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Soldier and Family Readiness Groups

Considerations for Implementation



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About This Report

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *Readiness Group Support for Resilient Soldiers and Families*, sponsored by the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-9, U.S. Army. The purpose of the project was to assess the implementation of Army policy that changed Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) to Soldier and Family Readiness Groups (SFRGs) to determine whether Army families are aware of the changes, how the changes are being implemented at different installations (including challenges commanders are facing implementing the changes), and whether the new SFRGs are appropriately designed to engage Army soldiers and families and increase readiness and resilience among Army families.

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Summary

The U.S. Army provides an array of programs and services to help soldiers and their families navigate the challenges of military life. One such support is Soldier and Family Readiness Groups (SFRGs), which provide spouses and other family members with information and activities to facilitate engagement in the Army community. In 2019, new policy guidance covering these groups initiated several differences of note:

- Unit commanders' role in leadership was more strongly emphasized.
- The name was changed from Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) to emphasize the inclusion of soldiers, as well as family members.
- The emphasis of the group's activities shifted from socialization to communication.
- The role of volunteers received less emphasis, while the role of the Command Family Readiness Representative (CFRR) was expanded.

The Army asked the RAND Arroyo Center to assess the implementation of the new Army policy to determine whether Army families were aware of associated changes and whether the new SFRGs are appropriately designed to engage Army soldiers and families and increase readiness and resilience among Army families. To conduct this assessment, we developed a logic model to frame the evaluation, reviewed the growing literature on peer support groups to determine what makes these groups successful, evaluated the policy change itself to identify potential gaps, fielded a survey to Army spouses to gain their perceptions of the changes, and conducted supplemental interviews with a limited number of stakeholders. The totality of this work speaks to best practices for implementing and administering SFRGs, and these best practices underlie the findings and recommendations.

Summary of Findings

The key findings that emerged from our assessment span and integrate what we learned from the different elements of our approach. These findings point to conditions that facilitate engagement and, in turn, help ensure the success of SFRGs. They also point to areas where policies could be improved to strengthen outcomes, as detailed in the recommendations to follow. Although evidence from the literature review focused on peer support groups with different goals, the general findings are still relevant for the Army's interest in forming a network of support within the Army community and understanding how best to engage members of that community.

- The literature suggests that **structured group formats** with some predictability but with built-in flexibility facilitate engagement. The flexibility should center around the needs of the individual group, so some mechanism for assessing those needs would be helpful,

whether informally canvassing members or providing a structured survey. That said, the new guidance does not specify the activities needed to successfully implement an SFRG. Although prior and new guidance allow for autonomy at the unit level to determine the specific content and structure of SFRG activities, the new guidance does not specify the need for synchronous group communication, including in-person or virtual meetings, nor does it specify the content of communications, specifically the type of information that should be shared with group members. In addition, the new guidance explicitly redirects group activities away from social activities and fundraising to information-sharing activities.

- **The role of peer group leaders** (in this case, unit commanders and CFRRs) is critical. These individuals need training and support—the importance of which is strongly supported in the literature. Thus, the structure and content of SFRG training will be important for determining the success of the program. Because of the demographic and positional differences between leaders and group members, skill sets such as communications and interpersonal tools can help group leaders foster trust and a climate of open communication. In addition, choosing peer group leaders with similarities to group membership yields benefits in terms of engagement, which can be accommodated, as discussed in the literature, by having multiple group leaders that speak to different aspects of the group’s membership—such as soldiers versus family members—in the case of SFRGs.
- Given recent changes in policy that **broaden the responsibilities of the CFRR**, the selection of the CFRR and facilitation of that role, in terms of time and other resources to perform the role, will be integral. Thus, clarifying the qualities and characteristics that are important for CFRRs to possess (appropriate knowledge skills, abilities, and time required to complete their responsibilities) is needed. Related are concerns about the disparity between the old and new guidance on the role of volunteers and the degree to which they can play a role in group leadership or sharing administrative support duties that also need clarification.
- One finding from the literature review with the greatest weight of support speaks to the **importance of minimizing logistical issues associated with access** to group activities. Choice of meeting location, platform access options, and accessibility of content affect engagement. Both the literature and our survey results confirm that challenges such as busy schedules can be a barrier to engagement, which relates to decisions about communication channels and venues that can minimize such obstacles to participation.
- **Resources for leadership training and skill building and the costs of information-sharing** also need to be supported. The literature also speaks to the need for peer support groups to be well resourced in this fashion. Even though the new guidance stresses the role of SFRGs in producing a network of social support among unit members and their families, it does not explicitly provide a mechanism for achieving that goal or guidance regarding how fundraising for social activities should be incorporated to help support the goal. Providing resources that make it easier for leaders to know how to accomplish this goal would facilitate their achievement.
- Importantly, the new guidance does not make allowances for **monitoring or evaluation of the implementation** of SFRG inputs, activities, or outcomes, which will make it difficult to know how integrated and effective SFRGs are across installations or units

