

**REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF THE DEBRIEFING
ON THE FIRST IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
MILITARY FAMILY SERVICES PROGRAM SURVEY**

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**for
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1.0 Introduction

The Military Family Services Program survey was implemented for the first time during the period January 1 to March 31, 2006. A debriefing process with key personnel from each Military Family Resource Centre was undertaken during January and the first part of February in 2007. Technical analyses of the data obtained from the surveys were carried out in March 2007. This report summarizes the main findings from the debriefing process, examines technical aspects of the survey results and makes recommendations for the next round of survey implementation.

As may be expected, a significant amount of information surfaced during the debriefing process, as key personnel from each centre were asked to reflect on all aspects of the process. Some experiences, perspectives and views reported by the centres were unique to one or a few centres; other experiences, perspectives and ideas were held by a larger number of centres. While all of the information provided by the centres was considered important, this report is based on the main themes and ideas that emerged and also on issues that were deemed to have system-wide implications.

1.1 Background

The Military Family Services Program (MFSP) survey is part of the accountability system described in *Parameters for Practice*. The purpose of the survey is to collect feedback from military families who use one or more of the services offered by a military family resource centre. It is intended that one member from each family completes the survey and, in his or her responses, reflects on the experiences of the family.

The survey is designed to reflect the philosophy of *Parameters for Practice*, which sets forth the objectives of Military Family Services Program services but does not

prescribe how these objectives are to be achieved. This philosophy makes it possible for each Military Family Resource Centre to design its services according to needs existing in its community, and with regard to services that may already be available through other local service providers. The survey thus looks at military families' feedback on the extent to which, in their experience, the objectives of the mandated services described in *Parameters for Practice* were achieved.

With a few exceptions, the survey was implemented during a two-week period selected by each centre within the first quarter of the 2006 calendar year. Centres were encouraged to plan programs and activities that would bring members of military families to the centre and to have the survey completed in conjunction with such activities or with other routine activities taking place. To support the implementation, extensive training was provided to representatives of centres in the fall of 2005 and, as well, a comprehensive range of supplies and resource materials were provided.

A total of 15,787 surveys were requested by the 41 centres world-wide. 2,550 completed surveys were received from 38 of these centres. This represents a return of 17% of the number of surveys requested for distribution by these 38 centres. It is worth noting that since there was only one respondent from each family, the 2550 returned surveys actually represented 7,472 participants.

1.2 Organization of the Report

Following this introduction, the remainder of this report is organized as follows: The process of implementation (Section 2), resources (Section 3), survey instrument (Section 4), and reporting (Section 5) are each examined in turn. In each section, the findings from the debriefing process will be reported first and followed by a discussion of

the findings. Each section concludes with recommendations. Conclusions are presented in Section 6. Two Appendices are included with this report: Appendix 1 provides a technical analysis of the survey results obtained and Appendix 2 provides a consolidated list of recommendations.

2.0 Process of Implementation

2.1 Findings

The debriefing first focused on all aspects of the implementation process, including preparations.

- Overall, most centres reported that they were able to implement the survey without undue difficulty. Some internal planning was required to ensure that events, which would attract a large number of participants during the survey period, were scheduled. As well, briefing and training staff was also a common preparatory step. Once preparations were made, the survey was generally implemented without undue disruption to normal operations.
- The time of year in which the survey was scheduled was commented upon by many of the centres. Close to half the respondents reported that winter was a difficult time in which to conduct a survey, as there were fewer activities and, also, the weather was always potentially a factor. The suggestion of these centres was that the survey should be conducted in the fall. For rest of the centres, the winter did not pose as much of a problem and it was also noted that conducting the survey in the fall would create the problem that a large number of respondents would not yet be sufficiently familiar with the services of the centre or the community to be able to respond knowledgeably.

This was particularly the case in centres that served communities with a large number of new postings each year.

