

HELPING OUR HEROES

Efforts to Help Military and Veteran Parents

HELPING OUR HEROES: EFFORTS TO HELP MILITARY AND VETERAN PARENTS

Military and Veteran Families

Families are increasingly complex and less stable. Today, more than two out of five children are born to unmarried parents and over half of all children will spend some portion of their childhood living in a single-parent household. Unfortunately, a substantial number of these children are likely to grow up experiencing very little support or contact from their biological father. These trends foreshadow troubling outcomes for children who benefit considerably from the financial and emotional commitment of two parents.

Military families are not immune to these trends. Indeed, military families (particularly enlisted soldiers) are more likely to experience these family changes because, compared to the civilian population, the military is comprised of men and women who are younger, less educated, and more likely to be a racial or ethnic minority – all groups with a higher prevalence of nonmarital childbearing and relationship instability.

Also, due in part to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, active-duty service members and veterans actually experience higher rates of family strain and separation than their civilian counterparts, and their children often have poorer outcomes as a result. This is particularly true for soldiers who are not married to their child's other parent (approximately 12 percent of military parents are single parents).

Challenges for Families Posed by Military Service

Although unmarried soldier and veteran parents are more likely than their civilian counterparts to have a formal child support and visitation order, they often face unique challenges caused by their military service that make it difficult for them to meet their parenting and child support obligations. Frequent changes in station, lengthy deployments, concomitant changes in pay, combat-related stress, and transitions to veteran status are fundamental elements of military service. These elements, however, can pose challenges for noncustodial parents to pay a fair amount of child support and to co-parent their children, and for custodial parents to receive adequate child support and share their children as agreed upon.

The challenges associated with military service are consequential to all parties involved, including the child support system, the military, and the families. The child support system is often burdened by the complexity of the cases, many of which involve interstate issues and are time-consuming to resolve. Military readiness is diminished when soldiers have competing concerns with their mission. Not being able to see a child or being unable to adequately support a child may deter a soldier's focus on the military mission and reduce readiness. In the end, it is the children and families for whom these issues matter most. Children benefit from the financial and emotional commitment of both parents, and soldiers and veterans deserve special attention to help resolve the issues regarding their child support and parenting obligations that are often made more difficult due to their service.

Overview of HEROES for Children in Military Families Project

In recognition of the challenges faced by many soldiers and veterans, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) encouraged each state to designate a liaison to act as a point-of-contact for military families, and they also funded several states' initiatives to address these challenges. These challenges are particularly relevant for Texas, given the high number of soldiers and veterans in the state.

In response, Texas developed the most comprehensive program in the country, aptly named HEROES (short for Help Establishing Responsive Orders Ensuring Support for Children in Military Families Project). HEROES provides a wide range of services to support military and veteran families, including broadly available services such as a website, a dedicated phone line and email that bypass the typical route of service, training to child support attorneys and military legal assistance personnel; and more tailored services such as parenting order legal clinics (POLCs) at the military installations to answer soldiers' questions, and specialized case review and management for soldiers and veterans offered by three dedicated HEROES child support attorneys.

A full report on the HEROES program is available at childandfamilyresearch.org. This report provides an overview of the challenges military service may pose with regard to child support and parenting obligations, as well as a review of Texas and other states' and federal efforts to address these important challenges. The report concludes with a summary of recommendations that the OCSE, state legislatures, judiciary, state child support offices, and the military should consider to ensure that soldiers and veterans are well-served, military readiness is maintained, the burden on state child support systems is reduced, and children have the support they need.

Information in the report is drawn from a rigorous evaluation of the HEROES Project conducted by the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. Under the direction of Cynthia Osborne, Ph.D., CFRP reviewed project materials, observed legal clinics, interviewed child support attorneys, reviewed case log files, and analyzed surveys completed by soldiers who attended the legal clinics to conduct the evaluation.

HEROES has been extremely well received in Texas: The military values the help the project provides its soldiers; the child support system benefits from the reduced strain on the regional child support staff due to specialized services provided by the HEROES attorneys, the judiciary appreciates the improved preparation of the cases involving soldiers or veterans that come before their court; and the noncustodial and custodial parents receive resolution to their complex cases. In the past 3 years, HEROES hosted over 90 legal clinics (POLCs) and provided over 4,400 military families and veterans with legal information, referrals, expedited assistance with paternity establishment, parenting and child support order establishment and modification, and case review.

In sum, assisting military families is an effective strategy for all parties involved. Although noncustodial military parents typically have complex cases, they generally result in a child support order that will be paid regularly to the custodial parent. Working to resolve these complex cases ensures that the child support division will maintain performance standards, the soldiers will be ready to serve, and children will have the financial and emotional commitment of both parents.

Help Establishing Responsive Orders Ensuring Support (HEROES) for Children in Military Families Project

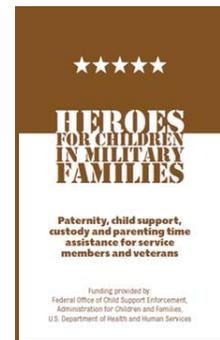
Texas has the most comprehensive project to address the parenting-time and child support needs of military families and veterans. The Help Establishing Responsive Orders Ensuring Support (HEROES) for Children in Military Families project provides a wide range of services, including:

- Information available online
- Dedicated mainline and email
- Deployment checklist and wallet card
- Information at pre and post deployment briefings and Stand Down events
- PTSD training for agency attorneys
- Training for JAG about Texas Family Code
- Parenting Order Legal Clinics (POLCs)
- Specialized case review and management

The three services that make Texas unique in its efforts to assist military and veteran families are the dedicated main phone line and email, POLCs, and three designated HEROES attorneys who specialize in resolving complex military and veteran cases. The mainline allows military and veteran families to request enhanced child support services from the HEROES attorneys when standard services are not enough to address their needs brought about by their military service. The legal clinics (POLCs) take place at three major installations in Texas (Ft. Hood, Ft. Bliss, and Jt. Base San Antonio). HEROES attorneys and JAG invite military parents to receive paternity, child support, and parenting-time information.

Often, the HEROES attorneys will follow up with the military family member after the POLC and work to resolve the case. One HEROES attorney specializes in veteran services, but works with active-duty soldiers, as well. In addition to the POLCs, HEROES attorneys receive requests for services from the HEROES mainline or email, field office caseworkers, and JAG attorneys, who they work with closely at each installation.

The HEROES attorneys are not only a valuable resource for military and veteran families, they also help to reduce the strain that complex military and veteran cases place on the local child support staff; and if a court hearing is necessary, they are able to present comprehensive information to the judge. In the past three years, HEROES has hosted over 90 POLCs and provided over 4,400 military families and veterans with legal information, referrals, expedited assistance with paternity establishment, parenting and support order establishment and modification, and case review. Assisting military families with their parenting and child support obligations is an effective strategy for all parties involved. Military cases, although complex, generally result in a child support order that will be paid regularly to the custodial parent. Working to resolve these complex cases ensures that the child support division will maintain performance standards, the soldiers will be ready to serve, and children will have the financial and emotional commitment of both parents.



Child and Family Research Partnership

info@childandfamilyresearch.org • 512.471.3536 • Toll Free 855.471.CFRP (2377)



Find us on the Web
childandfamilyresearch.org



Like us on Facebook
facebook.com/cfrplbj



Follow us on Twitter
[@cfrplbj](https://twitter.com/cfrplbj)



Sign-up for Email List
<http://bit.ly/XPzRVD>