Brief from the Military Family Resource Centres

Without family, there is no future.

Submitted to the Department of National Defence as part of the public consultation on the future of the Canadian Armed Forces

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Canadian military families have clearly shown their significant contribution through the past thirty years of military operations. They make a direct contribution to operational efficiency and for this reason must be recognized in the evolving policies of defence as an integral and vital part of the CAF and must be supported by all levels of government through the Military Family Resource Centres (MFRC), governed by and for families.

Introduction

In the course of the last twenty-five years, Canadian military families have experienced the intense operational tempo of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Although directly involved in terms of their major contribution to the CAF’s mission, no mention of this contribution and the place of military families is to be found in the 1994 Defence White Paper nor in the 2013 document “Canada First.” Despite the support shown toward them by the establishment of services for military families and the commitment of the CAF, in 2008, with regard to families, these families continue and will continue to undergo the huge impacts of military life and its repercussions on their existence, of the political decisions made by the Canadian government as to this country’s military involvement, both at home and abroad. This major source of support strength represented by military families who sacrifice much for a military career, not to mention the supreme sacrifice paid by many families, must be officially recognized in the next Defence policy as being an inseparable element. Over the last quarter century, Canadian military families have paid dearly for this right to be included as an integral and essential component in the next policy, to benefit from the resource requirements and to find support from the various levels of government.

Review of defence policies of allied countries and of Canada

1. The Australian Defence White Paper

In leafing through the latest white paper from Australian Defence (2016), chapter six on personnel reveals that Australian Defence includes military families in the makeup of the military community. As a result, the Australian government foresees certain support services for military families. However, nothing can be found as to families’ place and contribution in the mission.
2. The United Kingdom Defence strategy

In the document “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review” of 2015, the United Kingdom makes the commitment to ensure that a career in the armed forces is better balanced with family life. To this end, a budget of £450 Million has been adopted for investment in charities of the armed forces and for the pursuit of developing policies in the fields of education, health and housing, so as to meet the needs of the military lifestyle. The British government is announcing the launch of the strategy “First Comprehensive Families Strategy for the Armed Forces” to do more for the employment of spouses and for the care and education of children.

3. The policy of the United States

In 2011, the president of the United States signed a commitment on the part of the country toward military families. This commitment, entitled “Strengthening our Military Families”, lists four action priorities to address and respond to the issues of military families. These priorities include family health, both physical and psychological, the education and development of children, education and career opportunities for spouses and childcare. This commitment, signed by all the heads of various departments of the American government, defines the strategies outlined to respond to each of the priorities and issues affecting military families.

4. Canada’s White Paper for Defence

In the 1994 Defence White paper, the word “families” appears in just one place in the entire document. This occurs in the paragraph laying out the reduction in the number of postings and transfers which would mean a lightening of the burden these numerous moves represent for military members and their families.

In 2008, the CAF launched The Canadian Armed Forces Family Covenant, where we find these words:

“We recognize the important role families play in enabling the operational effectiveness of the Canadian Forces and we acknowledge the unique nature of military life. We honour the inherent resilience of families and we pay tribute to the sacrifices of families made in support of Canada. We pledge to work in partnership with the families and the communities in which they live. We commit to enhancing military life.”

However, the application of this covenant remains, to this day, intangible for families. As for the document “Canada First Defence Strategy” from 2013, no mention is made therein of military families.

In the past twenty years, the CAF have made major contributions to military operations throughout the world and consequently, families have been party to this significant contribution. As a result, the question can be justifiably asked for what reasons they are not included in Defence policy and strategy. Like the other allied countries above, Canada should recognize the ongoing role of military families.
The contribution of Canadian military families since the 1960s

Overview of military operations 1960-1990 and from 1990 to the present

Between the 1960s and the end of the cold war, Canadian Armed Forces were ever present on the international scene, involved especially in peacekeeping missions with the United Nations. Strong in number, the Canadian Armed Forces took part in several missions (Cambodia, Cyprus, Congo and Egypt). On the home front, Canada had, as well, a priority commitment to defending its own sovereignty in the Arctic, in addition to handling the 1970 October Crisis (Canadian Encyclopedia).

