

EVENT

SUMMARY

**CONNECTING GARNET FAMILIES:
2025 ROUNDTABLE SYNTHESIS
ON ACCESS, NAVIGATION, AND
FASTER KNOWLEDGE USE**



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Attendees & Organization

CIMVHR

The Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) is a national research network that brings together researchers, practitioners, policy leaders, community organizations, and those with lived experience to advance the health and well-being of military personnel, Veterans, and their families. CIMVHR's core functions include convening and connecting diverse partners, supporting research collaboration, mobilizing and amplifying evidence, and fostering dialogue across sectors.

CIMVHR does not deliver services, operate programs, or implement digital tools, nor does it set policy or control eligibility, funding, or service provision within military, Veteran, or public safety systems. Its role is best understood as a platform and steward, creating spaces where evidence, lived experience, and practice insights can be shared; supporting alignment across organizations; and helping ensure research findings are accessible, relevant, and usable by those positioned to act.

Garnet Families

Garnet Families has evolved as an integrated combination of research (Families Matter Research Group), network (Garnet Families Network), and partnership (Garnet Families Partnership) activities, all working together to advance and share research that resonates with community priorities and informs program and policy development. The garnet gemstone was chosen as a unifying symbol. Garnets are

commonly associated with love, loyalty, and safe return, values that resonate strongly within military, Veteran, and public safety families. Garnet Families is a community-based network of the Families Matter Research Group at Queen's University. It exists to support Canadian defence, first responder, and public safety personnel families, increasingly recognized as 'Garnet families,' by providing free resources, fostering connection, and cultivating a supportive community grounded in lived experience and research. Garnet Families recognizes that no two families' experiences are the same and that families face distinct and evolving demands in maintaining their well-being across postings, deployments, transitions, and daily life.

As both community members and knowledge holders, Garnet Families play a critical role in surfacing lived realities, shaping meaningful questions, and identifying what information, supports, and connections are most useful to families themselves. Garnet Families is not a service delivery or policy authority; rather, it acts as a bridge between families, research, and broader systems of support.

CIMVHR-Garnet Families Roundtable

This report synthesizes insights shared during the CIMVHR-Garnet Families Roundtable convened at the CIMVHR Forum 2025. It reflects participant perspectives on emerging needs, gaps, and opportunities affecting Canadian defence and public safety families. The content is intended to inform dialogue, alignment, and future collaboration across the research, policy, service, and community ecosystem. It does not constitute an implementation plan, a set of commitments, or an allocation of responsibility to any single organization. It is an important annual 'pulse check' to capture changes in what challenges and opportunities are presenting for families and those who study, serve, and support them.

Executive Summary

This report synthesizes a national roundtable on Garnet families to:

1. Identify emerging needs and areas where policy and services can improve.
2. Surface participant-identified needs, opportunities, and system-level conditions affecting how Garnet families access, navigate, and use knowledge, and to situate CIMVHR's potential role as a convenor and knowledge-mobilization connector within that broader ecosystem.

Participant tables included a mix of service providers, researchers, knowledge mobilizers, Garnet family members, and active or former serving persons, alongside representatives from government, philanthropy, and other community roles (see Figure 1: Roundtable participant check-in survey results).

Key Findings:

Participants identified interconnected challenges affecting Garnet families across access to care, communication, mobility, policy alignment, and knowledge use.

Access and care continuity were central concerns. Families described widening gaps in primary and mental health care, long wait times, and disrupted continuity across postings, with burnout particularly affecting younger families. Participants emphasized trauma-informed, wrap-around approaches that support earlier identification of risk and practical navigation, while recognizing the role of purpose, meaning, and identity in family well-being and help-seeking

Communication and navigation challenges were seen as compounding access issues. Families want a clear place to start, clarity on roles and responsibilities, and direct communication that does not rely solely on serving members. Participants stressed the importance of vetted information over unverified social media and highlighted MFRCs as trusted hubs, despite contact-information barriers and growing virtual fatigue. Consistent, adaptable dissemination through schools, bases, MFRCs, and community partners was emphasized.

