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An Analysis of the Voluntary Activities of Military Spouses

Sherry Fontaine, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
School of Graduate and Professional Studies
Park University
MB 1107
8700 N.W. River Park Drive
Parkville, MO 64152
Telephone: 816-584-6452
E-mail: sherry.fontaine@park.edu

Mark A. Brennan, Ph.D.
Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences
3002 McCarty Hall, PO Box 110310
The University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611-0310
Telephone: (352) 392-1778 x229
Fax: (352) 392-8196
E-mail: MABrennan@ifas.ufl.edu

Abstract

An analysis of voluntary activities among military spouses offers a view of volunteerism within a population that is in a unique circumstance. Military spouses often are placed in an unknown geographic area in which new social networks have to be forged and where employment opportunities are not always available. Volunteerism, in this instance, serves to build skills for future employment. In fact, "useful training" was cited as the most important factor by survey respondents in increasing a spouse's interest in volunteerism. The study also indicates that improvements in operational areas can lead toward more interest in volunteering. Having assignments of interest, recognition, and better organization of volunteer programs were all cited as factors that would increase interest in volunteering. Management and leadership improvements would aid in structuring programs that would be useful for individuals involved in volunteer projects, as well as for those considering volunteer activities.

Key Words:

military, volunteers, spouse, reasons, barriers

Introduction

An analysis of voluntary activities among military spouses offers a view of volunteerism within a population that is in a unique circumstance. Military spouses often are placed in an unknown geographic area in which new social networks have to be forged and where employment opportunities are not always available. Given these circumstances, one would expect that volunteer opportunities would appeal to military spouses, easing the social isolation they may be experiencing, as well as enhancing their employment skills. It is not surprising then that spouses of military personnel have traditionally provided volunteer services to the military community (Martindale, 1987).

The analysis presented in this paper is based on the results of the 1992 *Department of Defense (DOD) Surveys of Enlisted Personnel and Their Spouses*. Before proceeding to an analysis of this survey, it will be useful to describe the results of an earlier (DOD) survey done in 1985, which also included an examination of volunteerism. A report issued from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Family Support, Education, & Safety) and authored by Melanie Martindale (1987), Defense Manpower Data Center, provides an excellent description of volunteer behavior and volunteer frequency by spouses of active duty officers and enlisted personnel and serves as historical and comparative background for this report. The report is based on data analysis from the 1985 *DOD Survey of Military Spouses* and administrative information. Data on volunteers was examined in conjunction with socio-demographic and other variables in order to develop a profile of characteristics and factors pertaining to volunteerism. Spouses of both officers and enlisted personnel (military wives, military husbands, civilian wives, and civilian husbands) were examined for this report.

The 1985 survey and subsequent report revealed a number of important characteristics regarding military spouses' inter-

est and propensity to volunteer. The report indicated that life-course stage is a determinant in volunteerism. Individuals least likely to be involved in volunteer activities are young adults without children in the household or young adults with preschoolers. However, individuals with children aged 6-17 are likely to be involved in volunteering. As the children in the household reach young adulthood, the parent's volunteer activities decrease.

There are other characteristics of respondents drawn from the survey that indicate differences in volunteerism. One of these is sponsor pay grade. Among the spouses of enlisted personnel, the percentage of volunteer activity increased as the pay grade increased. Similarly, within the officers' spouses main group (civilian wives), as the pay grade increased so did the level of volunteering. In other groups of officers' spouses, no relationship was found between pay grade and volunteer activity.

Similarly, the 1985 study showed that spouses of officers have more volunteers in relation to their population than do enlisted spouses. Of this group, the civilian wives of officers supply the majority of volunteer time (50.5%). However, there is no difference in volunteering behavior or volunteering frequency by service.

Other important factors were labor force status and occupation. In terms of labor force status, the report noted that in civilian spouse groups, both full and part time workers had a higher level of volunteer activity than those who were unemployed.

However, respondents who were unemployed were more likely to volunteer than respondents who were working full time. Additionally, part-time workers were more likely to volunteer than fulltime workers were. An exploration of the ability to find work fitting skills at the "current location" found that both the civilian spouses of enlisted personnel and the civilian wives of officers were more likely to volunteer if they could not find such

applicable work.

Rank coupled with occupation revealed differences among those spouses who volunteered. Within the civilian spouses of enlisted personnel, the most likely volunteers were those in the technical/professional/managerial fields. Within the civilian spouses of officers, the most likely volunteers were those grouped in the craft/operative fields.