In 1989, Canada’s regular forces numbered 88,800 along with 26,100 reserve members (1994 Defence White Paper). At the outset of the 1990s began a process of personnel attrition in the CAF, causing numbers to fall to the 64,000 current military members in the regular forces and 26,000 reservists (CF Website).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the CAF have taken part in an almost continuous manner in military operations. In fact, Canadian military members have been involved in more than 20 major operational tours, most of which have required multiple troop rotations. In this period, marked by a substantial increase in operational rhythm, we witnessed, at the same time, a massive wave of budget cuts in terms of defence and families. Not only were there major cuts in military forces, there were, too, in financing for the MFRCs. These cuts had the effect of reducing the direct operational capacity of the Canadian Armed Forces, since they targeted individuals, namely military members and their families, who represent an indisputable contribution to the success of military operations.

In that same period, the roles of the CAF members gradually went from being “peacekeepers to peacemakers to warriors” (Daigle, 2013: p. 1). In particular, Canada’s participation in NATO’s mission in Afghanistan dragged on from 2002 to 2011 at a cost of 158 Canadian military casualties (Veterans Affairs Canada Website). Suicides on the part of Canadian Armed Forces members are also a major preoccupation since they not only reflect great distress on the part of members; they also cause the disintegration of many families each year. Among the troops who were deployed, several must deal with physical and psychological wounds which have a considerable impact their families. Psychological trauma continues to appear among military members and veterans despite certain missions’ having ended, and their families required services to support them as they face these new challenges.
Through the years, the Canadian Armed Forces have also had to adjust to the reality of military members being more numerous in forming couples and having children (Moelker and van der Kloet, 2006). Today, we find more than 39,000 military spouses in Canada, some 40,000 children in their care and 89% of spouses being women (Wang, Z., Aitken, N. CAF Family Research Team, 2016). To this number are added the parents of military members, which are also supported by the MFRCs.

In fact, for many young military members and reservists, parents are the main relatives who are directly affected by the realities of military life. Due to the current portrait of Canadian families, it would be hard to count the exact number of parents who are part of the equation of military families. In the same way, the population served is further increased by the recent extension of service to medically releasing veterans and their families by the MFRCs.

Retaining members of the CAF

It is crucial to take an interest in the preparation of families in connection with the challenges posed by military life. In fact, retaining members of the CAF is clearly dependant on the commitment and loyalty of members’ families, that are heavily influenced by their adjustment to military life. Numerous authors affirm that the adaptation of families, in particular that of members’ spouses, influences member retention (Burrell, Briley Durand and Fortado, 2003; Hall, 2008; Altman Klein, Tatone and Lindsay, 1989; Werber Castaneda and Harrell, 2008). For their part, Burrell, Briley Durand and Fortado (2003) suggest that a greater cohesion with the military community, along with perceived support by that community through its policies, contributes to the adaptation of members’ families.

Preparation of families and troops

In addition to retaining its personnel, the CAF also ensure that families are prepared to face the various challenges posed by military life. The expression “Family Readiness” refers to “a family’s ability to adapt to and deal with the stressors associated with military danger and a military life style, such as frequent moves, deployments, unaccompanied tours, and overseas assignments” (Hall, 2008, p.73).

It has often been shown that the preparation of CAF members with a view to prolonged absences is directly linked to family readiness. The level of family preparation has an undeniable influence on the preparation level of troops in terms of their mission (Hall, 2008; Adams, Hall and Thompson, 2009). In fact, the more the member’s family is adapted to military life and prepared for the challenges that it poses, the more the member is reassured when he or she must leave the family and devote all efforts to the success of the mission and to avoiding distractions which could lead to failure, injury or even death.

Hall (2008) outlines certain things as protective factors when it is a question of adapting to military life and preparing for moves and for deployments: spousal support, support from the senior officer of the military spouse and a positive view by the family of the culture within the unit. In the same line of thinking, Rosen and Moghadam (1990) suggest that the perception of support on the part of other military spouses is a factor which
facilitates the adjustment and preparation of a spouse. Hall (2008) also points out that the fact that spouses have a paid position can favour a better preparation for the family concerning deployments by assuring them of additional financial resources. In other words, since the difficulties families have in managing a member’s absence decreases as available support increases, it might be maintained that the ability of spouses and families to manage a member’s absence is not so much a specified personal trait, but rather a variable that depends on the level of support available within the community (Spera, 2009).

