

EVENT

SUMMARY

**THE 2024 FAMILIES ROUNDTABLE:
NAVIGATING CHANGE AND
SUPPORTING MILITARY, VETERAN,
AND PUBLIC SAFETY FAMILIES**

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Acknowledgements

Garnet Families, Families Matter Research Group, and the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research thank the large group of moderators, notetakers, and attendees who participated in the 2024 Families Roundtable. Your contributions were essential to ensuring this event addressed the diverse needs of families across different defence and public safety sectors. Thank you for your engagement, insight, and collaboration.



Executive Summary & Roundtable Timeline

Almost 200 people attended this year's Families Roundtable, hosted by Garnet Families, Families Matter Research Group, and the Canadian Institute for Military & Veteran Health Research. This year's discussion focused on three areas and the experiences, issues, and needs across military, Veteran, first responder, and public safety families, who we've started to refer to by the shared language of Garnet families.

Question #1: What issues and needs are emerging for Garnet families that need to be prioritized?

Roundtable participants explored the intensification of challenging stressors such as frequent relocations, deployments, and risks associated with increasing global insecurity and conflict. Additionally, the need to expand and redefine what constitutes a family in policies, research, and service provision emerged as an important topic of discussion. Participants emphasized the importance of including diverse family structures, ensuring equitable access to resources that reflect all Garnet families. Addressing gaps in childcare, healthcare, and employment support were also identified as key priorities to enhance the wellbeing of Garnet families.

Question #2: How can we enhance our engagement and connection with Garnet families and those who study, serve and support them?

This question sparked thoughtful discussions about the challenges and opportunities for deeper engagement with Garnet families. Participants expressed that, in order to truly engage Garnet families and those who study, serve, and

support them, a holistic approach is needed, and engagement must be continuous as opposed to episodic. Similarly, the discussions underscored how efforts to engage Garnet families should prioritize improving cultural awareness, targeted outreach, the dissemination of accurate and accessible information, and the creation of supportive and inclusive spaces.

Question #3: What might a cross-sectional knowledge sharing event specific to families look like and what could it achieve?

Overall, participants expressed that, to organize a successful cross-sectoral knowledge-sharing event, it is essential to embrace an inclusive, community-driven approach that recognizes and addresses the unique needs, voices, and experiences of a diverse array of families. Participants noted the event must be co-created with families, focused on community-building while ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, and practical support. In other words, families should be at the center, participating in ways that recognize their unique lived experiences. There was a sense that this kind of event can help build trust, break down silos, and create a lasting impact by equipping families with the tools and support they need.



2022

In October of 2022, Families Matter Research Group, the Vanier Institute of the Family, and the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) hosted the 2022 Families Roundtable at CIMVHR's annual conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The discussions were largely focused on the perennial challenges these families navigate. Participants discussed a lack of culturally competent support, frequent relocations, barriers to mental health care, and the impact of deployment on family dynamics. Additionally, participants explored the various kinds of support families require, emphasizing this support should be accessible, culturally relevant, and meet the diverse needs of families. The [2022 Families Roundtable Report](#) offers a more detailed exploration of these discussions as well as an overview of key findings, emerging priorities, and actionable recommendations for supporting military, Veteran, and public safety families.

2023

In October of 2023, the Families Roundtable was hosted by Families Matter Research Group, Garnet Families, and The Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research in Gatineau, Québec. The discussions emphasized how many of the challenges identified during the 2022 Roundtable had become more pronounced, yet there was a sense that families still lacked accessible, comprehensive, and culturally competent support. Specifically, participants conveyed how challenges families deal with were more difficult to navigate due to broader social instabilities, including COVID, the housing crisis, inflation, and increased global conflict. A more in-depth summary of the issues raised during the 2023 Roundtable can be found in the [2023 Families Roundtable Report](#).