In addition to the characteristics of respondents who volunteered, the survey and report also examined the attitudes of volunteers. Data demonstrated that in many cases volunteer activity is not related to satisfaction with specific aspects of military life, but rather is associated with overall satisfaction. It appears that familiar and personal factors, as well as external expectations, are more likely to influence volunteer activities than satisfaction or dissatisfaction with specific aspects of military life. Furthermore, the frequency of volunteer activity among the spouses of enlisted personnel is higher among those who are satisfied or very satisfied with the military way of life compared to those who are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Martindale's analysis of the *1985 DOD Survey of Military Spouses* provides an important historical and comparative context for our report on volunteerism based on the *1992 Department of Defense Surveys of Enlisted Personnel and Their Spouses*. In this report, we will present similar demographic and socio-economic characteristics of spouses who responded to the survey questions on volunteerism. The *1992 Survey* provides additional questions on volunteer satisfaction, reasons why spouses do not volunteer, and practices or additional services that would increase a spouse's interest in volunteering.

Methodology

Data was collected from the *1992 Department of Defense Surveys of Officers and Enlisted Personnel and their Spouses* where questionnaires were mailed to 64,643 spouses. The survey included

twenty-two variables related to volunteerism; these variables served as the basis for this analysis. The questions encompassed volunteer activities that were both on-installation (i.e., military unit support activities and installation/support activities) and off-installation (i.e., local community support activities).

There were a total of 23,847 respondents to the survey questions regarding spouse's involvement in volunteerism. The unadjusted response rate was 37%. The 1992 DOD survey reported responses from 23,847 military spouses. Of this number, 16,061 (67%) did not engage in any type of volunteer activity; 7,786 (33%) did perform volunteer work/activity. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the responses to individual questions regarding reasons why spouses did not volunteer and factors that would increase a spouse's interest in volunteering.

Comparatively, in 1995, the Independent Sector (1996) reported that 48.8% of the adult U.S. population was involved in some sort of volunteer activity. Reasons for the differences in volunteerism between the general population and military spouses can be due, in part, to the three-year time difference between these two surveys. However, given that less than 35% of the military spouses were involved in volunteerism, it is worthwhile to explore the reasons why spouses did not volunteer. Of equal importance will be to assess the factors that might increase a spouse's interest and participation in volunteer activities.

Patterns Of Volunteerism

The role of spouses and volunteerism in the military is particularly noteworthy. According to Katherine Reardon,

"Spouses are frequently called upon by the military command to provide formal support through volunteerism when paid formal support services are absent or inadequate to serve community

need." (Reardon, 1996: 98).

If military spouses are often asked to volunteer, the fact that only 33% did volunteer is puzzling. Anecdotal accounts provide one explanation: that the psychological demands of military life dampen a spouse's enthusiasm to volunteer rather than increase it. No studies supporting that explanation were found. It is more likely that military spouses are motivated to volunteer for the same reasons that civilian spouses volunteer. The DOD survey contained eighteen questions regarding respondents' reasons for volunteering and, conversely, reasons for not volunteering. These questions encompass both personal reasons for choosing whether or not a spouse volunteered, as well as organizational and management concerns. Before proceeding to this analysis, we will give a brief overview of the characteristics of the volunteers and non-volunteers.

Characteristics of Respondents

The majority of the spouses who responded to the survey were women. Of the total 7,786 spouses who performed volunteer work, eight-six percent (86%) were female and fourteen percent (14%) were male. Since it is a military population, the respondents were younger than the general population of volunteers, which would include a larger number of retirees. Specifically, 52% of the spouses were age 36 or older; twenty-seven percent were between the ages of 31 and 35 years of age. The maximum age of respondents to this survey was 65 years of age. Twenty-seven percent of survey respondents reported having some college experience short of a two-year degree. This was followed by 23% that reported having earned a four-year college degree. Overall, 55% of the volunteers reported an educational attainment of a two-year college degree or higher. Volunteers were predominantly Caucasian (86%) followed by African American and Hispanic respondents, representing seven percent

and six percent of the sample, respectively.

Both the availability of childcare and parental involvement in their child's activities are factors in volunteerism. Among the military spouses in this study, 76% had children. Martindale's earlier report indicated that the age range of children was also a factor in willingness to volunteer. Spouses with children age 6-17 were the most likely to volunteer, and volunteering decreases as children reached young adulthood (Martindale, 1987). Unfortunately, our data did not provide specific information on the age of the military spouses' children.

