

Deployment Support – Strength through Partnership

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ABSTRACT

The Halifax Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) in conjunction with the Department of Military Family Services (DMFS) presentation is an overview of the Family Separation and Reunion Program, including how this program is implemented to meet the needs of the Canadian Forces community.

The Family Separation and Reunion Program is provided to family and military members when Canadian Forces members deploy for 30 days or more on exercise, or on operations such as NATO's Standing Naval Forces Atlantic. Using the recent deployment of Her Majesty's Canadian Ship MONTREAL, as a working example, this presentation highlights the exceptional relationships, the process and the benefits to these relationships between the Canadian Forces, family, Military Family Resource Centres and the Department of Military Family Services and outlines how these programs and services were developed to support the members and families of the Canadian Forces.

HISTORY/BACKGROUND

The Department of National Defence created the Directorate of Military Family Services in 1991 to enhance the ability of CF members to be ready for duty. Their mission is “to promote and facilitate community based military family services that strengthen Canadian Forces families and communities”. During the 1990's Military Family Resource Centres were opened across Canada as well as in Europe and the United States.

Military Family Resource Centres are provincially incorporated, independent charitable organizations that work in partnership with the Department of Military Family Services and Canadian Forces Commanding Officers to deliver the Military Family Service Program at their location. Civilian employees, who are in turn governed by a volunteer Board of Directors, operate the Military Family Resource Centres. These volunteer based Boards of Directors must be 51% spouses of military members and are accountable to the Canadian Forces Communities in which they operate.

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Since inception, the Military Family Services Program, Department of Military Family Services and the Military Family Resource Centres have experienced a tremendous amount of growth, evaluation and change. This has recently culminated in the Military Family Services Program service model “Parameters for Practice” which provides the framework and context within which these programs and services are delivered, along with the philosophical concepts of the Program and a framework for its structure, governance, accountability, service delivery and funding.

STRENGTH THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Military Families ...the strength behind the uniform.... We believe all military families are strong independent, resilient and resourceful. They have to cope with many unique and challenging circumstances, least of all the challenges that come with long deployments. For example becoming a single parent, managing a household, stress, loss, fear etc. These challenges are then exacerbated by the fact they are usually far away from their normal supports, family, community and friends. The Canadian Forces attitude many years ago was “if we wanted you to have a family we would have issued you one”. The family was considered the members “problem” and was usually seen as a barrier to the Canadian Forces member getting his/her job done. This is no longer the case and in fact families are now seen and are treated as full partners in deployment.

Many years ago Maritime Forces Atlantic and the Halifax Military Family Resource Centre recognized families are not “dependants” but are partners in any deployed operations, they play a significant role that can have a huge impact in the welfare and morale of the deployed unit. Working with Maritime Forces Atlantic, the Halifax Military Family Resource Centre invested time and energy to educate and develop relationships with senior leadership and deploying units to recognize the value and importance of family during deployments.

As leaders in Family Separation and Reunion support, Maritime Forces Atlantic quickly embraced the value and significant role families play in the welfare and well being of their Canadian Forces members. Recognizing their importance, Maritime Forces Atlantic has joined in a full partnership with the Military Family Resource Centre to provide the member and their family with first hand information and an extensive array of services that address the social, physical and emotional needs of the family during deployment. When families are made a part of the team and these relationships are nurtured, Commanding Officers have reported fewer repatriations, less stress, reduced financial costs, improved crew morale and reduced stress on the family.

The goal of Family Separation and Reunion support program is to ensure families are informed supported and connected throughout the deployment of their loved one. Working hand in hand with families, Canadian Forces partners, the deploying unit, Deployment Support Group and senior leadership we are able to ensure that we can attain this goal. Military deployment for the purposes of this presentation is the temporary relocation of military forces or individual CF members on a mission to an area of operations, exclusive of normal training or exercise.

The Department Of Military Family Services Parameters for Practice provides the Military Family Resource Centre with the goals and the objectives of the program. The Military Family Resource Centre then determines how to accomplish these goals and objectives based upon the needs of the community and families they work with.