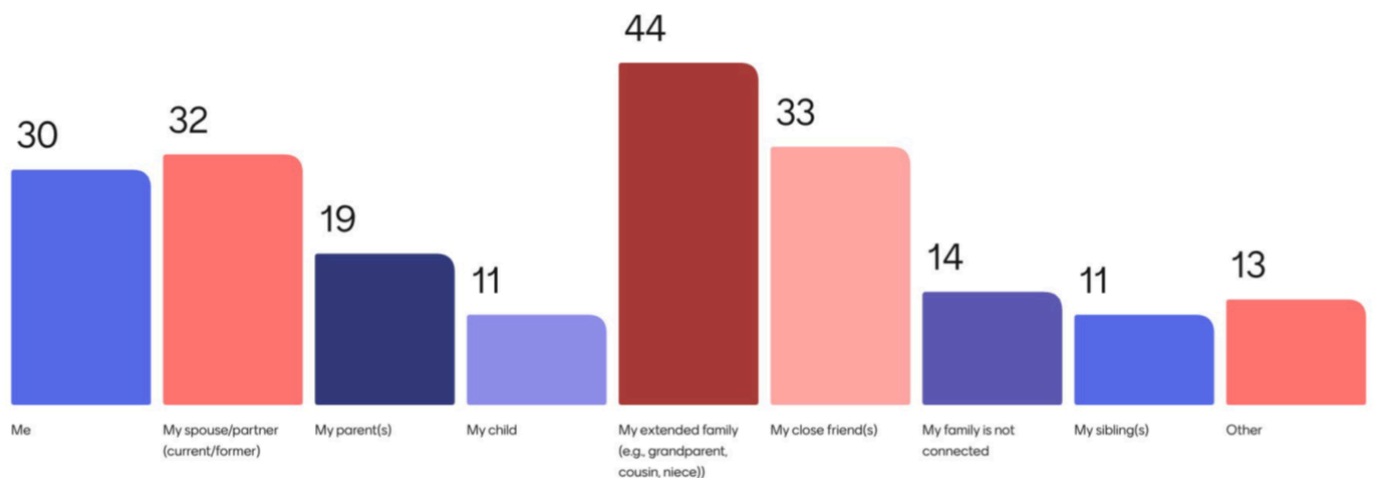
Family life and mobility were described as having cascading effects on health care, schooling, employment, and daily routines. Participants raised education portability, youth isolation following COVID-19, childcare misalignment with work schedules, cost-of-living pressures, and challenges related to spousal employment, credential portability, and recognition of diverse family structures.

Policy and system alignment challenges persist, with misaligned benefits, communications, and eligibility contributing to stigma, trust, and awareness issues. These challenges were viewed as particularly acute for reservists, part-time or volunteer public safety members, and families outside traditional assumptions.

Finally, **partnerships, connection, and knowledge use** were framed as critical enablers. Participants emphasized co-designed research, plain-language outputs, attention to dual-serving couples, and system-level navigation tools that help families see how research translates into relevant supports.

Roundtable participant check-in survey results

How is your family connected to actively or previously serving military, first responder, or public safety communities? Please select all that apply.



DISCUSSION #1:

What issues and needs are currently emerging for Garnet families?

Prompts:

- How well do existing policies address the needs of Garnet families?
- What specific changes have you noticed, or what improvements are required?
- What supports and services are currently available to Garnet families, and how can they be enhanced to better meet emerging needs?

Access & care continuity

Participants described healthcare gaps and how they are widening, including waits of up to 18 months to access a family doctor, alongside challenges in accessing care and maintaining continuity across postings. Access to primary care and mental health services in both military and public safety family contexts was described as extremely difficult. Families linked these pressures to burnout, particularly among younger members, and highlighted the need for clearer visibility and mapping of available supports across jurisdictions and systems.

A trauma-informed, wrap-around approach was emphasized as a condition for addressing concerns earlier and more effectively, with participants underscoring how care continuity is disrupted by postings, school transitions, and system handoffs. Safety and mental health concerns included family or partner violence, acknowledgement of moral injury, and the need to reduce shame and guilt associated with mental health challenges while strengthening skills to support those living with addiction. Participants also pointed to the importance of understanding how health changes, postings, and transition points affect families' sense of purpose and identity, and how these deeper dynamics influence help-seeking and engagement with services.