within installations and could potentially be a barrier to collecting and disseminating SFRG best practices.

- Finally, survey results suggest that **awareness of the policy change** from FRGs to SFRGs is not widespread among active component spouses who have been part of Army families since 2018. Most spouses who are aware of the change perceived that the groups have stayed the same and consider SFRGs a good venue for obtaining both accurate and useful information—one of the key functions of SFRGs explicitly emphasized in the new policy.

Recommendations

SFRGs need flexibility to adapt to the needs of the unit and to contextual factors such as upcoming deployments, but our research suggests that the Army should provide some basic guidance for required group activities, informational content, and group structure. Failure to impose some basic guidelines might result in uneven implementation of SFRGs across installations and units. In that light, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Army policy should be more explicit about the types of social activities that are acceptable in SFRGs.** Community building and creating a network of social support are central activities of SFRGs and are specifically mentioned in Army policy as a primary SFRG objective. Group activities that are intended to enable community building among participants should be specified as a core activity for SFRGs. Thus, efforts to provide affordable, broadly inclusive activities that give soldiers and their families opportunities to get to know both each other and leadership should be targeted in SFRG policy, and allowable fundraising activities should be clarified.
- **Army G-9 should provide expanded guidance on the types of topics the Army would like SFRGs to address as part of their activities.** Our survey results suggest that many spouses perceive SFRGs as good sources of information, and current policy reemphasizes the importance of SFRGs in providing information to participants. To aid in the distribution of information, additional guidance would be useful and could, for example, suggest key topics for SFRGs to include in information-sharing or lists of potential topics. It could also include ideas for how to incorporate speaker presentations into SFRG activities or opportunities for soldiers and families to participate in community volunteer activities.
- **The Army should provide suggestions on SFRG meeting frequency and more specifics and guidance on the minimal levels of other forms of outreach (e.g., social media posts) to ensure that SFRGs meet a basic level of activity to engage and inform participants.** The literature speaks to the essential nature of interpersonal exchanges between members for fostering engagement. SFRG activities sometimes lapse until they are perceived as critical (e.g., when a deployment is forthcoming). More specific guidance on the pace of regular activities can help ensure that this does not happen. If activity levels diminish, it reduces the ability of SFRGs to reach program goals of consistently providing information to participants and building a network of community support.
- **The Army should clarify further the role of volunteers and CFRRs in SFRG policy.** The current SFRG policy centers more responsibility on CFRRs, some of which was

previously handled by volunteers, and is also less specific on the role of volunteers. Specific policy guidance is needed on whether spouses or other family members can take leadership roles in SFRGs. Encouraging such engagement would be consistent with guidance from the literature that it can be helpful to have multiple leaders who align with various demographic or other characteristics of group participants. Moreover, given the role of the CFRR, such guidance may help support the CFRR in their expanded duties.

- **The Army should incorporate measurement of performance indicators into SFRG policy.** Although SFRG policy explicitly negates any role for compliance inspections, the implementation literature suggests that program performance monitoring and evaluation is central to ensuring that programs are meeting their stated goals. The Army might consider how best to incorporate such measurement and assessment, whether through informal or formal processes. Tracking performance indicators will help commanders monitor the “health” of their SFRG, assess the impact of implementation changes on SFRG performance, and facilitate establishment and sharing of best practices.
- **SFRG leadership training should provide templates and sample materials for executing SFRGs.** New SFRG policy specifies that role-specific training will be provided to SFRG leadership team members, which is consistent with the importance of training and support in increasing participant engagement and improving the SFRG function discussed in the literature with respect to peer support groups. As part of such training, providing templates and sample materials for all key activities of the SFRG—group administration, information-sharing, and community building activities—will increase consistency across SFRGs, reduce the administrative burden on leadership, and help leaders execute the program as intended.