-The mandated service component for Family Separation and Reunion (deployment support) is to enhance the ability of CF members to be ready for duty and supports the well-being of family members before, during and after periods of separation.

Service Goals:

- Provide resources and support that meet families' needs as a result of separation, including prior to, during and after separation.
- Enhance the ability of CF members to be ready for duty.

Service Objectives:

- Families are aware of and have access to relevant programs and services designed to help them manage CF-related separation and reunion.
- Families are aware of and prepared for the challenges they may encounter before, during and after separation.
- Families have opportunities to connect with and support each other during periods of separation.
- Families are supported during periods of separation.
- Families have help to deal with crises before, during and after periods of separation.
- Families manage the challenges and circumstances associated with separation and reunion.
- Services are developed in coordination and partnership with all partners

Sample Activities

- Develop information packages related to deployment and separation.
- Host briefings and information sessions related to deployment and separation.
- Coordinate peer support groups.
- Organize warm lines. Warm lines are informal telephone support networks.
- Offer workshops on coping strategies related to deployment and separation.
- Plan social events

HALIFAX MILITARY FAMILY RESOURCE CENTRE DEPLOYMENT SUPPORT PROCESS

Pre deployment – Pre deployment is the period of time prior to a ship or units deployment. During this pre deployment phase is when the relationship building and educating of the Command Team, members and families takes place. This normally occurs weeks and months prior to deployment.

Once a unit or ship has been identified to deploy for thirty days or more the Military Family Resource Centre starts the pre deployment phase. When HMCS Montreal was tasked to participate in the Standing Naval Force Atlantic January 2005 – July 2005. MFRC staff met with the ships Command team. Usually the Commanding Officer, Executive Officer and Chief. (Coxswain or Sergeant Major) This meeting is vital in building this key relationship. Support for family hinges on the support of the Command team. During this meeting the staff discuss what services and support the MFRC can provide to the members and their families throughout the Deployment, they educate the Command team on the needs of the family, resources available, educate the crew and explain communication needs with the unit and families as well as the concept of the Deployment Support Group and Deployment Assistance process.

Approximately 8 weeks prior to departure, military family resource centre staff spends a few days with the unit or on board the ship. The purpose of this process, part of the deployment assistance group, is to speak to each member of the crew or unit. Many members are not fully aware of the services, programs and supports that are available to them and their families. Family and emergency contact information is also collected from each member at this time. This information will then become the family contact data base that allows the MFRC to stay connected with the families and may be used in the event of a significant event as requested by the Chain of Command. It is also used to assist the Deployment Support Team in establishing Networks, keeping the family members informed on ship's activities, Network activities and placing warm line calls.

Deployment Support – Strength through Partnership

Deployment Support Group – Deployment Support group (DSG) is the common Canadian Forces title for the traditional Naval Shore Element, Army Rear Party and Air Sponsor Group. Commanding officers (COs) ensure that a consistent level of support is provided to deployed CF members and their families, in both official languages, during all phases of a military deployment through the provision of a DSG.

Unique to Halifax, the Deployment Support Group member works directly with and for the Military Family Resource Centre and not as a separate unit or entity. Military deployments may occur with little or no notice and can impose significant stress on both the Canadian Forces member and the member's family. A Deployment Support Group (DSG) can help the member and family cope with a military deployment, and contribute to the well being of the family unit. DSG's were the main contact for one of the HMCS Montreal families who experienced severe flooding in her home twice during the deployment. Having a person from the ship or unit to lend a helping hand, problem solving or assisting the family find a resource when the car breaks down, power goes out or a major appliance breaks down is very reassuring to the member knowing his family has a resource to help them through, it also reassures the family that they are not in this alone.

Family Briefing - Pre-deployment briefings are joint Military Family Resource Centre/Canadian Forces presentations for families and the members. They occur two to three weeks prior to a departure. All partners in support participate in informing and educating the families as to their commitment to supporting the families while the ship or unit is deployed. This has proven to be highly valued by the families as it is a tangible demonstration from the senior leadership that the Canadian Forces recognizes the value of families, keeping them informed and supported and in addition recognizes the sacrifices the member and the families make to serve their country.