Types of Spouse Volunteer Activities

Overall, the majority of spouses (70%) volunteered in their local communities. This broad category ranged from volunteer efforts in well-established organizations to informal volunteering such as organizing a bake sale for a school fundraising event. Thirty percent of spouses volunteered in installation/ support activities and thirty percent volunteered in military unit support activities. While both activities can be considered a volunteer activity within the military community, they are differentiated by the fact that military unit support activities focus on a small unit stationed at an installation while installation/ support activities are, as the name suggests, installation-wide.

Noteworthy is the fact that only recently, under the *National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 1995*, expanded authority was given for the increased use of volunteers in the following areas:

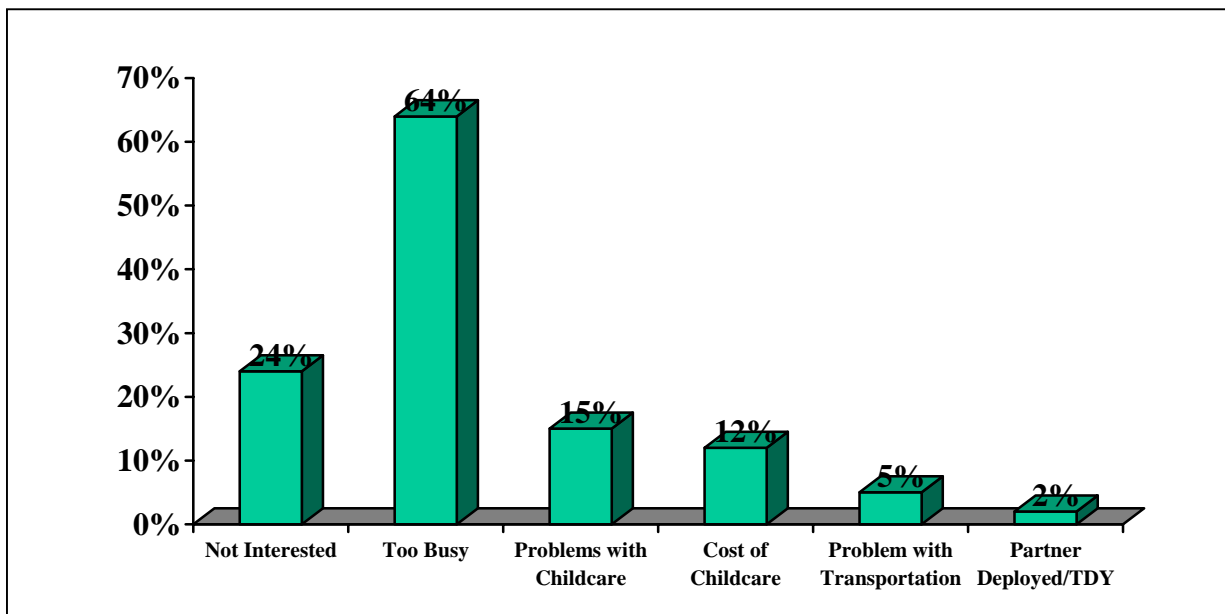
- medical services, dental services, nursing services, and other health-related services
- museum or natural resources program
- family support programs
- child development and youth services programs
- religious programs
- housing referral programs
- programs providing employment assistance to spouses

- recreation programs

Preceding this Act were several acts that incrementally increased volunteerism within the military community. The first was in 1983 (P.L. 98-94), which provided volunteers in family support programs and military museums legal protection from lawsuits related to their volunteer activity.

Family support and military museums were, until 1995, the customary positions of volunteers on military installations. The Act considered these volunteers Federal employees for purposes of Torts claims and workers compensation. In 1987, the *National Defense Act of 1987* authorized reimbursement for personal expenses from nonappropriated funds. In 1992, the

Figure 1
Reasons for Spouses Not Volunteering



National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 1992 authorized reimbursement of personal expenses from appropriated as well as non-appropriated funds.

Reasons for Not Volunteering

The primary reason given for not participating in volunteer activities was simply that the spouses did not feel they had the time (Figure 1). Sixty-four percent of survey respondents listed being too busy as the primary reason for not volunteering. This response is consistent with national surveys on why individuals do not volunteer. In a survey conducted for the Independent Sector by Hodgkinson and Weitzman (1996), it was reported that 59.9% of Americans did not volunteer because personal schedules were too full.