Our research supports the utility that an effective SFRG can have in fostering engagement in the Army community among leadership, soldiers, and families. The updated Army policy has indicated support for these groups and emphasized important roles, such as information-sharing. But the new policy guidance is less clear on some areas that can have important influence on the overall success of these groups in achieving their missions. Our recommendations highlight gaps in the policy guidance that, if addressed, can improve the likelihood of achieving the outcomes for which the Army aims.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The Army recognizes that military life entails some relatively unique challenges, including deployments, training, and frequent relocations. These challenges affect both the military member and that member's family. To alleviate the impact of these challenges, the Army provides an array of programs and services. The military community itself can serve an important role for soldiers and their families as well, ideally forming a network of social support (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NAS], 2019). However, the mere existence of programs, services, and an available community of members with similar experiences is not sufficient to provide a ready-made network of support or to resolve Army family issues.

Research has identified ongoing challenges with how available services are provided to military members and their families, including low utilization of programs (NAS, 2019). Even when service members and families are aware of the existence of various programs and are interested in using them, family members can have difficulty navigating the numerous programs and services to find the best resource to fit their needs (Sims et al., 2018; Trail, Sims, and Tankard, 2019; Trail, Sims, and Hall, 2021). Moreover, family members—who do not themselves have the same direct ties to the Army as soldiers do—might find this navigation process even more formidable.

Soldier and Family Readiness Groups (SFRGs), which in 2019 replaced Family Readiness Groups (FRGs), are one formal mechanism the Army provides to spouses and other family members to facilitate engagement in the Army community. As Booth et al. (2007) discussed, FRGs tried to find balance between formal supports provided by the Army and informal, or more social, supports that can provide an interpersonal network for spouses of soldiers and their families. The change to SFRGs was meant to expand the groups' scope to include a broader set of people affiliated with the Army, including "unit personnel, their family members, volunteers, and single soldiers" and integrate them into a "communication, information, and support network" (Headquarters, Department of the Army [HQDA] Execution Order [EXORD] 233-19, 2019, para. 3.A). The Army asked the RAND Arroyo Center to assess the implementation of the SFRGs and associated policy changes and how this program can best be positioned to continue to support Army soldiers and families.

Support to Military Spouses and Families

What are these groups, variously known as *Family Support Groups* (FSGs), *FRGs*, and now *SFRGs*? They are groups at the unit level (typically company and battalion) and codified in Army regulation as a commander's program. The intent was to bring unit leadership and spouses

together so that spouses could gain a better understanding and a direct feed of information regarding unit activities—specifically, those that affected families and pertained to soldiers leaving home, such as deployments—and get to know each other and unit leadership so that they would be able to both form a social support network among themselves and gain unit assistance when needed (Schumm et al., 2000). The structure of these groups has been codified over time. Often, spouses themselves played a key role in group leadership but unit soldiers were given liaison or management roles, or both. The nature of Army support to these groups has changed as well. During times of high deployment—for example, during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—the Army went beyond having a formal soldier liaison role and instituted paid assistance known as *Family Readiness Support Assistants* (FRSAs). Below, we walk through some of the historical developments.

Groups organized to provide support to military spouses and families have a long history in the Army, going back to the Revolutionary War (U.S. Army, 2018; U.S. Army, 2010; Schumm et al., 2000). Schumm et al. (2000) related that the first “modern” iteration of the support group was developed in the 1980s at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and was associated with units deploying to the Sinai. At the time of Schumm et al.’s writing in 2000, these groups, known as *FSGs*, were associated with units for whom rapid deployments were expected and were primarily intended to help families cope, both emotionally and logistically, with those deployments. Between deployments, the groups would largely disband.

However, as deployments to Afghanistan and then Iraq began, the Army began to recognize that dissolution of these groups between deployments was not necessarily helpful, and some long-term continuity would help the Army as a whole stay ready. The groups, known as *FRGs* by 2003 (Shinseki, 2003), were used more widely across the Army and maintained a unit presence between deployments (U.S. Army, 2018; U.S. Army, 2010).