2024

The 2024 Families Roundtable was hosted by Families Matter Research Group, Garnet Families, and The Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Many of the same themes identified in 2023 emerged during the 2024 Families Roundtable. For example, the 2024 discussions also emphasized a lack of accessible and culturally competent health care, including mental health care. However, this year's discussions uncovered new concerns and nuances. For example, participants voiced concerns about how the pace of stressors associated with the housing crisis, inflation, and increased global security has yet to decline. Similarly, nuances emerged around the definition of family with a growing recognition of the need for policies to adopt more inclusive definitions of family. Finally, accessing childcare and/or eldercare, along with having support during release and retirement, emerged as significant priorities for families.

Attendees & Organization

At this year's Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) Forum in Winnipeg, Garnet Families, Families Matter Research Group, and CIMVHR co-hosted the annual Families Roundtable. Now in its third consecutive year in this format, the Families Roundtable was held just before the opening of Forum, at a time when there are no competing sessions. Approximately 200 people participated in the 2024 Families Roundtable, with moderators and notetakers supporting discussion across three questions. For the first time, we had assigned seating, which allowed us to ensure a stratified representation of researchers, policy developers, serving personnel, formerly serving personnel, philanthropic organizations, service providers, knowledge mobilization hubs, and family members.

The event began with a land acknowledgement by Dr. Alyson Mahar. Next, Dr. Margaret Campbell reflected on the significant progress in reshaping the discourse around families within these sectors, crediting the leadership of Nora Spinks and Retired Colonel Russell Mann for creating the conditions that enabled this progress and a dedicated space for family-focused discussions. Dr. Heidi Cramm continued outlining this progress, beginning with the formation of Families Matter Research Group (FMRG) in 2021. FMRG is an interdisciplinary, international collective dedicated to studying the health and well-being of families within high-risk occupational sectors. In recent years, FMRG focused on synthesizing existing evidence to explore similarities and differences in family life across military,

Veteran, first responder, and public safety populations, leading to the development of a lifestyle dimensions framework: risk (concerns about injury, illness, or death), identity (navigating complex identities and feeling out of sync with broader communities), logistics (the challenge of juggling of work and family responsibilities), and mobility (the impact of relocation on family life).

The decision to adopt the name Garnet Families was another important milestone in advancing the discourse about defence and public safety families. Dr. Cramm explained that, through extensive community consultations, the name was chosen because garnets symbolize love, loyalty, and the safe return of loved ones. Garnet Families are families connected to military, defence, first responder, and public safety sectors who navigate all of these unique dimensions – risks, identities, logistics, and mobility—all at once, over the life course of the family and the career. By naming this phenomenon, we can create a collective and shared identity, offering a way of framing the experience that resonates with families and promotes connection.

Next, Lisa Delaney, the community development lead for Garnet Families, spoke about the nature and development of the Garnet Families Network (GFN). The GFN was developed to create a bidirectional, cross-sector, communication network in which Garnet Families can connect and access resources that are relevant to them through mechanisms like the Garnet Family Ties newsletter which helps keep families informed with updates, resources, and community news. Following this, Dr. Deborah Norris, Co-Chair of the Partners Council for the Garnet Families Partnership, outlined the Garnet Families Partnership's goal to strengthen knowledge-sharing, catalyze research, and

build trainee capacity to address the needs of Garnet families. Funded by a competitive SSHRC grant through to 2031, the partnership includes 36 organizations and 26 collaborators, hosted at Queen’s University.

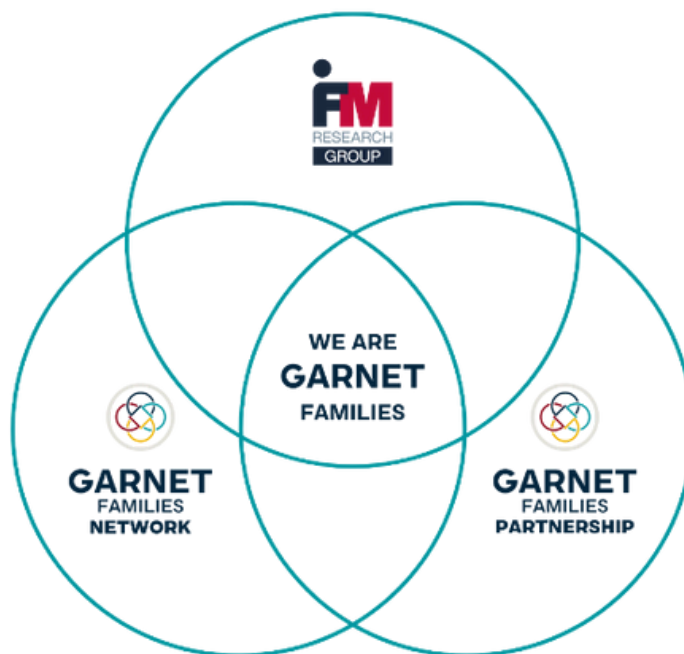


Figure 1: Venn diagram depicting the interrelated nature of Garnet Families activities.

