



# EVENT

# SUMMARY

## THE FAMILIES ROUNDTABLE:

Families of military personnel, Veterans, and public safety personnel are the strength beside the uniform, doing their part to ensure the safety and security of Canada, at home and abroad.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>03</b>	Acknowledgements
<b>04</b>	Introduction
<b>05</b>	Attendees
<b>06</b>	Questions
<b>07</b>	Question #1 Key Themes
<b>12</b>	Question #2 Key Themes
<b>15</b>	Question #3 Key Themes
<b>17</b>	Conclusion

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# INTRODUCTION:

## FAMILIES ROUNDTABLE 2023

In October of 2023, Families Matter Research Group (FMRG) cohosted the Families Roundtable with The Canadian Institute of Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) at the 13th annual Forum conference in Gatineau, Quebec. The Families Roundtable has evolved out of panel discussions, originating from the leadership of Nora Spinks, Col. Russ Mann (Ret'd), and the Vanier Institute of the Family in the early years of Forum, into an annual roundtable event that provides Forum attendees a space dedicated to focus attention and discussion on the experiences of defence and public safety (DPS) families.

The purpose of this year's Roundtable was twofold. First, it was designed to stimulate conversations about the needs and strengths of DPS families, as well as successful strategies used to connect with and support them. Second, it aimed to explore how DPS families can benefit from and inform broader collaboration, especially the direction of the evolving Garnet Families Partnership<sup>1</sup>. Garnet Families deal with the complex convergence of risk, mobility, identities, and logistics. The Garnet is a gemstone commonly recognized for its pomegranate colour, with historic associations across the ages with love, loyalty, healing, protection, and safe return to family.

## ATTENDEES

This year, the Roundtable doubled in size since 2022. Over 200 participants attended the Roundtable, including actively and previously serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces and various public safety sectors, family members, researchers and research trainees, service providers, philanthropic groups, representatives of research and knowledge mobilization hubs, and policy makers. The Roundtable was international in scope and there was an excellent representation of partners and collaborators involved in the Garnet Families Partnership. One of the things that makes the Roundtable so unique is its integration of individuals working across different sectors and roles who are typically siloed off from one another (e.g., military, public safety personnel, families, service providers, etc.). The Roundtable discussions are enriched further by varied comparative and complementary perspectives through strong international representation.

## QUESTIONS

Over the course of roughly two hours, Roundtable participants engaged in conversations focused on three questions:

- 1) What are some challenges that defence and public safety families experience?**
- 2) What are some successful strategies you've used to connect or support families?**
- 3) What else could we be doing?**

This year's discussions took on a new and more urgent tone, highlighting how challenges DPS families routinely face have been intensified by the pandemic, global insecurity, war, the housing crisis, inflation, and increased deployments. The following summarizes responses to these questions and identifies some of the key issues raised during the 2023 Families Roundtable.

# QUESTION #1:

## WHAT ARE SOME CHALLENGES THAT DEFENCE AND PUBLIC SAFETY FAMILIES EXPERIENCE?

**Increased Mobility:** One of the most pervasive challenges Roundtable participants identified is how DPS families are frequently required to relocate. Frequent relocations disrupt a family's access to education, childcare, healthcare, and have unique implications for family members. For example, spouses' ability to pursue their own career is hindered by frequent relocations, and children with health conditions or disabilities may lose access to life supporting services with each relocation.

Roundtable participants also addressed the financial implications that frequent relocations can have. For example, differences in cost of living are rarely accounted for, but are serious concerns given the rising cost of living. Canadian participants noted how finding appropriate housing has become especially difficult due to the housing crisis. Some families worry about losing family pets if they can't find pet-friendly accommodations and may consider difficult 'solutions' like the serving member relocating while the family stays behind.

Participants also expressed that relocations make it hard for families to integrate and feel connected to a community, particularly if there are linguistic or cultural barriers to navigate. Statements like, "the house does not get the chance to become a home", and "the more connected you are, the harder it is to leave", illustrate how families leave entire support networks behind when they relocate. This cycle of relocation and isolation can leave families feeling isolated and exhausted.