The intent of the groups was always to provide a network of mutual support to Army families (Schumm et al., 2000), but the groups became more established and systematized over time. Even at the turn of the century, these authors observed that although the term in use was *Family Support Group*, the groups were intended to encompass *more* than the nuclear family of a soldier (their spouse and children) and include parents, retirees, and others with some interest in a given unit, although their description stopped short of including the soldiers themselves. Schumm et al. described the FSG as a company- or battalion-level group intended to provide not only social and emotional support but also information and outreach regarding resources and programs available to the larger Army family to help its members navigate the challenges they faced.

Explicitly, Schumm et al. (2000) also noted that such groups are most effective when they are run in a nonhierarchical manner and do not mirror the chain of command, incorporating all family members regardless of the soldiers’ rank; that is, a spouse (for example) is included on their own terms rather than being associated with their soldier’s rank—in other words, spouses should not “wear their soldier’s rank.” All should feel welcome. The researchers further stated that the groups are not a form of therapeutic intervention. Schumm et al. (2000) and official

Army policy denote that the groups are a *commander's program*: a way for unit leadership to demonstrate tangibly the importance of families to the Army itself (Army Regulation [AR] 600-20, 2020; Schumm et al., 2000).

This conceptualization has stayed strikingly similar over the years, although the formal structures and name brand of the groups have evolved. During the years of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, some of the formalization described included battalion-level steering groups for company-level FRGs and the addition of formalized administrative support via the paid position of FRSAs at the battalion and brigade levels (U.S. Army, 2010).¹ These evolving descriptions of family readiness or support groups also included the vital role served by volunteers, particularly those that volunteer as group leaders (U.S. Army, 2018; U.S. Army, 2010; Schumm et al., 2000). Volunteers have also served in other roles, such as fund managers for monies that these groups raise to defray the costs of their group activities.

Finally, although the role of the commander as the ultimate oversight has, as explained, long been enshrined in the structure, other roles are undertaken by appointed or selected military personnel, such as the Family Readiness Liaison, now superseded by the Command Family Readiness Representative (CFRR), who serves as liaison between the command and the FRGs. Formal Army policy and documentation describing such groups was codified over the years in AR 608-1 (2017), particularly in Appendix J of that document, which provides details on FRG operations.

In late 2019, policy covering these groups was altered such that unit commanders, who earlier had substantial authority and oversight but were not directly responsible for the running of the groups, were given a more direct role in leadership; the name of the groups was changed to *Soldier and Family Readiness Groups* to emphasize the inclusion of single and married soldiers and their family members, and the emphasis of group activities explicitly changed from a social orientation to a communication orientation, although the policy still emphasized the role the groups play in establishing a network of mutual support.

Research Objective and Approach

RAND Arroyo Center was asked to consider these shifts while assessing the implementation of new Army policy that changed FRGs to SFRGs to determine awareness of the changes among families, how the changes are being implemented, and what empirical evidence was available that might best guide such implementation so that the program will be successful in achieving readiness and resilience among Army families.

¹ By 2003, the groups had undergone a name change to *Family Readiness Groups* (Shinseki, 2003). Shinseki notes that the name change was intended “to reflect the philosophy of being ready as opposed to waiting for the Army to take care of everything itself. Family readiness envisioned that spouses and families could weather their [soldiers’] sponsors’ absences with thoughtful but reasonable community support and a little help from their friends” (p. 10).

To address these questions, we engaged in the following thematically related but distinct activities:

- We **developed a logic model** to describe the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes of SFRGs to clarify the mechanics of the program to consider the question of implementation. The logic model speaks to the sequence of resources, intervention activities, and downstream outcomes. We further described a theory of change that is intended to underlie this model and speaks to the mechanisms that enable the outcomes of the “network of support”: that is, readiness and resilience. This logic model also serves to help orient readers who are less familiar with these groups to their processes and nature (see Chapter 2).
- We **reviewed the growing literature** on peer support groups to determine what factors might serve as facilitators of their success or barriers to it. From the literature, we gleaned suggestions for creating a supportive environment and maintaining engagement in SFRGs (see Chapter 3).
- From this literature-based foundation, we **evaluated the policy change** itself and highlighted where alignment could be improved between current policy, the logic model, and the theoretical intent of the policy (see Chapter 4).
- We **undertook a survey of Army spouses** to explore whether Army families were aware of the changes and to understand their perceptions of those changes (see Chapter 5).
- We **supplemented these efforts with interviews** with a very limited number of individuals affiliated with FRGs/SFRGs, including an incoming SFRG leader and unit commander, an FRSA, and a reservist spouse. Given the relatively short span of time between when the most-recent policy revisions were rolled out and when we conducted our study, we did not pursue such interviews in a systematic fashion and instead used those discussions as background for the experiences soldiers and families encounter with SFRGs (discussed throughout this report).

