

Inside Philanthropy

[How One Foundation Is Stepping Up for Military Kids Facing Mental Health Challenges](#)

By Connie Matthiessen



Children whose parents are in the military don't sign up to serve, but they make sacrifices nevertheless. Frequent moves mean that military kids often have to leave behind friends, schools, teachers and familiar communities — then start all over again in a new place. Meanwhile, their parents leave home on deployment, often for months at a time. In some cases, a parent comes home injured or traumatized — or doesn't come home at all.

“As we say all the time, it's an all-volunteer force, but military kids don't volunteer,” said Dr. Margaret Harrell, chief program officer at the [Bob Woodruff Foundation](#).

Given the challenges they face — against the backdrop of a global [youth mental health crisis](#)— it's no surprise that military kids are experiencing high rates of mental health problems, too. [A 2023 survey](#) conducted by the National Military Family Association, for example, found that 40% of military teens had low mental wellbeing. According to that report, “Compared to our 2022 numbers, reports of moderate and high mental wellbeing decreased, while reports of low mental wellbeing increased by nearly 12 percentage points.”

Mental health and well-being is one of the [Bob Woodruff Foundation's seven focus areas](#) and has been for a number of years. Initially, the foundation backed programs that primarily served adults, but it is now zeroing in on military children's mental health, as well. It's an area that aligns with the foundation's [mission](#) to “ensure that our nation's veterans, service members and their families — those who stood for us — have stable and successful futures.”

The Bob Woodruff Foundation was created by ABC news anchor Bob Woodruff and his family after he experienced a traumatic brain injury while covering the war in Iraq. Bob and his wife, Lee, believe veterans and those serving in the military should receive the same high-quality care and support he did after his injury.

The foundation helps veterans and those serving in the military with food, housing and legal assistance support. It also assists military families with fertility issues, [as IP's Dawn Wolfe reported](#). The foundation's [Got Your 6](#) network, a directory of its grantees and partner organizations, developed with the support of [Craig Newmark Philanthropies \(another stalwart veterans funder\)](#), aims to increase awareness of and create connections between veteran-serving organizations to streamline those services. Two years ago, the Bob Woodruff Foundation added military kids' mental health to its areas of focus.

"In 2022, we made a commitment to invest at least a million dollars in children's mental health in 2023," Harrell said. "We made that investment and have continued with that in 2024. The idea is hopefully to catch and support and mentor kids before they need clinical services. But we're also funding clinical services, and investing to increase the number of clinicians. We've invested over a million and a half dollars in military kids' mental health and wellbeing — it's something we're really committed to."

Children at risk

[Children's Research Triangle](#), a Bob Woodruff Foundation grantee, serves children experiencing mental health issues — military and nonmilitary alike. It is headquartered in the Chicago Loop and has 15 community partner sites in underserved Chicago communities. It works with high-risk children and youth, many of whom have experienced violence and other forms of trauma. Children's Research Triangle also conducts research and works with professionals who interact with traumatized children — in schools and shelters, for example — providing training in trauma-informed care.

Children's Research Triangle began working with military children in 2010, when it received a grant from the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#). "The program has grown from there," said Dr. Linda Schwartz, the organization's chief executive officer. "We've had our staff trained in a variety of interventions that are sensitive to the needs of military-serving families."

Schwartz described the differences in mental health she sees in military children compared to other kids. "I think the symptomatology itself isn't what's unique, I think it's the context that they arise in," she said. "Being separated from a caregiver, being worried about the wellbeing of a caregiver, is obviously huge. And the impact this has on the parent who's still at home, depending on how that parent is coping with having a partner who is not home and potentially in harm's way. And when the family member returns home, their physical and emotional state is a

driving factor in how the child is doing. Is the parent coming home with serious physical injuries, PTSD or other forms of mental health issues? We also have children who are dealing with grief and the loss of a parent.”

The frequent moves military families often make add to the challenges. “The adjustment of moving — making new friends, starting over in new school systems repeatedly — that’s hard on any child,” Schwartz said. “And then the family has to access resources and support groups and support systems in a new city, a new town, over and over again.”

Military kids’ experiences may be different, but the ways mental health issues show up, while taking a variety of forms, are similar to those of other children.

“The whole host of mental health issues that we see is very concentrated in this population, because having a parent in the military is such an intense stressor,” Schwartz said. “It stresses the whole family system. The child has their reaction, and the parent has their reaction, the child reacts to the parent’s reaction. We see children who have secondary traumatic stress: Their parents exhibit stress symptoms, and then they adopt those same symptoms, as well. It’s the whole gamut of mental health issues in a concentrated way.”

Care on site

Funding from the Bob Woodruff Foundation, which began two years ago, has allowed Children’s Research Triangle to provide direct support for military kids at the [Evanston Vet Center](#), which is part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

“Once we received the funding from the Bob Woodruff Foundation, we were able to have our therapists provide services for children directly at the Vet Center, which breaks down so many barriers,” Schwartz said. “The services are free, for one thing. It also breaks down the transportation barriers that so many of our clients face just getting to a clinic. And the Vet Center is a place that military families trust already. Being a part of a system that they trust allows us to more seamlessly help families.”

Accessing care in a familiar, convenient setting helps erode stigma, which often prevents families from seeking mental healthcare. “Stigma is a barrier for anyone seeking mental healthcare,” Schwartz said. “Having the support and endorsement of people that they already know and work with at the Vet Center really helps.”

Philanthropy’s evolving role

In addition to its support for Children’s Research Triangle, the Bob Woodruff Foundation is backing other programs that provide mental healthcare for military children. In some cases, the foundation supplements coverage provided by [TRICARE](#), the healthcare program for those in

the military and the national guard, veterans and families, to make care affordable. One grantee is working to provide mental healthcare in schools that have large populations of military children. The foundation is also supporting training for clinicians interested in treating military kids.

Until a few years ago, **mental health generally flew under the radar** as a philanthropic focus, drawing only a tiny fraction of funders' vast spending on health causes. But with attention to the problem on the rise — and an ongoing mental health crisis affecting young people in particular — that appears to be changing. A new organization, **Mindful Philanthropy**, is providing guidance for funders who want to include mental health in their funding portfolios, and a number are doing so. From big, donor-backed grantmakers like the **Ballmer Group**, the **Blank Family Foundation**, **Morgan Stanley**, **Pivotal Ventures** and the **Susan Crown Exchange**, to an array of **smaller** supporters, the funding landscape for mental health is growing brighter.

Schwartz applauded this rise in philanthropic attention on mental health. “One positive pandemic outcome is that there is now more support,” she said. “We’re seeing funders really step up and appreciate the need to fund mental health services for high-risk youth, because intensive, quality mental health services are not inexpensive. As mental health providers, we’re very appreciative that there are more foundations focusing on mental health — and youth mental health in particular.”

Still, military children’s mental health doesn’t have broad philanthropic support, despite the need. Some local and regional foundations provide such funding, but we weren’t able to identify national funders providing support in this area. (We’d love to hear about any funders we’ve overlooked).

For now, the Bob Woodruff Foundation seems to be the primary funder in this space — and it isn’t going anywhere. “For the foreseeable future, I can’t imagine it not being a priority for us,” Harrell said. “Of course, I would love to see the system get fixed and all these issues go away — then we can look somewhere else for problems to solve. We can all wish for that.”