Women who were not in the workforce

have, in the past, been disproportionately involved in the volunteer sector. A women entered the work force and two-income families became the norm, less women had time to become involved in volunteer activity (Firstenberg, 1996). In a family with two working spouses, much of the free time of both spouses may be spent with their children (Gerson, 1997). This raises another concern, which is the general preference for short-term, episodic volunteerism. Short-term volunteering works well for one-time events such as bike-a-thons or disaster relief. However, other programs such as tutoring or mentoring programs, require a long-term commitment in order to achieve demonstrable results (Gerson, 1997).

A more general reason given for not volunteering was simply a lack of interest.

Twenty-four percent of survey respondents listed they had no interest in volunteer activities. This compares with the national figure in which twelve percent of the population cited "lack of interest" as the primary reason for not volunteering (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1996).

Neither lack of interest nor lack of time is an atypical response unique to the military population. Stephen McCurley (1994) offers some practical recommendations on how to overcome the more tangible issue of time constraints. One alternative is to design volunteer programs to accommodate shorter time periods. A second is to share assignments among a group of volunteers (McCurley, 1994). The lack of interest of non-volunteers requires more creative responses. One approach is to view volunteerism as a leisure time activity (Boughton, 1996). Since volunteers give their time freely and are not bound to the organizations by monetary interests or need, the rewards are parallel to those found in leisure time pursuits. If volunteer managers can offer equally rewarding experiences from volunteer efforts, it follows that individuals will consider volunteering as a worthwhile pursuit in their leisure time.

Specific Barriers to Volunteerism

Research on volunteerism indicates that, while an individual's reasons for volunteering tend to be value laden, personal reasons for not volunteering are more particularistic (Clary, Snyder, Copeland, French, 1994). It is important to also examine these particularistic barriers to volunteer activity among military spouses.

Problems with securing childcare and the cost of childcare itself are indicative of some of the problems spouses face when considering volunteer activities (Figure 1). Among those spouses that did not volunteer, 15% cited problems with childcare and 12% cited child care costs as reasons why they did not participate in volunteer activities.

Difficulties in obtaining transportation

to a site can also be a significant barrier to volunteering. A small percentage of non-volunteers (5%) listed problems with transportation as a specific reason. However, since many volunteer opportunities exist on installation, transportation may not be an important barrier in volunteerism in military spouses.

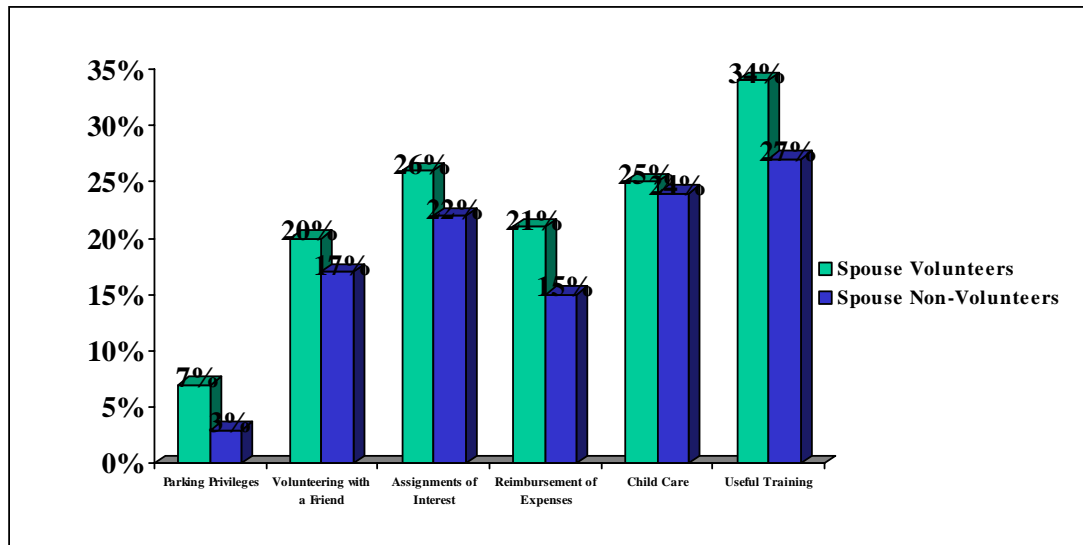
Factors that Would Increase Spouse Interest in Volunteering

Integral to this study is the analysis of factors that would increase interest in volunteerism among spouses who have not yet volunteered and maintain the interest of those who are presently volunteering (Figure 2). The most cited factor that would increase one's propensity to volunteer was "useful training," which we have interpreted as the job or career advancement skills gained through volunteering. As noted in the introduction, military spouses often move to new locations where employment opportunities are not always available.