Over the course of roughly an hour and a half, Roundtable participants explored three key questions. Their discussions highlighted the evolving needs of these families, identifying priority areas for research, support, and policy. While participants acknowledged many longstanding challenges, they also focused on emerging issues and potential solutions. The following sections summarize the key themes that arose from the discussions.

QUESTION #1:

WHAT ISSUES AND NEEDS ARE EMERGING FOR GARNET FAMILIES THAT NEED TO BE PRIORITIZED?

This question inspired discussions about the emerging issues and needs of Garnet families that require attention. Roundtable participants explored the intensification of challenging stressors such as frequent relocations, deployments, and risks associated with increasing global insecurity and conflict. Additionally, the need to expand and redefine what constitutes a family in policies, research, and service provision emerged as an important topic of discussion. Many participants emphasized the importance of including diverse family structures, ensuring equitable access to resources that reflect all Garnet families, regardless of their composition. Addressing gaps in childcare, healthcare, and employment support were also identified as key priorities to enhance the wellbeing of Garnet families.

Addressing the Intensification of Risk and Increasing Pace of Stressors: The Roundtable discussions highlighted how Garnet families face a range of challenges, many of which are amplified by stressors associated with service, such as frequent relocations and deployments. Participants detailed how these stressors cascade into family life, impacting family wellbeing and identity. They also highlighted that the pace of stressors on Garnet families has continued to remain intensified post-COVID, and the risks they face have become more pronounced. Participants referenced rising global insecurity and conflict, as well as the increasing deployment of defence and public safety personnel to respond to natural disasters, as contributing factors that have intensified stressors and risks. They also conveyed that these challenges are even more pronounced for dual-serving couples (i.e., those where both partners serve in these occupations), as the demands of simultaneous deployments or frequent relocations can place added strain on families.

Expanding Definitions of Family in Research, Policy, and Practice: Revisiting what constitutes a “family” within policy frameworks was a key topic of discussion across the different groups of participants. Roundtable participants underscored how families have become more complex and raised concerns about how narrow or normative definitions of family in policies, research, and service provision can exclude some families while privileging others. Participants also described the wide variability in how family is defined by researchers or organizations and within policies. They noted that some policies adopt age- or household-based definitions of family. Participants problematized how different definitions can create inconsistencies in service delivery and limit access to support. For example, while some service providers are required to assist anyone in crisis, others are restricted to helping only immediate family members. Similarly, participants questioned why some policies direct different family members to different service providers through different channels when they sometimes need support that allows them to seek help together as a unit.

While some definitions of what constitutes a family have evolved to reflect increasingly diverse and complex family structures, there was a sense among participants that current definitions of family in policy, research, and service provision can lag behind and fail to capture the diverse forms families take. Participants conveyed the importance of adopting more inclusive and flexible policies that recognize the diverse and evolving nature of family dynamics, including queer and Indigenous families, multigenerational households, ex-spouses, stepfamilies, adult children, and extended family members. They emphasized policies should not be one-size-fits-all as family experiences and needs vary widely. For example, ex-spouses, despite no longer being partners, can still be integral parts of a family unit. Yet, ex-spouses often lose their identity and support networks post-separation. There was a strong consensus among participants that reconceptualizing what constitutes family in research, policy, and service provision and embracing more inclusive definitions of family is a crucial step toward ensuring all Garnet families have equal access to the resources and support they need.