The Commodore, Commanding Officer, Assistant Chief of Staff/ Personnel and Training (N1), Personnel Support Program representatives, Canadian Forces Exchange (CANEX) etc., are just a few of the examples of the participants at a family briefing providing resources and information to ensure families and members know what services, programs are available to aid them during the deployment.

For some families this may be their first contact with the Canadian Forces and Military Family Resource Centre and it may be their first time experiencing a deployment of any length, so the MFRC briefing to families is based upon family preparation. We provide them with checklists, information and encourage them to think of the “what if’s”. If this happened would you be prepared? What would you do if? Is a common theme, have you thought of that? What about this? Etc. Canadian Forces families are extremely independent, resilient and capable of dealing with most situations, our experience has shown that when you provide the members, Command team and the families with the tools to plan, prepare and to think about possible “ what if’s” that many potential crisis situations can be avoided.

Sample Agenda for Family/Crew Briefing:

1. Welcome and introductions – Commanding Officer
2. Mission/Operation (includes roles, general threat, port visits, timings)
3. Family preparation and support
4. Public affairs and the media (helps to dispel rumours)
 - Mission information line; (Department of Military Family Services information line to update families on unit or ship activities)
 - Internet, telephone availability and other forms of communication - vital link between Canadian Forces, Unit, Military Family Resource Centre and Family

5. Deployment support group/ Family Networks
6. Formation resources available to support families and members (includes Mail/parcels, Customer Service Orderly Room (CSOR) chaplain support, pay and benefits)
 - Administrative, Financial and Legal Matters, Personnel Support Program (PSP) services:
 - Sports and fitness;
 - Recreation;
 - Canadian Forces Exchange; (CANEX)
 - Service Income Security Insurance Plan (SISIP) financial services; and
 - Community councils;
 - Social worker services; and
7. Question period – Commanding Officer

Closing remarks - Admiral or Commodore

Departure planning and execution – The departure of the ship or unit is a very stressful time for the member and the family. We have learned that the departure ceremony provides the family, the member and the community with an opportunity to be recognized by the Canadian Forces. Having the Chain of Command acknowledge the sacrifices of the family and the member is valuable in building the trust and the relationships between all partners in deployment. The Military Family Resource Centre in partnership with local business and the Personnel Support Program provides the family and the ship or unit with activities, refreshments and psychological supports. Families and friends are invited to attend the formal departure of the ship and on many occasions the ships CO will invite the families on board just prior to departure. This is a great opportunity for families and children who haven't seen the surroundings in which their loved one will be working and living for the next few months. There are also formal military ceremonies, a sail past and music which all lend itself to a sense of closure to the pre deployment phase for the families. Being acknowledged by the military and being invited to participate in the departure provides family with a feeling of value, respect and acknowledges the important role the family plays in the success of the mission the unit is about to partake.

Deployment Phase:

Family Networks – To build their own sense of community through sharing and supporting each other, Family Networks are based upon a community development model. The families of the deployed unit, a self-directed volunteer group plan, organize and deliver programs and activities for the families of the deployed unit. Who knows better what families need to help them cope with the separation than the families themselves? Each group is unique in their make up, personalities, experience with deployment, ages, interests, number of children etc. Activities planned for the HMCS MONTREAL ranged from adult to family oriented in an effort to appeal to the diversity in family styles. Dinner theatre, self-care programs, family swims, movie matinees and pot luck suppers are a few examples of the variety in planning that appealed to the greater cross-section of families. To ensure families have an enjoyable and beneficial experience and to ensure their needs are being met the following process is used to aid the MFRC in providing this support.

Deployment Support – Strength through Partnership

The Deployment Coordinator, Deployment Support Group or volunteers will contact each family member of the deployed ship or unit. The initial contact will be an invitation for them to join the family network group planning session and will determine if the family member would like to be placed on a regular contact/information list. If the response is negative, then there will be no further contact with those families unless there is a bona fide requirement to do so. It is important to note that while the group is recognized as being autonomous with regards to planning and implementation of activities, these groups do receive both financial and resource support from Halifax MFRC. Accordingly, activities conducted by the group must be in line with Halifax MFRC Mission Statement and Code of Ethics.