The nature, length and frequency of absences on the part of members have changed over the last decades. Peacekeeping missions have given way to combat missions, which represent increased risks and require preparation that demands repeated absences from home before deployment. Most training events occur on various bases across Canada and can spread over several weeks or even months, and several training episodes will be necessary before deployment, which itself will last for several more months. When it occurs, it is therefore important to understand that the families will have to deal with the member’s absence for the length of the deployment itself, but also for an extended period before deployment.

To support members and their families during these numerous absences, the Canadian Armed Forces had set up Deployment Support Groups, a military body which aims to be a go-between for families in terms of the chain of command. It was found that this new service created a certain amount of confusion in families, appearing to be a service that overlapped with what the MFRCs was providing.

The Deployment Support Groups gradually withdrew, leaving the MFRCs to support families, to equip them and help diminish the stress experienced during deployments. Because the prevalence of combat missions had raised the stress level for families, the MFRCs were always adjusting to the level of intensity of the missions and remained the reference point for families in terms of everything related to the challenges of military life.

Evaluation of well-being of Canadian military families – special report of the DND/CF Ombudsman

The 2013 report of the DND/CF Ombudsman presents three characteristics which define the military mode of life, namely mobility, absence from home and risk. In light of these characteristics, determinations are made concerning current military families. Just like American military families, the issues for our military families are related to housing, to the health of family members, to children’s and spouses’ education and to spousal employment. Most of the issues are regulated by the provinces. Although several steps had been taken over the years to bring awareness to the provinces, apart
from the abolition of the three-month waiting period to obtain a health card, little progress has been made in terms of these issues. In certain provinces, Quebec among them, the idea has been considered of creating an intergovernmental cell intended to analyze the issues of the military community and facilitate the administrative details involved in the frequent resettlements. However, this requires a definite commitment on the part of the different levels of government, something which does not exist at the present time. The Ombudsman recommends, moreover, that the approach which foresees participation by the provinces and territories be made official.

A further observation concerns the pride of military families in connection with their contribution to the mission of the CAF. Families feel that they play an active part in “something great and noble.” In addition, the CAF leadership and service providers, such as the MFRCs, who were contacted are all committed to ensuring the well-being of military families.

The Military Family Resource Centres

For over thirty years, the MFRCs have been working directly with military families offering them services which are adapted to enable them to deal with the various challenges that confront them. These organizations, born of the lobbying efforts of military spouses, were created by and for families.

Due to the increase in operational tempo of the CAF, the nature of the missions, which have quickly gone from peace missions to combat missions, the provision of services on the part of the MFRCs has been tailored to the developing needs of military families. To the impact of the missions have been added those already inherent in military life, for example, transfers and the related loss of resources, various absences for courses and exercises, not to mention the loss of employment, education projects put on hold for the cause of a military career.

Thanks to the proactive work of the MFRCs, families can settle in a new community, learn a second language and obtain resources and services adapted to their needs. In this way, military members can concentrate on their operations. By means of the MFRCs, Canadian families, through the governance and major involvement on the part of volunteers, make a direct contribution to the effort and effectiveness of operations.

It is recognized that the diversity (Institut des administrateurs de sociétés, 2011) and inclusion of the people served (Fournier and Potvin, 1995; Bréchat et al., 2006; Kaluma, 2009; Minkler et al., 2001) in the governance systems of the organizations allow for a better understanding of the needs and for better decision making. Ultimately, we are witnessing a more efficient
use of the resources that have been allocated, especially as concerns public money in the case of community organizations. As a result, governance by families is essential considering that it gives a voice to the individuals concerned, but it is also important to ensure an effective local adaptation of national policies. In the final analysis, this will be seen in more responsible financial management of public money.

Canada is the only country having a system that delivers services to military families where they, in fact, govern the organizations dedicated to them. This model is a subject of both envy and interest on the part of other countries, among them, Sweden which has found here inspiration to develop and implement its own program. In 2013, an MFRC delegation travelled to Sweden to advise the head of Swedish military personnel as well as the president of the veterans’ commission for the Swedish government.