Communication & navigation

Participants highlighted gaps in the visibility and awareness of available services, noting that families often struggle to know where to start or who is responsible for what. They described the need for direct communication with families that does not rely solely on serving members as intermediaries. Practical navigation ideas included sit-down conversations to map pathways to help and escalation, paired with timely outreach during deployments and other transitions, with participants noting that communication gaps place significant pressure on families.

Participants emphasized that, in the absence of reliable institutional communication, families may turn to unverified social media, underscoring the importance of access to vetted, trustworthy information. MFRCs were consistently identified as trusted hubs with a wide range of supports, yet participants noted persistent contact-information barriers that limit proactive outreach, with similar challenges on the public safety side. Participants identified dissemination as most effective when it intentionally includes MFRCs, schools, bases, and community organizations, supported by simple, adaptable toolkits that preserve core, evidence-based messages and reduce reliance on virtual-only channels amid growing virtual fatigue.

Family life & mobility

Postings were described as having cascading effects on families' access to health care, schooling, employment, and daily routines, often resetting supports just as they become established. Participants referenced international examples, such as school passport models, and highlighted the need for a pan-Canadian approach to education portability to reduce repeated disruption for children.

Youth needs were prominent, particularly in relation to post-COVID-19 isolation and loss of social skills, with different supports required for younger children and older adolescents. Childcare was repeatedly described as misaligned with work schedules, especially for families managing 12-hour shifts and alternating caregiving arrangements, prompting discussion of centralized or extended-hours childcare options. Participants also pointed to cost-of-living pressures, decentralized base communities, attachment ruptures, and identity challenges, with uneven access to resources across rural and urban settings. Postings further affect spousal employment and credential portability, creating financial strain when families

are forced into single-income arrangements. Participants noted generational differences in expectations of military life, with younger families placing greater emphasis on well-being, shared decision-making, and quality of life.

Policy & system alignment

Participants described persistent misalignment across policies, benefits, and communications that can leave families taking a back seat, particularly when systems are not designed with family realities in mind. They called for better education for families and more flexible leadership approaches that recognize how career pathways and organizational structures affect family well-being. Gaps in benefit design and delivery were identified as contributing to inequity and confusion, especially for families navigating complex or non-traditional circumstances.

These challenges were described as enduring year over year, alongside ongoing stigma, trust, and awareness issues. Participants emphasized the importance of grounding service culture and identity-related work in research evidence rather than short-term public or political debates. Policy alignment was viewed as particularly critical for reservists, part-time or volunteer public safety members, and families whose circumstances fall outside traditional assumptions about military or public safety families.

Dual-serving couples & MFRC context

Participants highlighted significant gaps affecting dual-serving couples, noting that resources are often limited or absent on the public safety side and constrained on the military side, with many services implicitly assuming a non-serving spouse. Lived realities include reliance on extended family for childcare, challenges maintaining intimacy, and heightened complexity when two CAF members deploy simultaneously.

MFRC supports, including childcare, social work, deployment preparation, events, wellness expos, and curated external resources, were widely valued. At the same time, participants reiterated that MFRCs frequently lack direct contact information for families, with similar constraints on the public safety side, limiting proactive outreach and coordination.

DISCUSSION #2:

As a core member of the Garnet Families Partnership, how can CIMVHR help Garnet families stay better connected with researchers, partner organizations, and collaborators, so that useful knowledge is shared and used more quickly?

Participants' reflections in this section were offered in response to a prompt about CIMVHR's role as a convenor and connector within a broader ecosystem, rather than as an implementing body or service provider. The observations below are therefore presented as system-level opportunities and conditions that shape how families connect with knowledge, research, and one another.

Prompts:

- How do we make Garnet families feel more connected to a broader community of Garnet families?
- How do Garnet families learn to recognize they are Garnet families?