Finally, some participants stated that frequent relocations could have implications for recruitment and retention. Specifically, they noted how some DPS families may consider leaving the public safety sector due to the range of negative experiences associated with frequent relocations, including concerns about how these relocations impact families.

**Risks:** Roundtable participants identified the range of risks that DPS personnel encounter as serious challenges for DPS families. While the risk of injury and death to the serving personnel are apparent, participants stressed there is little awareness of how risks manifest within the family unit. Similarly, they spoke to the challenge of finding specialists equipped with the cultural competence and skills necessary to support families as they deal with risks associated with these occupations.

This year's Roundtable discussions highlighted how DPS families are facing new and unprecedented risks associated with war, global insecurity, inflation, and COVID. Yet, families at the Roundtable felt there is a lack of support designed to help families cope with these new distinctive risks. Unfortunately, some participants noted that the ability to communicate openly about risks are hindered by security protocols, a potential lack of trust between employers and families, and the ways that family members may work to shield each other from risks or stressors. For example, one Roundtable participant noted how serving members must "hide parts of the job to protect family members but that causes problems when they don't disclose".

Ultimately, COVID-19 and associated countermeasures, as well as global insecurity and conflict, have compounded the risks that DPS families face, placing them in a very precarious position. As one Roundtable participant expressed, "families are living closer to the edge".



**Logistics:** DPS families must also navigate logistical challenges, including non-standard work hours and prolonged periods of absence. These logistics make it extremely difficult to balance the needs of all family members with occupational requirements. In describing how difficult it is to strike a balance between work and family, a participant commented, “something always takes the back seat”. Given the range of logistical challenges associated with DPS sectors, some DPS families may feel as though their entire lives are dictated by the needs of the service. For some family members, this can lead to frustration and resentment. As one Roundtable participant noted, “work problems can turn into personal fights”.

**Unfortunately, the long-term repercussions associated with these overlapping challenges are not well understood.**

Roundtable participants emphasized how COVID, the rising cost of living, and global insecurity have made it more difficult for DPS families to navigate everyday logistical challenges. These discussions underscored how the risks and requirements associated with different DPS sectors have increased significantly during the pandemic. For example, serving members may entertain fears they will jeopardize their family’s safety through their work and struggle to balance work, safety, and family obligations. Unfortunately, the long-term repercussions associated with these overlapping challenges are not well understood. Similarly, little is known about how dual serving couples, LGBTQIP2+ and racialized DPS families manage these challenges, or the ways in which these challenges differ among these populations.

**Uncertainty and Stress:** DPS family life is often characterized by high levels of uncertainty and stress. As one Roundtable participant expressed, “military families live with uncertainty in everything”. Roundtable participants conveyed that much of this uncertainty and stress stems from the high-risk nature of DPS work. For example, when a family member is deployed, their loved ones worry for their safety and are often unsure what their mental and physical condition will be when they return. Similarly, occupational risks and requirements hinder their ability to make plans which can minimize uncertainty. Participants expressed uncertainty and concern about the ways service impacts not only the serving member, but the entire family unit. They noted how, for some DPS families, life can feel like a continuous cycle of unknowns. Given the immense uncertainty and risk that permeates the lives of DPS families, positives associated with being part of a DPS family can be obscured and overlooked. In describing this dilemma, one participant expressed, “it can be a challenge to focus on the positives; being a military family can also be exciting and enjoyable”.

**Lack of Support and Recognition:** Across the 28 tables, Roundtable participants consistently identified issues with existing support services, including a lack of accessible and available support. Participants problematized how families are rarely prioritized as an important population deserving of support and the lack of resources developed to respond to DPS family needs. They noted how support for DPS families tends to be treated as a low organizational and community priority, with their contributions and sacrifices sometimes overlooked or taken for granted. DPS families want to be recognized by employers, policy makers, and the broader public for their contributions and sacrifices to support the serving member and ensure operational readiness. Some of the challenges that DPS families routinely experience may be exacerbated if families feel betrayed or when sacrifices families make to support the serving member’s career go unacknowledged. As one participant expressed, “That trust isn't always there, and it's hard to build with family when we're only focusing on the Veteran/service member themselves”.