We discuss each of these efforts in subsequent chapters and conclude the report in Chapter 6 with a summary of findings and recommendations. Two appendixes provide the details behind some of the analyses.

Chapter 2. A Logic Model to Guide Evaluation of SFRGs

In this chapter, we detail two models describing how SFRGs should function and produce the short- and long-term outcomes specified in Army policy. We first describe a program logic model that details the ideal inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes of a well-functioning SFRG. Next, we describe the processes underpinning the implementation of successful SFRGs, detailing the mechanisms that enable SFRGs to produce the desired outcomes (i.e., a program theory of change model). For readers unfamiliar with SFRGs, the chapter will provide a more detailed orientation of how SFRGs should ideally function. Furthermore, these models should help commanders and Army leadership understand what resources and activities are needed to implement SFRGs and what elements SFRGs need to incorporate to obtain the desired outcomes, and they should provide guidance on measures to determine whether an SFRG is operationally successful.

What Outcomes Should Well-Functioning SFRGs Produce?

To understand how SFRGs should ideally function, we developed a program logic model using program policy, regulations, and interviews and feedback from Army leadership. Logic models are a useful way of specifying the reasoning behind program structure and activities and how those activities are connected to expected program results (Knowlton and Phillips, 2009). They are used to illustrate how program resources, activities, services (inputs), and direct products or services (outputs) are designed to produce short-term, medium-term, and long-term outcomes for program participants. Logic models also identify broader community impacts that should result from program activities and services (Knowlton and Phillips, 2009). Therefore, they serve to communicate how a program contributes not only to the specific needs and outcomes of program participants but also to the broader community. In doing so, logic models also serve as blueprints for measuring how effectively programs meet their expected goals.

SFRG Inputs

Figure 2.1 displays the logic model we developed for SFRGs. Program *inputs* (the resources needed to administer the program) include personnel to administer the groups, such as the commander, CFRR, and fund manager. Volunteers also play an important role in administering SFRGs. Army policies and training resources provide direction for how to administer the groups, and funding provides the financial resources for group functioning, including resources to fund group activities. Meeting infrastructure resources, such as spaces to hold in-person meetings and licenses for virtual meeting capabilities, allow SFRG meetings to take place. Finally, support from leadership, both within the larger unit, installation, and Army Headquarters and from

volunteers, provides the impetus to implement SFRGs in specific units. This support may include Army Community Service personnel who help connect group members to programs and services, as well as higher-unit (such as brigade-level) public affairs personnel.