This innovative model “by and for families,” clearly shows families the trust placed in them by the military system and the Government of Canada. The MFRCs have always demonstrated their innovative spirit both in the creation of tools, programs and activities, and in seeking other funding sources. The DND/CF Ombudsman recommends, in his investigative report, that this governance of the MFRCs by families be retained and he underscores the fact that these centres constitute a basic resource for the CAF and that their prime role as front-line players must be strengthened.

**Financing of the MFRCs**

The MFRCs play a vital role in operations in the mission of the CAF and represent a direct link with military families. However, the envelope adopted by the Treasury Board has shown little growth through the years. The MFRCs must, therefore, turn to other sources of financing to maintain the essential services which respond to family needs. Over and above the $27M budget allocated, the MFRCs will, through various initiatives, seek almost an additional $10M every year. The fact of their being constituted as not-for-profit organizations enables them to diversify their sources of financing, through, among other things, fundraising.

However, through the years funding sources have proven unstable, indeed precarious. Whether grants from federal, provincial or municipal programs, these funds are not necessarily ongoing and are subject to cuts on the part of their granting agencies. Although certain MFRCs have developed interesting ways of operating through fundraising, the creation in the past ten years of major foundations or organizations having, on their boards of directors, people of influence with networks of significant contacts, has had an effect on MFRCs fundraising. These organizations, whose mission also targets the military community, create confusion among the businesses where they solicit funds. Several MFRCs have seen the donations previously received redirected in recent years to these foundations and organizations. At the same time, smaller MFRCs do not have the means to do fundraising. The MFRCs can request funds from these foundations, but each year they find themselves in competition with each other for available funds.
Yet, it is the MFRCs, firmly planted in their setting, who work directly with families, ascertain the needs, adapt their services, create new ones and rapidly broaden their provision of services to new clienteles which are added based on political decisions. Financial instability is directly detrimental to their ability to maintain essential services for families, veterans and their families and because of this, on the ability to contribute in an optimal manner to operational efficiency.

Recommendations

Whereas in the past twenty-five years, that military and veterans’ families have been on duty 24/7 for months, if not for years;
Considering the significant sacrifices made by military families both personally and professionally;
Considering that military families have made the supreme sacrifice and that thousands live with a member who is psychologically injured;
Considering the thirty years of direct experience of the MFRCs with military families in an intensive operational context;
Considering the expertise acquired in matters of essential services for military families;
Considering their in-depth knowledge of the needs and issues affecting military families;
Considering that they have been created by and for military families;

All the Military Family Resource Centres make an official request to the Minister of National Defence to,

1. Include military families in the next Defence policy as an integral and essential part of the mission of the CAF.
2. Officially recognize the MFRCs as being the official service providers for military families and to attribute to them as clients, with the resources required, veterans and their families.
3. Signal the commitment of Defence toward military families, by means of specific actions, such as the creation of dedicated programs or the injection of additional funds coming from various government ministries and institutions, among them the DND, Veterans Affairs, Health Canada, the Ministry of Family and others to enable the MFRCs to ensure in a stable manner its fundamental and front-line role with military families and with veterans and their families.
4. Develop, through the implementation of an intergovernmental cell, a strategy related to the support and to issues facing military families, and to see to its adoption and signing by the Prime Minister, federal ministers and the provincial premiers, in order that military families may receive support by all levels of government.
Conclusion

The next Defence White Paper will be incomplete and not reflective of the reality facing the Canadian Armed Forces without the addition of military families, of veterans and their families who have contributed directly to the mission of the CAF and its operational efficiency. Hence, they participate directly in the contribution Canada makes both at home and abroad.

The inclusion of military families and of veterans and their families must be reflected through concrete actions in order to enable them to deal more easily with the impacts of military life, from recruitment to release, and to be supported in their reintegration into civilian life after having given themselves entirely to the mission of the CAF.

For that purpose, the Military Family Resource Centres (MFRC), through their experience and expertise, have been proven to be the resource to be optimized to serve all the clientele made up of military families, veterans and their families.
References


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