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**Recognition of Family Needs, Strengths, and Diversity:** Importantly, families want to be able to recognize themselves, in all their diversity, in available support services. Many participants problematized how most available resources continue to feature limited representations of DPS families. They noted how resources tend to focus on white, heterosexual families, with little attention given to the unique experiences of racialized families and male or LGBTQIP2+ partners. When discussing the diversity of DPS families, roundtable participants expressed, “there are so many couples now where the wife serves, and there still lacks representation in the diversity of families” and “family services are not intersectional enough”. These participants felt as though outdated assumptions about families are embedded in policy and programming. They pointed to the ways that the meaning of family is continually changing and the need for policy and programming that reflect these changes. The continued emphasis on white and heterosexual families in resources leaves men, racialized or LGBTQIP2+ partners under-supported. Roundtable participants resoundingly advocated for resources that reflect a diverse range of families and the enormous breadth of family experiences.

## QUESTION #2:

### WHAT ARE SOME SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES YOU'VE USED TO CONNECT OR SUPPORT FAMILIES?

**Using Communications Technologies to Build Community:** This question prompted participants to underscore the importance of building community among DPS families. They noted how COVID has made it more difficult to find and become embedded into communities. However, they also suggested using technology to increase opportunities to connect with and support DPS families. Using technologies and online platforms can broaden the reach of events, which helps to overcome the disconnection caused by COVID. Using online platforms can help DPS families connect with those who understand and validate their experiences. For example, some Canadian Military Family Resource Centres now offer a virtual Youth Support Group for military youth aged 12-18 years old. Some participants suggested timing events so they overlap with difficult periods like holidays or deployments to alleviate some of the associated stressors. Other participants offered suggestions like finding mentors who are willing to 'adopt a family' to provide guidance and offer a sense of community, again highlighting the important role of community and social networks to the wellbeing of DPS families.

**Enhancing Communication:** Many roundtable participants pointed out that communicating openly about the risks, challenges, and rewards that DPS families experience is key to connection and will help foster and maintain supportive relationships within and outside the family. Importantly, participants noted DPS families may need some support to communicate effectively. For example, parents may need help educating their children about the type of work and risks their DPS parent faces.

Conversely, children may also need assistance communicating their needs and challenges to their parents. Using different communication strategies or technologies like social media can support connectivity within family. For example, creating a family group chat or an interactive message board is one way to increase and potentially enhance family communication, especially while navigating non-standard work hours.

**Formal and Informal Supports:** When exploring successful strategies that can be used to connect and support DPS families, many roundtable participants emphasized the important role of both formal and informal peer-support programs. Roundtable participants also identified specific sources of support they found useful, including PSPNET Families, Together We Stand, Beyond the Blue, Wounded Warriors Canada, Military Family Resource Centres, and the Royal Canadian Legion. More general strategies for connecting and supporting DPS families include offering psychological, social, and financial support. Similarly, some noted the importance of adopting a strengths-based approach when working with DPS families.

**Offering Education & Improving Awareness:** Another means of supporting DPS families is through education. There was a sense among the Roundtable participants that education designed to improve awareness of the various risks and challenges DPS families navigate is essential. For example, DPS families could benefit from education so they can better understand the impact of occupational stress. Participants addressed the importance of embedding educational opportunities for DPS families into the hiring and onboarding process to prepare them for potential risks and challenges and supply them with support. In addition to education for DPS families, participants proposed educational campaigns geared toward specific populations like health providers, educators, and politicians to increase awareness of everyday DPS experiences.

**Engaging Leadership:** Roundtable participants underscored the importance of engaging individuals who hold leadership roles in initiatives focused on DPS families to help ensure their success. There was a sense that, if those in leadership positions understand the challenges that DPS families face, they are more likely to develop supportive policies that promote family wellbeing. For example, leaders can help employees feel empowered to address familial obligations without fear of being labeled as a 'slacker'. Participants also asserted how important it is for leadership to emulate values that support families, like showing compassion, providing flexibility in scheduling, and communicating about how work influences family life and vice versa. Finally, participants felt that leadership must be prepared to seek out expertise necessary to support DPS families.