SFRG Activities

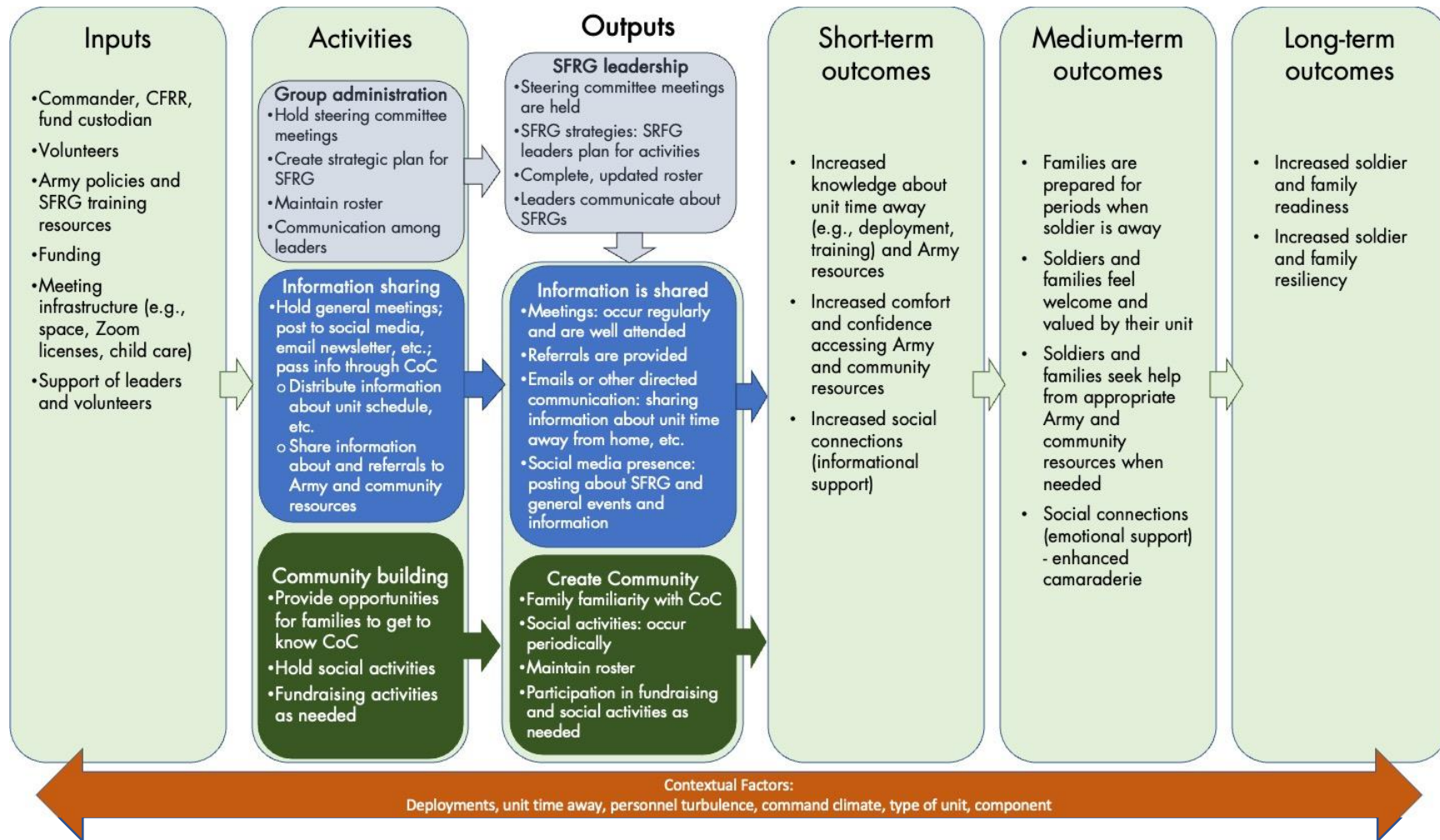
Program activities consist of group administration tasks, activities to share information with soldiers and families, and activities meant to build community. *Group administration* activities are conducted by SFRG leadership and include holding steering committee meetings and creating a strategic plan for the SFRG.² SFRG leaders communicate with each other about group and individual member issues outside formal group meetings. Leadership also maintains an updated roster of soldiers, their family members, and friends who are associated with the group.

Information-sharing activities are the backbone of SFRGs and include distributing information through group meetings, social media posts, and other information-sharing methods. Information shared includes information on unit schedule and activities (e.g., upcoming deployments) and information about and referrals to Army and community programs and services for soldier and family well-being. *Community building* activities consist of opportunities for soldiers and their families to get to know each other better and for families to get to know their soldiers' chains of command. These activities can include social activities held around SFRG meetings (e.g., after-meeting coffee hours), social activities outside formal meetings (e.g., picnics, group trips to local parks, formal balls), and fundraising activities.

Interview respondents generally viewed social activities as important for supporting interactions between soldiers, families, and the chain of command and a key step in building group cohesion. Although key training dates and other information can be distributed via email, respondents described how the informal interaction at social events is “where you interact with family members [and] you hope to build bonds, so they have a network to lean on when their service members are deployed.”

² These activities may take place at levels higher than the company, such as the brigade level (U.S. Army, 2010).

Figure 2.1. SFRG Program Logic Model



NOTE: CoC = chain of command. This logic model is based on program policy, regulations, and RAND interviews and feedback from Army leadership.