Impacts of Relocation: Emotional, Financial and Logistical Strains on Families: Issues related to relocation were discussed as challenges in each of the tables. As one participant expressed, for Garnet families, frequent relocations often mean having to “start from scratch” at each new posting. Participants explored how this constant cycle of upheaval can

create a sense that the family is taking a step backward as they navigate the challenge of rebuilding their lives, re-establishing social networks, and finding new service providers. They described how many families are faced with the impossible decision of whether to relocate with the serving member or stay behind, which can impose an array of different emotional and logistical strains on the family. Additionally, participants noted families who relocate must interrupt spousal career trajectories and leave behind established support networks, including extended family, friends, healthcare professionals, and educators. Importantly, participants discussed how these challenges can be compounded for families relocating to areas with higher costs of living. To ease this process, some participants shared their aspirations that mandatory residence in a new community be waived, recommending that service providers offer virtual welcome packages that help families learn about and apply for important services like childcare before they arrive at their new post.

Housing needs were discussed alongside the broader challenges of relocation and the cost of living. When military housing on base is available, it can provide a sense of community for some families; however, other families desire more separation. The high cost of housing and lack of affordable options were noted as increasingly pressing issues for Garnet families in recent years, particularly for those living in areas where housing is unavailable or unaffordable. Multi-generational and alternative housing arrangements were suggested as means to alleviate these challenges, as well as a review of policies to ensure more stability in housing availability and affordability. For example, some participants advocated for providing greater flexibility in housing allowances or offering subsidies for families relocating to high-cost areas to help ease financial burdens and improve access to housing options.

Childcare and Eldercare: Participants emphasized that securing reliable child and eldercare is a top priority for Garnet families, especially given the challenges of frequent relocations, irregular and unpredictable work hours, and the fact that many families live far from extended family members who could otherwise provide care. Participants also problematized the shortage of accessible and affordable childcare options, particularly in emergency situations. Some noted this shortage is especially concerning because reliable childcare is essential for families to access other support services, such as mental health counseling. Similarly, participants discussed how the availability of childcare varies widely

by location. While some areas offer 24-hour childcare, families in other locations often face long waitlists. Furthermore, they addressed the ways families with more complex caregiving needs, such as those caring for children with disabilities or children and parents, encounter additional barriers in accessing appropriate services.

Overall, the discussions pointed to a clear need for respite care services that help alleviate the pressures on families, particularly caregivers. Some participants advocated for looking to innovative solutions that could offer new models of support for families balancing caregiving responsibilities. For example, one table referenced Sweden's grandparent leave program which lets parents transfer some of the total allotment of paid parental leave to a grandparent. Ultimately, participants conveyed that addressing gaps in childcare and respite care services is essential to helping Garnet families navigate their caregiving responsibilities while maintaining their overall wellbeing and accessing necessary support services.

Employment and Educational Opportunities: Roundtable participants explored how employment continuity for spouses is a significant challenge, particularly for those in licensed or regulated professions as their credentials often do not transfer across provinces or territories. They noted this creates disruptions in a spouse's career progression and adds strain to families, many of whom are forced to choose between financial stability and family life. To address this, some Roundtable participants recommended expanding support for portable job opportunities and streamlining the process for credential transfers across provinces and territories. Some participants suggested providing greater access to training and educational opportunities for family members affected by frequent relocations as a way to help ease some of the negative impacts of relocation. Overall, there was a sense that ensuring continuity of employment would help families maintain stability as they move from posting to posting.

Improving Access to Comprehensive, Culturally Competent, Preventative Mental Health Support for Garnet Families: Participants discussed mental wellbeing and resilience as top priorities for Garnet families, given the unique challenges and complex identities associated with defence and public safety work. Yet, participants also identified a lack of preventable and culturally competent support, challenges accessing support and navigating service provision, and a lack of continuity of care. They conveyed that the combination of frequent relocations, stress, and cumbersome logistics makes it even more difficult for Garnet families

to find the comprehensive support they need, whether related to health, caregiving, or family wellbeing. Participants also discussed the lack of both short- and long-term support for families and issues securing support. As one participant expressed, “Sometimes asking doesn’t get you anywhere,” highlighting the frustration families face when trying to access support.

