed to a military child health conference panel and presentation.
- Co-authored a peer-reviewed manuscript submission.
- Co-developed a military family journey map identifying stress points in navigating MEDB care (Figure 1).
- Secured a Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) Engagement Award to further build stakeholder capacity as research partners.
- Ongoing collaboration and monthly engagement planned through February 2027.

Conclusions

- Structured collaboration with military families can elucidate hidden challenges and barriers to healthcare.
- Partnerships with families can inform family-centered, and contextually relevant interventions to improve healthcare experiences and outcomes.
- The MCFC SEG provides a replicable and sustainable model for integrating military family voices into research.
- Meaningful stakeholder partnerships support military family health, well-being, and warfighter readiness.

Lessons Learned

- Military family engagement requires flexible participation opportunities to accommodate relocations, deployments, and family responsibilities.
- Iterative recruitment may be necessary due to natural attrition in highly mobile military populations.
- Stakeholders can identify systemic barriers and challenges that may not be readily addressable within project goals/scope.
- Compensation is necessary to support engagement.
- Recruitment is limited to those who interact with healthcare systems/processes.
- Multiple opportunities for contribution may promote diverse involvement and retention.

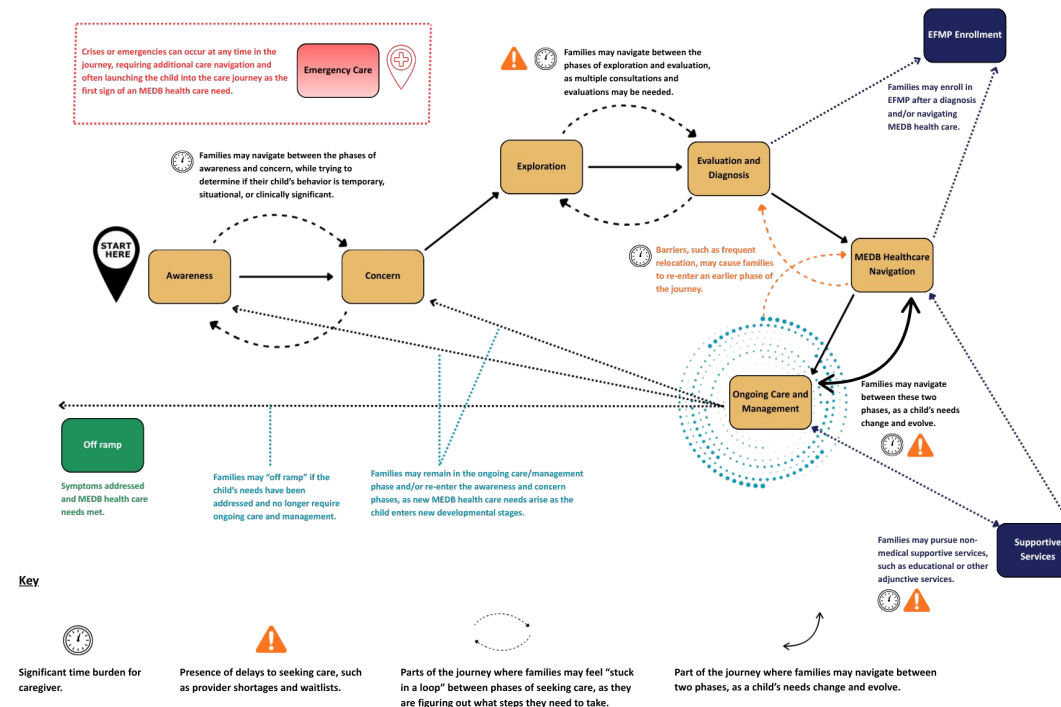


Figure 1: Journey Map for Military-Connected Youth and Families Seeking MEDB Healthcare

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