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Promoting Healthy Minds, Healthy Children

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The challenges faced by military families are many and varied, but often, it can be the children who suffer the most. The nonprofit Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF) is investing \$1 million to fund programs specifically targeted at promoting better mental health among military children; the funding is expected to support more than 1,200 military-connected children across the country throughout 2023 and 2024.

"While our military children are resilient, they also face unique challenges that can impact their mental health: frequent moves, deployments, and the prospect or actuality of losing a parent," explains Anne Marie Dougherty, CEO of the Foundation, which was formed in 2006 to ensure that veterans and military service members and their families can thrive. "Not only do children in military and veteran families face service-related stressors that compound mental health challenges, they're also more likely than their civilian peers to experience financial or housing instability, and food shortages; and to have parents or caregivers who are frontline workers. These risk factors can also contribute to poor mental health.

"Recent studies highlight why we need to support military children's mental health," Dougherty continues. "First, military parents are concerned about their children. A 2021 Blue Star Families report found that 43% of military parents they surveyed were concerned about at least one child's mental health. Second is reports of stress from the children themselves. A 2022 National Military Family Association survey of 2,500 military teens found that 28% scored low on mental well-being and 37% reported that they had thought about harming themselves or others. Third is a need for more clinical support. In a 2023 study by the Journal of the American Medical Association of more than 39,000 communities, 35% of military families reported a shortage of military and civilian psychiatric care."

BWF was founded when ABC television



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-Anne Marie Dougherty

anchor Bob Woodruff was critically wounded by a roadside bomb in Iraq. Due to the quick action of soldiers, medics, and military medical professionals, Bob's life was saved. While he lay for 36 days in a medically-induced coma at Walter Reed, his wife Lee and brother Dave resolved to draw attention to the challenges service members face and in-

vest in solutions to help support them in the next chapter of their lives.

With support from individual, corporate, and philanthropic donors, BWF has invested more than \$157 million to date in programs supporting military families and veterans nationwide, building the largest non-governmental network of organizations dedicated to serving veterans in the country: the Bob Woodruff Foundation Got Your 6 Network, named for the military phrase "I've got your back." Today, that network includes hundreds of partners in all 50 states, and in Puerto Rico, Guam, and American Samoa, making sure services are accessible to more than 97% of veterans and uniformed service members in communities across the country. The focus is on seven critical issues: mental health and wellbeing; food insecurity; housing; community building; service-connected infertility; legal issues; and employment.

Dougherty has served as CEO of BWF for 14 years and has a personal connection to the Foundation's mission. "I come from a long line of family members who have answered the call to service," she reveals. "My father was in the Army's special forces, my maternal grandfather was a World War II fighter pilot in the Marines, my paternal grandfather served in the Navy, my uncle served in the Army, and my husband is a veteran Marine officer who served in Afghanistan. I understand the sacrifices, the worries, the challenges, and the rewards that come with serving."

BWF does not deliver services directly, but instead, it identifies and invests in programs that do as part of the Got Your 6 Network. The Foundation has a rigorous, competitive grant process, awarding funding to best-in-class organizations that improve the health and wellbeing of service members, veterans, their families, and caregivers. "We're especially focused on programs that improve social determinants of health, decrease barriers to physical and mental healthcare, increase accessibility to programming that fosters a healthy lifestyle, and enhance opportunities for veterans to thrive after service," Dougherty points out. "Each program we fund determines their own specific client eligibility criteria based on the programming they provide."

"Children in military and veteran families face rising mental health issues and difficulty accessing care," she adds. "The Bob Woodruff Foundation is working to bridge the gap by identifying and investing in best-in-class organizations to ensure families can access mental health care, community support, and

additional resources to help children thrive." Some examples of programs supported by BWF include:

- Big Brothers Big Sisters of San Diego designed a first-of-its-kind program called "Operation Bigs," which provides professionally supported adult mentorship to children of military families. This includes active duty, veteran, and Gold Star families. The San Diego area is home to more than 111,000 active-duty service members, 230,000 veterans, and their families. BWF's investment supports one-on-one mentoring for 115 military-connected youth to improve their self-esteem, decision-making skills, resiliency, and mental wellbeing. This program fosters a nurturing environment where youth and teens build skills, knowledge, and confidence, so they can thrive despite the challenges they face.

- The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Child and Family Service (CFS) in Hawaii provides high-quality mental health care that is "evidence-based" to service members, veterans, and their families. Since it opened in 2020, the organization has seen increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among the children and teens it serves. BWF provided funding to fill gaps in funding and availability of care for military children given the high demand among service members. With approximately 35,000 active-duty, Guard, and Reserves-connected children living in Hawaii, providers at military treatment facilities are overwhelmed by the need for behavioral health services, leading families to seek care in the community. Additionally, while many of the children and families seeking mental health services are covered under TRICARE, there is often a gap between reimbursable expenses and the actual cost of care. BWF's investment enables CFS to provide evidence-based mental health care to improve mental health and wellbeing for children in military and veteran families free of charge.

- The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinics at Endeavors: BWF's investment will increase Endeavors' capacity to meet the mental health needs of military-connected children by providing clinicians and clinical interns with training and supervision in evidence-based play therapy. This critical training will ensure Endeavors can provide high-quality mental health care for over 275 military-connected children in El Paso, Killeen and San Antonio, as well as across Texas and New Mexico via telehealth.

- Similarly, BWF's investment in The Steven

A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Red Rock Military Services (RRMS) is supporting the training of additional clinicians in evidence-based therapies for children and teens, supporting individual and group clinical care that is not reimbursable under TRICARE, as well as funding materials for group therapy, family intervention, and play therapy. The Lawton, Oklahoma area is home to more than 7,000 post-9/11 veterans, 13,000 active-duty service members, and 12,000 family members. Military-connected children and teens account for 20 percent of RRMS' clients, and these clients present with challenges such as anxiety, adjustment issues, and behavioral concerns. BWF's investment is helping RRMS' increase capacity to provide mental health care for more service members, veterans, and their families in the Lawton, Oklahoma area—where most counties are considered medically underserved. (Between 83% to 94% of individuals in the Lawton area need behavioral health services but are not receiving them.)

- The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Valley Cities (Washington State.) In this region, Clover Park School District — where 30% of students have active-duty parents — reported significantly higher rates of adverse childhood experiences than the national average. By expanding clinical services in middle school and creating a new clinical position in the high school, this program gives military children the tools they need to do well in school, reach developmental milestones, and successfully transition into adulthood.

"Most of the programs we've invested in to support military children's mental health this year are geared toward clinical capacity building, reducing the cost of seeking care, decreasing isolation, and mentoring," Dougherty says. "A lot of our partners have strong relationships throughout their community—including with local military installations. Their relationship and reputation ensure other community-based organizations know they are a great resource for military-connected children. Additionally, the Bob Woodruff Foundation Got Your 6 Network connects our partners and other organizations serving military families in their area. We believe it's important to invest in community services, address economic and social barriers to mental health, and generally create an environment supporting mental wellness." ■

For more information, please visit the BWF website at: <https://bobwoodrufffoundation.org/military-childrens-mental-health/>