Roundtable participants called for a shift from reactive to preventative approaches in mental healthcare, emphasizing the importance of early interventions, resilience training, and community-building programs to promote family wellbeing. For example, some participants proposed establishing additional peer support programs as a way to bridge gaps in mental health resources and ensure ongoing access to care. Additionally, there were calls to help families prepare for unique occupational challenges early on in the career lifecycle. This could involve providing tools and resources to help family members understand and manage the realities of service life from the outset. These discussions also highlighted the need for long-term and comprehensive mental health support, not just in immediate crises but as a sustained resource. For example, participants stressed the importance of long-term mental health support following critical incidents, rather than relying on short-term interventions.

Participants also drew attention to the critical need for cultural competence among healthcare providers, particularly in understanding the unique experiences and challenges faced by Garnet families. As one participant pointed out, “How does a Veteran condense 30+ years of service into a 30-minute session with a family doctor or specialist?” This comment highlights the complexity of translating the health implications associated with a lifetime of service into a brief consultation, a challenge that many face when seeking care. Another participant shared an experience in which they had to repeatedly retell their story to different service providers due to high staff turnover, ultimately leading them to disengage from treatment altogether. The lack of cultural competence can not only undermine trust and rapport but can also exacerbate feelings of alienation and frustration. To address these issues, participants suggested implementing continuing education programs for mental healthcare providers and offering professional development opportunities that focus on understanding the specific needs of Garnet families.

Access to Healthcare and Continuity of Care: Participants discussed how frequent relocations often require Garnet families to start over with new healthcare providers, noting

this can be particularly detrimental when specialized care is needed. They also explored how limitations in cross-provincial healthcare licensing and service portability can contribute to long wait times, delays in treatment, and gaps or interruptions in care. Participants outlined how families with special healthcare needs – such as children requiring regular screenings or Veterans coping with PTS – often lose access to specialists when they move and face challenges accessing care in new locations, including the difficulty of building rapport with new providers. Many Roundtable participants emphasized the need for a streamlined transfer of healthcare records and continuity of healthcare across postings. Participants also highlighted that certain families like those living in rural and Indigenous communities encounter more complex barriers to healthcare access, including geographic isolation and a lack of culturally competent care.

Release, Retirement, and Family Involvement: Roundtable participants conveyed that retirement or release from service are particularly challenging for Garnet families. They discussed how many families are unprepared for the significant adjustments these transitions involve and noted the level of support available during retirement varies by sector. One of the major difficulties highlighted by participants is the gap in mental healthcare services that often occurs when service members retire or are released. Participants voiced that an important consideration in these transitions is the need to involve spouses and other family members more comprehensively. There was a sense that keeping families fully informed and supported throughout this process is essential for their overall wellbeing and successful adjustment to life after service. For participants, this also involves making sure services for serving members and their families are better integrated, avoiding the silos that often exist between public safety and civilian systems.

Participants shared that transitioning from military to civilian life can be a daunting process, and improving transitions between care providers, whether from military healthcare to civilian services or from one location to another, could help alleviate some of the stress families experience during this time. They advocated for integrated services that bridge gaps and make it easier for families to access comprehensive support rather than navigating fragmented or siloed systems on their own. Overall, discussions about release, retirement, and transition emphasized the need for family-inclusive approaches and support services that address the needs of entire families, rather than focusing solely on the individual service member.

Challenging Stigma and Building Resilience: Another key theme focused on creating family dynamics and a broader culture in which mental health is openly discussed, vulnerability is seen as a strength, and the stigma around seeking help is actively challenged. Participants felt this would help shift from the traditional “military mentality” of suffering in silence, where emotional struggles are often hidden or dismissed. Participants emphasized the importance of fostering an environment where mental health challenges are recognized as a natural part of life, rather than something to be ashamed of. There was a strong consensus that encouraging open dialogue within families can not only help normalize mental health challenges but build stronger, more resilient support systems. By creating spaces for these conversations, there was a sense that families can better navigate the complexities of mental health, ensuring that individuals feel heard, and are empowered to seek help when needed.