Family Network Group Meetings/Activities

During the initial planning session, Deployment support staff will provide the families with information on the organization, operations, support and roles of the Halifax MFRC and how the family network group works. Staff will facilitate the establishment of formal guidelines for group activities and for planning sessions. This is necessary to ensure respect and equity for all family members and participants. Families work together to determine what activities they would like to do, when, for what ages and then organize, and coordinate each of the activities they have determined they would like to do.

The family network groups plan their activities with the following in mind:

availability of resources; activities planned for participation of all group members and not a select few; where other groups are established there should be cooperation to share resources in order to reduce costs (i.e. joint initiatives, participating).

MFRC support to the family network groups include:

dedicated staff for coordination, assistance and facilitation, facilities and equipment, administrative support, supplies and childcare as required in support of group meetings and activities.

Financial support for group activities may be available through the Halifax MFRC. Where such funding is allocated, it will be shared fairly and in an equitable manner. In order to receive MFRC support, including funding and administration, all activities and events must be open to all family members of deployed personnel. Additional financial support for the group may also be available from their respective ships or units.

Families who participate in the family networks have reported that the opportunity to connect with other families from the deployed ship or unit is a great way to meet new people and to build their own social safety nets. It helps to be able to speak to others experiencing the same deployment.

Workshops

It is widely known and recognized that not all people experience deployment separation in the same way. There are different stages and emotions that families may experience. To help families cope with some of the challenges associated with this separation and the accompanying stress the Military Family Resource Centre provides many resources and fun interactive workshops to ensure families have the necessary tools to support them. How people react to separations can be highly individual and it is important for families to know that there is no “right way” for them to react to deployment related separations.

Dancing Through Deployment – this workshop helps to educate families on the different emotional stages of deployment and to provide them with different coping strategies. For example, the pre deployment phase may include the anticipation of loss and detachment and withdrawal. The deployment phase may include emotional disorganization, recovery and stabilization and then the anticipation of homecoming. Emphasis is placed on positive coping strategies and enhancing positive experiences.

Helping Children Through Deployment – Deployment separation can be a challenge for adults who understand why a family member must leave. It can be an even more confusing time for children who may not have the same understanding. This workshop helps parents explore the impact of deployment on children, recognize the positive growth opportunities and discuss ways of addressing issues that may arise. This fun interactive workshop provides information and tips on how to help and tips on what to do prior to, during and after a deployment to assist children feel safer and more secure.

Waltzing Together Again – this workshop identifies and develops strategies for dealing with the various types of stress associated with the return of a family member. It is also an opportunity to celebrate the family's accomplishments during the deployment.

Significant incident – We all know that being in the military is inherently dangerous and that loss of life, accidents etc., do occur. It is especially challenging for families when this occurs and the member, ship or unit is far from home. Families have told us over and over again that they don't want to hear of these events on the radio or TV, but want to hear it from the military first. Maritime Forces Atlantic senior leadership has made a commitment to families that they will work with the Military Family Resource Centre to provide families, no matter where they are in the world get the information to families as quickly and as accurately as they can when unexpected or tragic events occur.

Family callouts may be in response to a significant event that impacts a deployed unit, to provide families with information prior to a media release or to inform families about changes to schedule etc. It is up to the Chain of Command how and when to engage the services of the Military Family Resource Centre. Emergency Family callouts may only be commenced when requested by the CO of a deployed unit or by local CF Commander.

The objectives of the HMFRC during a callout are:

- To provide timely accurate information.
- To ensure the information is delivered in a compassionate and understanding way.
- To ensure callout it is carried out in an efficient and effective manner by trained staff and volunteers.
- To ensure concerns from families are followed up.
- To ensure any additional information sessions, supports or resources are put in place to support families.

During HMCS Montréal's Deployment spring of 05, they experienced the tragic loss of a sailor overboard. The MFRC was contacted, informed of the situation and then requested to call families of the crew to let them know before they heard it through the media. Our trained qualified staff was then called in and given a script to read to the families. Staff reassures the family, provides them information and listens to families feedback and concerns. After the calls are completed and the information has been passed on to the families, we will then determine if there is a need for more information. For example do we need to send situational updates, hold a family briefing, and call in other resource such as social workers or padres etc., to help the families cope with tragic news. The impact of a tragedy or accident on families of a deployed unit is unpredictable. Many of course are concerned about the impact on their loved one, others want to know what the ship or unit does in emergencies, others still just want to talk and be with other family members of the unit or have a need for other professional services.