Community connection & belonging

Participants stressed that community connection requires more than one-way communication and cannot rely solely on email. They highlighted the value of in-person or hybrid touchpoints, such as day- or half-day gatherings, speaker series, and conferences that engage knowledge users alongside academic audiences.

Families expressed interest in hearing directly from other families and suggested family-oriented events involving researchers. Participants also noted that, while the CIMVHR Forum is effective for building networking channels, translating ideas generated in these spaces into practice requires coordination beyond any single convening event.

Liaising with clinicians and educators was described as energizing for researchers and important for ensuring that research questions remain grounded in real-world needs.

Participants encouraged CIMVHR, alongside partners, to build on existing organizations and local champions (for example, MFRCs, the Vanier Institute, and family leaders) as convening anchors where research can be discussed in concrete, relatable terms rather than exclusively academic formats.

Recognition & identity as Garnet

Participants asked what constitutes “useful knowledge” for families and called for more direct lines of communication that reach families who may not be accessing formal services. They emphasized the importance of researchers closing the loop more frequently and suggested a research community snapshot that would help families understand what work is underway and how to connect with information relevant to their lives.

A succinct purpose statement captured expectations articulated by participants: Support conditions that enable useful knowledge to be shared and applied more quickly to benefit Garnet families. Participants also highlighted the value of qualitative data and family stories in surfacing lesser-known issues that align closely with lived experience and may not be visible through traditional research outputs alone.

Channels, formats & the RIGHT information / RIGHT audience

Participants observed that CIMVHR’s activities are often perceived as operating primarily at the research or academic level and identified a need to move knowledge more effectively to families and other knowledge users. The core challenge was framed explicitly: How to ensure that the right information reaches the right audience, in the right format, at the right time.

Participants recommended multi-channel dissemination approaches, including MFRC newsletters, short and frequent social media updates (“constant trickles”), lay summaries, podcasts, speaker series, and conferences calibrated to knowledge users. They emphasized the importance of bilingual and plain-language outputs and urged that families themselves be asked how they prefer to receive information. Participants also cautioned against over-

reliance on digital delivery due to virtual fatigue and suggested pairing digital content with concise print materials that can be shared through clinics, MFRCs, schools, and community events.

Partnerships & outreach coordination

Participants described the realities of outreach and coordination, noting that feedback from families is difficult to obtain but essential for improving services. Military, Veteran, and public safety families were described as inundated with information, complicating efforts to ensure messages are received and acted upon. Participants asked how information can be shared effectively in a crowded communication environment and raised questions about accountability and follow-through across the system.

Collaboration was described as often occurring without dedicated funding, with informal processes and back-channel coordination slowing progress. Persistent contact-information barriers, particularly the lack of direct family contact data within MFRC and public safety systems, were identified as foundational constraints. Participants suggested prioritizing research funding that is co-designed with existing family and support services, so studies are grounded in real-world practice and can be more easily applied. They also emphasized the need for researchers to clearly explain how findings can be used in the field and to involve families directly in shaping research questions, interpreting results, and guiding follow-up actions.

Conclusion

This roundtable highlights a set of system-level conditions that shape how Garnet families connect, recognize themselves, and use knowledge more quickly. Families emphasized the importance of clarity around roles and responsibilities, access to vetted and timely information, and navigation supports that reduce reliance on unverified social media.

MFRCs were consistently identified as well-positioned to anchor family-facing entry points. Within this ecosystem, CIMVHR's role is to convene dialogue, curate and amplify plain-language research summaries, support feedback loops between families and researchers, and help align evidence with family-identified priorities—rather than to implement services or infrastructure.

Participants emphasized that CIMVHR, MFRCs, CAF/VAC, researchers, funders, and community partners each have distinct and complementary roles. Co-design with families, resolution of contact-information barriers, clearer navigation pathways, and reporting back on progress were described as shared responsibilities. Taken together, these coordinated efforts can help military and Veteran families recognize themselves in the system, feel connected to a broader community, and use evidence more effectively, while policy and system alignment reduce barriers linked to postings, daily life, and dual-serving couples.

Overall, families asked not only for more evidence, but for evidence that is translated into practical, accessible forms that support everyday decision-making and strengthen family well-being.

Acknowledgements

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