Several groups of participants discussed the need to identify and better understand Garnet families who are thriving. There was a sense that having a better understanding of what these families are doing differently or successfully can help replicate those positive outcomes across the broader Garnet families community. Similarly, some participants felt that focusing on the positive aspects of Garnet family life can lead to more nuanced understanding of various family needs and strengths. They noted how recognizing families who are thriving can create opportunities to celebrate them while also helping foster a greater sense of community and resilience within the broader Garnet Families Network.

QUESTION #2:

HOW CAN WE ENHANCE OUR ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTION WITH GARNET FAMILIES AND THOSE WHO STUDY, SERVE, AND SUPPORT THEM?

This question sparked thoughtful discussions about the challenges and opportunities for deeper engagement with Garnet families. Participants expressed that, in order to truly engage Garnet families and those that study, serve, and support them, a holistic approach is needed, and engagement must be continuous as opposed to episodic. Similarly, the discussions underscored how efforts to engage Garnet families should prioritize improving cultural awareness, targeted outreach, the dissemination of accurate and accessible information, and the creation of supportive and inclusive spaces for meaningful connections. To strengthen efforts to engage and connect, several key strategies and areas for development were identified.

Knowledge Mobilization, Consistent Communication, and Accessible Information:

Overall, the Roundtable discussions highlighted inconsistencies in how Garnet families get essential information. Participants discussed how many Garnet families struggle with knowing where to turn for support, as critical information does not always reach all family members. They noted that information fatigue, combined with a lack of awareness about available services, leaves many families disconnected from much needed resources. Some participants also discussed how families often feel overwhelmed by an excess of information, while others pointed out a lack of access to information. This discrepancy reveals inconsistencies in communication and knowledge mobilization efforts. Participants problematized how families are frequently overlooked as a primary audience in knowledge mobilization efforts and emphasized instead that they should be a central focus. Similarly, participants voiced that it can be difficult to access accurate information due to complex systems and siloed services. To enhance engagement with Garnet families, participants felt it is crucial to prioritize effective knowledge mobilization, so families receive timely, accessible, and relevant information in formats that work for them.

Additionally, participants pointed out that understanding how different families access and act upon information is key to improving engagement. Specifically, they conveyed that recognizing the different ways families engage with information can help tailor communication strategies so that they align with a variety of family needs. There was a sense across the different tables that better understanding these differences and tailoring engagement strategies to accommodate them will help all families, regardless of location, bandwidth, or communication preferences, feel included and supported. Participants advocated for using a mix of communication channels, such as word-of-mouth, social media, and in-person interactions, in order to reach families more effectively. Participants also pointed to the challenge of ensuring that families receive the right information at the right time. There was a shared sentiment that prioritizing the most relevant information and streamlining messaging is essential to prevent information overload or confusion. Additionally, integrating lived experiences into the dissemination of information was identified as a powerful way to enhance engagement.

Participants emphasized that a cornerstone of improving communication and connection with Garnet families is ensuring that messages are clear and consistent. They noted families must know exactly where to turn for information and services. Some participants suggested developing a user-friendly resource like a repository, hub, or app that provides a comprehensive list of services and information. There was a sense that this resource could provide clear pathways through complex webs of information, making it easier for families to access information and make informed decisions. Ultimately, an approach to knowledge mobilization that prioritizes clarity, consistency, and accessibility was recognized as key to bridging the gaps in communication and fostering stronger, more meaningful engagement with Garnet families.

Increasing Awareness and Growing Cultural Competence: Many Roundtable participants indicated that Garnet families frequently encounter challenges when engaging with organizations or professionals who do not fully grasp their distinct needs and experiences. Consequently, there was a sense that one of the first steps to enhancing engagement is fostering cultural competence among educators, service providers, and organizations directly interacting with these families. Participants suggested engaging with individuals and organizations as they are often the first point of contact for Garnet families yet may not

be equipped to provide culturally competent care. Ultimately, participants felt a more occupationally aware approach to care and service provision could improve both engagement and outcomes, ensuring the services professionals offer are relevant and sensitive to the needs of Garnet families.