In these situations, volunteer positions can offer valuable alternatives to paid employment. Volunteer activities can provide ways for spouses to learn about various types of employment, acquire new skills, and even develop contacts for future jobs (Clary, Snyder & Ridge, 1992; Schram, 1985). This is supported by studies which found that volunteerism does provide volunteers with important job skills that are transferable to paid employment (Schram, 1985). It appears that many respondents recognized that volunteerism can provide useful training for their future careers. Twenty-seven percent of spouses who did not volunteer and 34% of those who did volunteer, noted that volunteer opportunities would provide useful training for the future and would increase their interest in volunteer activities.

Another important factor in increasing volunteerism (22% of non-volunteers and

Figure 2
Development Factors that Would Increase Spouse Volunteerism



26% of volunteers) was the need to have more assignments of interest. All too often volunteers are not appreciated and are given uninteresting tasks. Interest in volunteer activities would increase if volunteers were provided with more skill-oriented tasks and were involved in the operational decisions of a program.

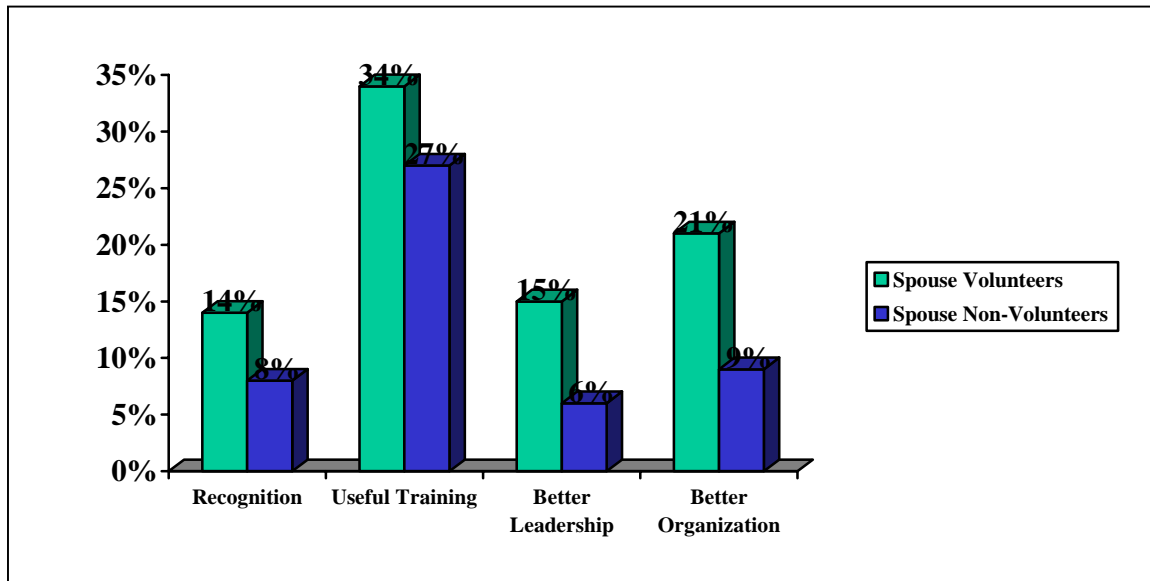
The overall management of volunteers is related to the types of volunteer assignments (Figure 3). Three questions on the survey addressed improvements in volunteer management as factors that would tend to increase volunteerism: better leadership, better organization of volunteers, and recognition of assignments. Both non-volunteers (6%) and volunteers (15%) felt that better leadership would increase interest. Non-volunteers (9%) and volunteers (22%) believed that better organization of volunteers would increase interest in volunteering. Both groups (8% of non-volunteers and 14% of volunteers) expressed that recognition for assignments would increase their interest.

Shortly following the Volunteer Summit, a Newsweek article (Gershon, 1997) noted the importance of volunteer management in a painfully direct manner. The article stated that most volunteers are not employed effectively and the management of volunteers is often poor. Consequently,

it was concluded that volunteers are not going to be able to provide the solutions particular to the social problems that policy-makers have optimistically sought from the volunteer sector. In part, lack of effective volunteer management is an organizational problem. Brudney (1993) noted that organizations do not provide support for volunteer managers or the programs for which they have responsibility. The author went on to note additional research that found volunteer managers unappreciated and their accomplishments trivialized (Scheier, 1988a, 1988b, 1988-1989). In a contrasting example, Drucker (1990) reported how one parish increased its volunteerism by transforming the volunteers from the status of helpers to that of colleagues. One can conclude that better leadership and organization of volunteers could be strengthened in an organizational atmosphere that recognizes the contributions of volunteers to nonprofit organizations and the importance of the role of volunteer administration.