Our role is to ensure that their concerns or requirements are met and to work with the chain of command for additional information or resources to meet those needs.

The padres and other CF professional's work with the families who are most closely affected by any tragic news e.g. next of kin or significant others of the injured or deceased. Having a senior officer speak directly to families and to have experts such as doctors or engineers immediately available to answer family's questions and to dispel rumours is tremendously helpful in alleviating family stress and anxiety.

ADDITIONAL SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Prevention and Education – recognizing that no matter how well we prepare for deployment “life happens” other events, crisis, illness, stress etc can challenge a families coping mechanisms and they may require additional resources or supports. The Military Family Resource Centre has qualified professional staff to assist the family member with the curve balls that they sometime have thrown at them. These professionals work closely and in partnership with the Ship or unit and as necessary with the many other Canadian Forces helping professionals (social workers, medical professionals, padres) and the Chain of Command to address the needs of the family member. By pooling our resources and working together many problems or situations can be resolved and in many cases repatriation of the military member can be avoided. In addition, families may access free of charge the Canadian Forces Members Assistance Program which provides them with counselling or other professional services. Other resources and service includes emergency childcare and respite care where the military Family Services Program provides family's access to up to seventy-two hours of free childcare over the course of a deployment. This allows time for preventative self care for the stay at home parent to prevent possible breakdown or to assist a parent with more immediate needs in the event of their illness or injury.

Post-Deployment Phase:

Homecoming planning -Participating in homecoming activity planning and execution; and banner making, working jointly with Canadian Forces resources, unit and family to plan and execute a reunion celebration Homecoming, and the anticipation of having the family unit together once more, generates its own kind of anxiety. The energy level is heightened as the family members look forward to “the day”. Along with the expected excitement, many family members experience feelings of uncertainty. In acknowledgment of those feelings being “normal” and to prepare for the stresses of reintegration, the Deployment Services team offer an interactive workshop. During the MONTREAL deployment, *Waltzing Together Again* was offered during the last scheduled Network meeting giving those, who spent so much time together over the course of the deployment, a chance to discuss their feelings and strategies for dealing with some of the challenges of reuniting as a family. Partners more experienced with reintegration are regarded as mentors by the staff and those partners newer to *deployment life*. To aid in the celebration of reunion, the Network and Deployment Services team create activities that acknowledge what was accomplished during the deployment. An afternoon for the families to come together to share a meal and participate in a group *welcome home* banner-making party with a slide show presentation of all the activities they planned, organized and participated in, affirms their journey together and commitment to the group process. The team's ongoing promotion of self-care culminates in an afternoon dedicated to the *at home* partner. Childcare is provided for the time that allows the adults freedom to enjoy a relaxed atmosphere that includes quiet music, a massage, facial, manicure, special refreshments and good conversation with the friends they became acquainted with during the deployment. Reports evaluating the Network experience are very positive and highlight the sense of being supported by one another, the MFRC and the military unit. It's not unusual to hear there is a level of disappointment in the Network coming to a close when a unit returns home.

Post Deployment– meeting with command staff to review deployment experience from family, Military Family Resource Centre, Canadian Forces leadership and command teams perspective, lessons learned.

SUMMARY

We have learned so much working in partnership with the Canadian Forces senior leadership in Halifax and with our families. It is absolutely vital that families are seen as and are treated as full partners in deployment. Knowing the challenges, dangers and needs of the member or unit that is deployed provides the Family Resource Centre with the information necessary to know what the families may be experiencing and then we are able to plan and provide the necessary supports, information or resources. Ensuring families are informed and supported makes them a valued part of the team. Keeping them connected and supported does result in better relations, trust, improved morale and a much better understanding about the military by families that will pay dividends to the CF. Military Families are the strength behind the uniform, support them and they will support you.