Building Community Through Targeted Outreach: Roundtable participants noted that targeted outreach efforts are essential for connecting with Garnet families and voiced a need to create spaces in which Garnet families can connect with one another. Participants suggested organizing roundtables, online forums, webinars, and other types of events to facilitate engagement and build a sense of community. They also discussed how community is forged through formal organizations and events, but also through informal social networks and suggested tapping into these informal channels of communication as a powerful means to connect with families. Similarly, participants noted it is essential to “meet families where they are at”, to break down barriers to engagement. Some participants expressed that one challenge to engagement is defining who is a Garnet family. These participants indicated the term itself is new and will be unfamiliar to some families; raising awareness about what it means to be part of this community would help to make certain that all families who need support feel empowered to reach out. They noted that clear definitions and targeted outreach efforts will help families recognize and celebrate their identity and connection to the broader Garnet families community.

Engaging Communities in Research and Co-Creating Knowledge: Enhancing the impact, relevance, and accessibility of research was identified as another way of improving engagement with Garnet families. Several tables discussed the importance of involving families in co-creating knowledge, ensuring their participation at various stages of the research process. A few participants indicated there can be tension between researchers and Garnet families, especially those with negative past experiences where they felt treated as mere “test subjects”; most participants emphasized the significant opportunities for meaningful engagement through participatory and collaborative research initiatives. There was a sense that these initiatives have the potential to empower families, give them a voice in shaping research agendas, and make sure research addresses the issues that matter most to the community. Similarly, participants felt involving Garnet families in the co-production of research would not only strengthen the relevance of the findings but help ensure researchers are more likely to focus on the most pressing challenges that directly impact families.

The discussions underscored that an essential part of this process is ensuring that research findings are effectively shared with participants and the broader Garnet families community. Participants called for research to not only be shared with the families who contributed but also reach those in positions to influence change, including policymakers, those in leadership positions, and frontline workers. Building partnerships between researchers, organizations, and other relevant parties was proposed as a means to make certain that research findings reach a wider audience. Similarly, participants suggested researchers host interactive sessions to engage families at different stages of research, fostering a more inclusive and interactive approach to knowledge sharing.

QUESTION #3: WHAT MIGHT A CROSS-SECTORAL KNOWLEDGE SHARING EVENT SPECIFIC TO FAMILIES LOOK LIKE AND WHAT COULD IT ACHIEVE?

Overall, participants expressed that, to organize a successful cross-sectoral knowledge-sharing event, it is essential to embrace an inclusive, community-driven approach that recognizes and addresses the unique needs, voices, and experiences of a diverse array of families. Participants felt as though the event must be co-created with families, focused on community-building while ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, and practical support. In other words, families should be at the center, participating in ways that recognize their unique lived experiences. There was a sense that this kind of event can help build trust, break down silos, and create a lasting impact by equipping families with the tools and support they need. Below is a synthesis of the key themes, considerations, and strategies that emerged through discussion.

Benefit to Families: Creating Value Through Meaningful, Family-Centered Events: For events to be truly impactful, participants conveyed they must offer tangible benefits to families. Participants stressed the importance of creating value for families and showing appreciation for their contributions to public safety. Additionally, they emphasized that events should engage the entire family unit and offer something for every family member to enjoy and participate in. They noted how families are seeking actionable advice and tangible solutions to help navigate their experiences. Interactive sessions that encourage dialogue, brainstorming, and sharing real-world experiences were proposed as effective means of fostering collaboration that would allow families to leave events with practical takeaways that can be applied in their everyday lives.

Participants highlighted that follow-through after events is equally important. They described how families need to see the outcomes of their participation and understand how the insights generated at the event are being put into practice. There was a sense that

providing clear outputs, whether in the form of resources, reports, or future events, can help show families their contributions were meaningful and had some impact. Participants underscored that at the heart of these events should be community-building and not just knowledge-sharing. Similarly, they indicated that, by incorporating fun, family-oriented activities, and creating a relaxed and welcoming environment, attendees would be more likely to attend and better able to connect with one another.