- A number of centres suggested that lengthening the 3-month time frame during which the survey could be scheduled would provide more opportunity to schedule the survey in a way that would maximize response rates.
- A number of centres also commented that the 2-week time period for implementation was relatively short and did not permit centres to schedule more than one or two special activities or events. As well, a 2-week window was not long enough to include all normally scheduled activities that bring participants to the centre.
- Some centres viewed the requirement to have participants complete the survey while at the centre as a major limitation. They noted that some participants do not frequently come to the centre but could be reached by mail. As well, some participants who do come to the centre may not have the time just then to complete a survey but might complete it, if allowed to take it home. A large number of respondents also thought that option to complete the survey online would help increase response rates.
- A number of centres had provided incentives such as draws for prizes and some thought that these were effective at increasing the response rate. It was suggested that some major prizes could be made available nationally or regionally.
- The required response rate was an important theme that drew comments throughout the debriefing process. Centres had been instructed to obtain as high a response rate as possible but no specific numbers or percentages had been specified. Subsequently, response rates had been calculated on the basis of the number of families at the base,

wing or unit showing in the records of the Directorate of Personnel and Applied Research (DPersAR). Some centres disputed that this was an accurate way of calculating response rates. Most centres identified a need to make known, in advance, how response rates were to be calculated and what the minimum acceptable response rate was.

- A few centres indicated that implementing the MFSP evaluation survey interfered with other local evaluation efforts.
- A number of centres suggested that, if the survey became a continuing requirement, resources to support its implementation should be included in annual funding.

2.2 Discussion

There was an even division between those who advocated that the survey should be held in the fall and those that thought it should continue to be held in the winter. Indeed, many acknowledged that there was not an ideal time of year that would work for all centres. While it might be possible to allow each centre to pick its most ideal time, in practice this would result in surveys being implemented throughout the year. This would not only pose logistical and administrative problems but would also make it difficult to claim that the survey represents a snapshot at a given point in time. Thus, it is important that a specific period of time be identified in which all centres must stage the survey.

From the perspective of quality of responses, it is important that respondents have been in their posting long enough to be able to answer questions based on their family's experiences in the current community. Since most postings occur in the late summer, the winter remains the preferred time period. However, some adjustments of the existing time

frame of January 1 to March 31 would be desirable, both to increase the flexibility available to centres for scheduling the survey and also to avoid weather problems.

The suggestions to lengthen the 2-week period for implementation can easily be accommodated from both operations and research methodology perspectives. By lengthening the time period from two weeks to three or four weeks, centres would have the opportunity to increase response rates. At the same time, centres that can complete the survey in a shorter period of time would have the latitude to do so.

The desire for alternate forms of data collection (mail, take-home and web) arises from the belief that these would increase response rates. If used as an alternative to asking participants to complete the survey while at the centre, it is unlikely that this would be the case, as research has shown that each of these data collection approaches typically yields a lower response rate than does face-to-face data collection. In particular, mailing out surveys tends to result in notoriously low response rates. However, these alternative methods can be viable as supplements to in-centre data collection or in circumstances where in-centre data collection is not feasible.

The desire of centres to have clearly defined methods for calculating response rates and for knowing in advance the minimum response rate acceptable is understandable. The method of calculation of response rates used after the first round of implementation by DPersAR is incongruent with intent of the survey, which was to obtain feedback from *participants* in Military Family Services Programs. By using the total number of families in the base, wing or unit, the calculated response rates were not consistent with the intent of the survey. As the survey is intended to be part of the accountability system for the Military Family Services Program, it is important that it

continue to be focused on users of the program and that response rates are calculated on that basis. If it becomes desirable to understand the views or perspectives of military members and families who do not use the program or to determine the reasons why they do not use the program, other evaluation tools and methods should be designed for that purpose.

From a technical perspective, the intent of any survey is to be able to make statements that accurately reflect the experiences, perspectives and opinions of all members in a defined population, not only of those responding to the survey. Generally, this is accomplished by having as high a response rate as possible; the lower the response rate, the greater the margin of error. However, it is important to keep in mind that, in this case, **the population is the total number of participants at each centre**. The number of surveys required to achieve reasonable accuracy varies with the size of the population. The smaller the population, the higher the percentage of respondents required. Since the total number of possible respondents varies from centre to centre, the minimum number of completed surveys will also vary from centre to centre. Once the total number of possible respondents in each centre can be determined, the minimum number of surveys required can be calculated and communicated.

Although only a few centres remarked that implementing the MFSP survey interfered with other evaluation efforts, it is worth reflecting on this issue. The concept of the MFSP survey is that it will not be the only evaluation activity undertaken within Military Family Resource Centres. Indeed, there may well be a number of other evaluation activities carried out due to local initiatives or other funding requirements. The coordination and scheduling of evaluation activities becomes an important management

task within centres, to ensure that the timing and pacing of evaluation activities is appropriate and does not interfere with service delivery.

