

The Michigan Daily

University helps military families

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In honor of Veterans Day, the University is supporting military spouses and partners during the deployment of their significant others through HomeFront Strong — a program aimed at providing support to the families of veterans and service members.



The eight-week program is specifically designed to help military spouses prepare or cope with the stress of military deployment. It is open to individuals in any stage of the deployment cycle to provide necessary attention and assistance.

Michelle Kees, the leader of HomeFront Strong, said the program began after the leadership of the Army National Guard realized military families needed more resources than were originally available. The umbrella organization Military Support Programs and Networks sponsors HomeFront Strong and similar programs that offer assistance and support for families before, during and after their significant other's deployment.

"Many of the programs in the military mental hospital focus exclusively on veterans or service members and family members are only seen from mental health services in an ancillary role," Kees said. "They don't receive the spotlight, and with HomeFront Strong, the military spouse truly is the star."

The M-SPAN Program Team is comprised of faculty from the University of Michigan Depression Center and the Department of Psychiatry and together they work to promote military mental health initiatives, including reintegration and psychiatric support for veterans and their families.

The sessions focus on creating and strengthening social support, teaching new styles of self-care, obtaining available resources and encouraging positive coping mechanisms for military family members.

"(What) we universally heard from family members, from spouses and also from service members, was that the military wives, military partners, military spouses

needed more support,” Kees said. “We developed HomeFront Strong really in response to the concerns from the National Guard leadership, from the voices of the family members.”

The program is free and includes a free meal at the beginning of each session before breaking into spousal, teenage and school-aged support groups. The program has completed one cycle with eight female participants and is currently in its second cycle with seven female participants, according to Kees.

“Because this is part of a development program, we are doing a pre-assessment, a post-assessment and a three-month follow up,” Kees said. “It’s not enough to say we see a need and we have some good ideas for a program. We want to really see if the program is helping individuals become more resilient and develop better coping skills.”

In addition to teaching coping skills, the program builds social relationships among spouses.

“One of the common experiences we’ve heard from military spouses, in particular National Guard and the Reserve component, is the inherent feeling of isolation,” Kees said. “Through HomeFront Strong, they are able to connect with each other and truly see that they are not alone in this experience.”

Kees said the program also strives to raise awareness about the lack of support military families receive, and to promote solidarity for them in the community.

“I think HomeFront Strong is a great program that has a lot of potential, but at the end of the day one of the things that can truly help these families is for neighbors to be aware that these families are in our community, they’re in our schools, they’re at Kroger, they’re at the soccer game,” Kees said.

Raising awareness is not the only goal on the horizon, and HomeFront Strong also hopes to expand to other military families in Michigan communities.

“Our next step will be partnering with community agencies and continue to develop the model and hopefully implement it at other sites,” Kees said. “We’re very aware that there are many military families in other places than Ann Arbor and we need to do our best to reach them.”