Creating Inclusive Spaces and Amplifying Diverse Family Voices: Many participants underscored the importance of cultivating a safe, inclusive, and equitable environment for events. They recommended events that prioritize equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion and seek to addressing the unique challenges faced by diverse families (e.g., Indigenous, Black, LGBTQ, and newcomer families). Similarly, participants noted considerations must be made for families with different needs, whether those are physical, emotional, or economic. To maximize attendance and participation, participants felt it is crucial to remove barriers that might prevent families from attending. Providing childcare or covering travel costs for remote participants were identified as key considerations that could improve engagement. These considerations were seen as particularly important for families with young children or caregivers who may face challenges in attending events without additional support.

Participants voiced the need for creating dedicated spaces for marginalized groups to ensure their perspectives are fully represented and valued. They conveyed how these spaces could not only provide a platform for underrepresented voices but also foster an environment where all families feel empowered to participate without fear of marginalization or retribution. Finally, discussions emphasized that safety is paramount. To encourage families to share their experiences and engage in open dialogue, participants expressed that it is essential to establish clear norms designed to protect families from rank-based hierarchies. Ultimately, there was a strong consensus among participants that events should be designed to be as accessible and inclusive as possible, with an emphasis on making it easier for all families to participate without additional stress or inconvenience.

Emphasizing Lived Experience and Involving Families: Participants shared a strong belief that events should be co-created alongside a diverse range of families with lived experience.

They emphasized that involving families in both the planning and execution phases could help to ensure the event remains relevant, meaningful, and impactful. There was a sense that incorporating lived experience would bring essential, firsthand knowledge that can ground discussions in real-world challenges and ensure the event reflects the diverse realities of Garnet family life. Participants also underscored the importance of including families from across the defense and public safety sectors as a means to address the challenge of breaking down sectoral silos and facilitating cross-sectoral understanding. As discussed in more detail below, there was a sense that this cross-sector dialogue would allow participants to share insights, learn from one another, and identify strategies that are working well within one sector and consider how they might be adapted or applied to others. In this way, the event would foster mutual learning, encourage knowledge exchange, and ultimately help create a more unified and collaborative community of Garnet families.

Creating Flexible and Ongoing Engagement Opportunities for Families: Roundtable participants shared a range of insightful ideas regarding how to design or structure a cross-sectoral knowledge-sharing event tailored to families. For example, many participants noted events should combine both in-person and virtual elements to ensure accessibility and flexibility for participants. Several participants suggested that, instead of holding a single large event, it would be worthwhile to consider holding a series of small, regional events to allow for more localized participation. These regional events could be complemented by a virtual component such as monthly family drop-ins to ensure broader reach. Similarly, participants explored the value of holding regular events. There was a sense that, in order to build trust and familiarity, events should not be one-time occurrences. Instead, they felt events should be ongoing to maintain engagement and build community engagement over time.

Cross-Sector Dialogue: Participants pointed out the importance of creating spaces within the event structure where sector-specific concerns could be explored and addressed. With attendees representing diverse sectors – including military, public safety, and veteran services – there was a strong call for dedicated time to discuss both the unique challenges and commonalities that families face across these different fields. Participants noted that by incorporating spaces for sector-specific discussions, the event could foster more targeted solutions and allow participants to learn from one another, building cross-sectoral understanding and collaboration.

Additionally, there was a sense that creating room for cross-sectoral discussions could help to identify opportunities for aligning resources across different sectors, making it easier to implement interventions that address the complex and overlapping needs of families from various sectors. Moreover, participants suggested that engaging participants in cross-sector dialogue could lead to greater innovation in support strategies and build stronger partnerships across different sectors or organizations dedicated to serving these sectors.

Conclusion

Many of the same issues faced by Garnet families continue to emerge year after year, alongside new nuances that surface through discussions. The continued persistence of these challenges highlights the urgent need for attention and action. To continue to advance discourse and action in ways that impact families positively, Garnet families will require investment and support from all sectors of society, including individuals, families, communities, organizations, and various levels of government. As we look ahead, the Roundtable discussions make it clear that it is crucial to work collaboratively to continue to amplify the voices of Garnet families and spread the word about the need for change. Together, we can build a more supportive future for Garnet families.



Figure 2: Each animal represents a different family in defense and/or public safety sectors. For instance, the otter, chosen through community consultations, symbolizes emergency communications families.