**Involving DPS Families:** Many roundtable participants expressed how involving DPS families in decisions that affect their lives is an essential component of providing effective support and fostering connection. These participants recommended listening to and, when possible, elevating the voices of DPS families. Similarly, they noted the importance of forging opportunities for them to co-develop policies and programs. A participant provided Living in Our Shoes as an example of how the lived experiences of military families can be used to guide policy. Living in Our Shoes consisted of 110 recommendations for the UK government, many of which were accepted to better support military personnel and their families. Similar campaigns could be developed for different sectors, including fire, corrections, police, and emergency communications. Finally, family advisory committees that help guide the development of policies and programming are another means of supporting DPS families and help to ensure their voices are heard.

## QUESTION #3: WHAT ELSE COULD WE BE DOING?

**Tailored Support & Resources:** This year's roundtable discussions emphasized the need for support and resources that are tailored to the needs of specific family members, as well as resources that have been developed to serve a diverse range of families. For example, roundtable participants identified a need for resources developed specifically for spouses and children across their life course (e.g., career support, educational and extracurricular support for children). Participants also noted the lack of resources designed with family diversity in mind and advocated for a diversification of support services and representation of a diverse range of families in policy and programming. These participants problematized the ways that certain families like rural or racialized families are often under-served. Similarly, several participants noted the need for resources that address the range of experiences DPS families can have throughout their life course. These participants emphasized the need for additional support designed to address the ways that DPS family needs change throughout the life course and during pivotal life course transitions like relocations or retirement. Ultimately, participants called for an overhaul of existing services to ensure that they are more plentiful, accessible, and culturally competent, designed to the needs of DPS families.



**More Awareness and Alignment Among Support Providers:** Many roundtable participants discussed the need for better integration and communication among support providers. These participants expressed frustration with how existing support providers can be siloed off from one another, potentially leading to complications and misaligned goals. Participants noted that a wealth of unified, evidence-based, federally and provincially funded, preventative supports are urgently needed. Given the role that relocation and mobility can play in DPS family life, these supports must be available both in person and online. Finally, participants expressed a need to improve 'cultural competence' or awareness of issues DPS families experience among civilian support services. Doing so would help reduce the need for DPS families to continually explain themselves and ensure they receive adequate support.

**A Network or Hub of Well-Funded, Accessible & Flexible Supports:** When discussing the barriers to access support, Roundtable participants noted how searching for support can be a confusing and drawn-out process. Some conversations problematized the lack of awareness among DPS families regarding what resources and supports are available and identified additional barriers to support like stigma. These discussions stressed it is crucial DPS families can access resources and support without having to go through the serving member as this can be another barrier to receiving support, particularly if family members are experiencing issues like abuse. Roundtable participants almost unanimously called for a network or online hub that connects both DPS families and service providers with resources and support, thereby bridging gaps in service provision. They noted that this hub should serve as a clear pathway to resources and would help to ensure DPS families know what is available to them.



## CONCLUSION

Although many of the issues that DPS families face were captured in the [2022 Roundtable Report](#), this year's discussions reflected the urgency of the issues DPS families are dealing with. In many ways, the Roundtable discussions underscore how the issues these families face have historically experienced continue to evolve. The issues continue to compound, making them more palpable and pressing. Specifically, this year's discussions highlighted how risks that DPS families face are more tangible, and the range of logistical challenges they deal with have become more difficult to navigate due to broader social changes and instabilities, including COVID, the housing crisis, inflation, and increased global conflict.

The Roundtable has become a significant point of community engagement that helps to ensure our partnership responds to well-established and emerging priorities. The issues that DPS families face are both persistent and evolving, which makes them difficult to identify, grapple with, and respond to. In order to respond to the complex, far-reaching, and large-scale nature of these issues, DPS families need investment from a variety of different sectors, including government, academia, service providers, philanthropic organizations, and the broader community. Garnet Families Network has developed through the authentic participation of DPS families, and those who study, serve, and support them to respond to the diverse breadth of DPS family needs, and address some of the challenges laid out in this report. Although it may feel like a daunting task, it is one that can only be achieved through collaboration and is a challenge worth pursuing.