A whole range of resources was provided to centres to assist in implementing the survey. Nevertheless, there are other costs incurred within local centres to conduct a survey, primarily in the area of staffing. Funding should recognize these costs to ensure that centres are in the best possible position to implement the survey.

Recommendation 1: The time frame for implementing the surveys should be changed to the period January 15 to May 15.

Recommendation 2: The maximum time period permitted for data collection within each centre should be increased to 28 days.

Recommendation 3: Face-to-face data collection within centres should remain the main data collection method. However, centres should be permitted to use mail out and take home approaches as a supplementary method.

Recommendation 4: Web-based data collection methods should be developed as soon as possible and, once available, should be the primary alternate method of data collection. On-line completion within centres can also be encouraged at that time.

Recommendation 5: Reaffirm that the intent of the MFSP survey is to obtain feedback from participants in MFSP services.

Recommendation 6: Develop a method for estimating the total number of families participating in services at each Military Family Resource Centre during a typical winter month.

Recommendation 7: Communicate in advance to each centre the minimum number of responses required in that centre.

3.0 Resources

3.1 Findings

A second focus for the debriefing was the resources provided by DMFS to support the implementation. These included the training, information materials, posters, ballot boxes, and other materials.

- Most centres rated highly the resources provided to them. The general consensus was that these resources were well designed, helped considerably with implementation efforts, and reduced the burden on centres.
- Centres also expressed satisfaction with the training that was provided, indicating that it helped prepare staff for the implementation process. Some identified a need for further training or refresher training prior to the next round of implementation, particularly where new staff members, who have not had the initial training, assume responsibility for survey implementation.
- A few centres reported problems with receiving the materials in a timely or a convenient manner.
- A few centres reported that the quantity of supplies provided was inadequate; and a few others stated that an excessive amount of supplies had been sent.

3.2 Discussion

It can be concluded, based on the feedback received, that the resources supported implementation efforts as intended and generally worked well in the field. With longer lead time than was available in the first implementation, it should not be difficult to work out the few problems relating to delivery methods and the quantity of supplies.

The training prior to the first round of implementation represented a major effort as full-scale regional training had been offered. It would probably not be feasible to

conduct training on such scale again prior to the second round of implementation. However, some training will have to be provided to people who are new to their positions. As well, some provisions for refresher training would be desirable.

Recommendation 8: Details regarding the amount of supplies and shipping methods should be worked out with each centre well in advance of the implementation. Supplies should arrive at least 30 days prior to the survey season.

Recommendation 9: Full scale training should be available to key staff members at those centres where there are no staff members who participated in the first round training.

Recommendation 10: Refresher training should be provided to all staff members prior to the implementation process within their centres. This can be provided as part of regularly scheduled meetings and/or through online methods.

4.0 Survey Instrument

4.1 Findings

During the debriefing process, an important topic of discussion was the performance of the survey instrument.

- Most centres reported that the survey instrument worked well. Respondents understood the intent of the questions and were able to complete the survey with ease.
- There were a few reports that the appearance and lay-out of the survey was intimidating and dense, particularly with English and French versions being bundled in the same booklet.

- One important suggestion regarding wording was that, in Items 14, 16 and 17, the use of the word *deployment* was not appropriate as it excluded other types of separation resulting from operational requirements.
- There were a number of other comments and suggestions made regarding the wording of questions and the addition/deletion of items but, for the most part, these were unique to particular centres.
- A few centres commented that it was difficult for respondents to understand the community focus of the survey and that their respondents tended to answer using the local Military Family Resource Centre, or even a MFRC at a previous posting, as their frame of reference.
- A few centres commented that it was difficult for their respondents to understand that the survey was meant to provide information nationally as well as locally. Such respondents tended to perceive the survey as having a national intent only, which made them more reluctant to complete the survey.
- Some centres questioned whether one survey can work in an entire system, given the differences among settings.

4.2 Discussion

The survey handed to the respondents is quite formidable looking with the two languages being bundled together. The layout of the survey was, in fact, more dense than is desirable. These characteristics of the survey might be off-putting to some respondents who perceive from its size that it might take too long to complete and from its look that it is difficult to complete.

Changing the wording of items using the word “deployment” could be easily done to clearly include separations due to all operational requirements.