Increased recognition for the contributions of volunteers was listed by fourteen percent (14%) of respondents as a factor that would increase interest in volunteerism.

Figure 3
Management Factors that Would Increase Spouse Volunteerism



Volunteer administrators, or in smaller organizations, executive staff members, should formally recognize the work of volunteers. This could be formally accomplished, for example, through institutionally sponsored award ceremonies or through periodic acknowledgments in newsletters (Chasen, 1999). It should also be understood that recognition of volunteers' efforts serves as a form of non-monetary reward. Moreover, recognition of their efforts and accomplishments would help in raising a sense of satisfaction and value to the organization among volunteers.

The social aspect of volunteering is reflected in the finding that many volunteers would be interested in volunteering with a friend (17% of non-volunteers and 20% of volunteers). Based on a meta-analysis of research on rationales for volunteerism, Chinman and Wandersman (1999) found that volunteers cited the benefits of socializing with others and the satisfaction of reaching the goals of an organization as primary reasons why individuals participated in voluntary activities.

Other Factors

Given that volunteer work is unpaid, it may be an added burden for potential volunteers to actually pay for the costs of volunteering. Consideration should be given by organizations to pay for these costs by methods such as reimbursing mileage costs, providing parking privileges, and providing at least partial reimbursement or vouchers for childcare. Volunteers who use their own automobiles for transportation may be reimbursed for mileage. Another example would be to validate parking or provide parking spaces for volunteers. These expenses are generally minimal and would be offset by the contributions of volunteers. In the survey, childcare availability was ranked as an important factor in increasing volunteer activity (27% of volunteers and 24% of non-volunteers). Also, twenty-one percent of volunteers and fifteen percent of non-volunteers felt that reimbursement of expenses would increase interest in volunteer activity. A small percentage (7% of volunteers and 3% of nonvolunteers) considered that parking would positively affect their interest in volunteer activities.

Conclusions

The analyses of responses to this survey among military spouses reveal patterns of volunteerism that are applicable to the broader sector of volunteers. The barriers of lack of time, lack of interest and need for child care are examples of barriers that are shared by the larger potential volunteer population. What may be a more pronounced factor for military spouses are the training and career development opportunities provided by volunteer activities. This report noted that for military spouses, relocation to unfamiliar areas, particularly abroad, and geographic isolation could limit employment prospects. Volunteerism, in this instance, serves to build skills for future employment. In fact, "useful training" was cited as the most important factor by survey respondents in increasing a spouse's interest in volunteerism.

The study also indicates that improvements in operational areas can lead toward more interest in volunteering. Having assignments of interests, recognition, and better organization of volunteer programs were all cited as factors that would increase the interest in volunteering among respondents. Management and leadership improvements would aid in structuring programs that would be meaningful and useful for individuals who are involved in volunteer projects, as well as for those considering using their personal time for volunteer activities.

This study provides a number of interesting insights into the patterns of volunteerism among military spouses. It also raises more questions regarding how to encourage more volunteerism among this population. How do we structure volunteer programs to accommodate the time constraints potential volunteers

might face? Do volunteer opportunities offer skill building responsibilities? How can we manage volunteer programs more effectively and ensure that volunteers are recognized and rewarded for their efforts? Upon reflection, these insights, as well as the questions raised by this study are worthwhile topics for further research on the volunteer population at large.

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Authors' Biographies

Sherry J. Fontaine, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the School of Graduate and Professional Studies at Park University. She formerly served as the Principal Investigator for the Scholar Initiated Research Project on Volunteerism Among Military Families. The project was supported by the Military Family Institute at Marywood University. Dr. Fontaine has served on several nonprofit boards and has been a consultant for nonprofit organizations. She has also taught and published in the areas of nonprofit management, public policy, and health policy.

Mark A. Brennan, Ph.D. is a faculty member in the Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences at The University of Florida. His current teaching, research, writing, and program development concentrates on the role of volunteerism and community involvement and action in the community development process. He has over 15 years experience designing, conducting, and analyzing research and has conducted comparative research extensively throughout America, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Japan. He served formerly as Senior Research Associate on the Military Family Institute Volunteerism Among Military Families project.