The issues relating to the community focus of the survey and the dual national and local purpose are somewhat more complex. The community focus is required in order to maintain consistency with the philosophy of *Parameters for Practice*. The dual national and local function of the survey does make it more difficult to explain its purpose but, in fact, is meant to prevent the duplication that would likely result from conducting a national survey separately. Thus notwithstanding the fact that complex ideas are embedded in the design of the survey, they are necessary to ensure a consistency with the philosophy of the program and to avoid duplication of efforts. Efforts should be directed at promoting a better understanding of these concepts rather than to changing these aspects of the survey.

Notwithstanding the issues identified as problematic, in the majority of centres and for most participants, the survey performed well and, with a few adjustments, it will be suitable for a second round of implementation.

Technical analyses were carried out to examine the psychometric characteristics of the survey, the performance of the 5-point scale and the accuracy of the results when viewed on a system level. These analyses confirmed that the instrument performed well in the particular circumstances and is suitable for continued use. Details of these analyses are provided in Appendix 1.

Recommendation 11: Redesign the survey layout to ensure it is visually inviting as well as easy to complete.

Recommendation 12: Investigate the possibility of unbundling the English and French versions of the survey.

Recommendation 13: Reword items using the term “deployment” to “deployment or other operations related separation”.

Recommendation 14: In training materials and training sessions, clearly focus on explaining the community focus and the national/local purposes of the survey.

Recommendation 15: The purpose statement in the general instructions and some of the preambles should be revised to make clearer the community focus and the national/local purpose of the survey. These passages should also emphasize that respondents should use their current posting a frame of reference.

Recommendation 16: Investigate the possibility of providing local centres the opportunity to insert their own brand identification in addition to the existing MFSP identification.

5.0 Reporting

5.1 Findings

Reflection on the reports received was the final focus of debriefing process.

- The general consensus was that the overall format and content of the reports was fine. The reports were seen as containing relevant information, which was presented in a manner that was easy to understand.
- Many of the centres expressed concern, in some cases strong concern, that recommendations were made without an understanding of the context of the local centre or community. Consequently, many recommendations were viewed as being inappropriate or impractical.
- Almost all respondents agreed that the reports were not made available in an acceptable timeframe. While the information contained in the reports was seen as useful, the lack of timely arrival of the information made many of the findings less relevant than they might have been earlier. In some instances decisions had already been taken on pressing matters and those decisions

could have been informed by the information in the reports had that information arrived earlier.

5.2 Discussion

The report format and content offer a good model to follow in future reporting. At the same time, the reports could be made shorter through the elimination of some extraneous and duplicated materials. As well, the general tone of the report could be less technical.

The comments on the relevance of recommendations seem justified. Generally speaking, it is difficult to make recommendations relating to programs or services without a good understanding of the local context. Thus it is important that those who draft recommendations be familiar with the local context, perhaps by involving local managers and staff when drafting recommendations. This will help ensure that any recommendations are based on an accurate interpretation of the findings and also that the recommendations are useful, relevant and practical.

The late delivery of the reports is an important issue. The reports are meant to deliver feedback, and feedback is most useful when it is timely. A reasonable expectation is that reports should arrive within a three month period of the submission of the data and earlier, if at all possible. Such timelines would put centre decision makers into a position where they can act upon the information delivered. As well, it is reinforcing to future survey implementation to know that the efforts expended into data collection will soon be returned in the form of useful information. Finally by delivering reports promptly rumors and speculation can be avoided.

Recommendation 17: A report template should be prepared, to provide evaluation results to centres in a manner that is user-friendly and easy to understand.

Recommendation 18: Local centre managers and field operation managers should be involved in the drafting of any recommendations based on evaluation results.

Recommendation 19: A standard of 90 days from receipt of a centre's data should be set as the maximum time for delivering reports.

6.0 Conclusions

This report presented the results of the debriefing process that took place in January and February of 2007. The purpose of the debriefing was to understand the experiences and perceptions of local centres regarding the first implementation of the MFSP survey. This report also reported the results of technical analyses of the survey data that were undertaken.

The main findings indicate that, overall, the implementation process went well and that the survey instrument performed well. The resources provided to support centres also served their purpose. The reports conveyed the results of the survey well but the recommendations were not perceived as useful or helpful. The late delivery of the reports was also of concern.

Overall the implementation of the survey can be considered a success, particularly for a first effort. At the same time, the debriefing process did highlight some adjustments and improvements that could be made. There is every reason to believe that, if the recommendations of this report are adopted, future implementation rounds will be even more effective.