SFRG Outputs

Program *outputs* (descriptions of what the activities generate; Knowlton and Phillips, 2009) include indicators of how well group administration activities are providing the groundwork for effective leadership of SFRGs. Indicators measuring whether steering committee meetings are held, whether SFRG leaders have a strategic plan for the group, whether a complete and updated roster is maintained, and whether SFRG leaders communicate among themselves are relevant indicators of functional SFRG leadership. Functional SFRG leadership feeds into the other outputs of group activities: Information is being shared with SFRG participants, and groups are laying the groundwork for community building among SFRG participants and between participants and leaders.

Indicators that information is being shared with SFRG participants include measures of whether meetings occur regularly with sufficient attendance,³ whether communication is being distributed through emails or other means that share information about the unit (e.g., updates on trainings or deployments), and whether social media activities include posts about SFRGs. Indicators that the basics of community building are taking place include the extent that families are familiar with their soldiers' chains of command (e.g., number of meetings between commanders and family members, number of personal emails or other communications), whether periodic formal and informal social activities are being conducted, whether a roster of SFRG participants is being maintained and used for SFRG-related activities, and whether fundraising activities are being held as needed.

SFRG Outcomes

Expected outcomes from effective SFRGs include those that are expected to occur in the short term (e.g., those that occur immediately following SFRG activities to within a few months), medium term (i.e., those that follow from the short-term outcomes), and long term (those that follow from the short- and medium-term outcomes, also called *program impact*). In the short term, SFRGs should result in increased soldier and family knowledge about unit time away and Army resources, increased comfort and confidence accessing Army and community resources, and improved social connections between soldiers and between family members to provide informational support for one another (e.g., advice on Army life, recommendations for seeking out resources).

It is expected that these short-term outcomes would lead to the medium-term outcomes shown in Figure 2.1, which include that families are prepared for when their soldiers are away from home, soldiers and families feel welcome and valued by their units, soldiers and families will be able to find and receive help from the appropriate Army and community resources when they are needed, and soldiers and families form social connections within the unit that provide

³ Note that policy does not dictate the frequency of activities such as meetings; these are at the discretion of the unit.

emotional support and increased camaraderie. Finally, the short- and medium-term outcomes are building blocks for soldier and family readiness and resilience, which form the long-term impacts of the program.

Contextual Factors Affecting SFRGs

How well the program functions is also affected by contextual factors outside the program itself. For example, unit deployments or other time away from post, personnel turnover, and a unit's command climate can affect the inputs and activities of SFRGs, which in turn affect their outputs and outcomes. These factors can serve as a barrier to group functioning (e.g., personnel turnover can hinder the forming of social connections), or they can facilitate group functioning (e.g., there is more urgency for SFRG meetings when units are deploying). Component is also relevant; although the inputs and activities are largely the same in both the active and reserve components, the reserve component SFRGs may use remote communication methods more often than the active component SFRGs do, for example.

Understanding the dynamic flow of the relationships between and among the inputs, outputs, and outcomes and measuring the expected connections among these three aspects will allow the Army to measure the successful implementation of the program (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2006). Note that the main purpose of a logic model is to describe the different functions of a program and the desired outcomes that should result from an effectively implemented program. A logic model does not dictate the elements that cause a program to be effective. The next section describes the elements that should be present to make SFRGs effective in producing the desired outcomes.

How Should SFRGs Produce the Desired Outcomes?

In our description of the SFRG logic model, we outlined the various inputs of the SFRG program in terms of personnel and resources, the activities undertaken as part of the program, the immediate anticipated outputs, and the outcomes for various time spans. These outcomes include not only informational support but also emotional support and, indeed, a network of support: feelings of camaraderie and accessible assistance for soldiers, spouses, and other members of a unit's Army family. The logic model speaks to the sequence of resources, intervention activities, and downstream outcomes; however, a theory of change underlies this model and speaks to the mechanisms that enable the desired outcomes.

Therefore, we start with considering those desired outcomes—a network of mutual support, feelings of camaraderie, and cohesion—and work backward to identify the potential ways SFRGs might cause these outcomes to occur. We see these outcomes arising from a climate in which soldiers and families feel comfortable discussing the challenges they might be facing to get assistance from the group and from group leadership (e.g., Lindsay and Cagliostro, 2020; Lott et al., 2019; Gabrielian et al., 2013; Smith-Merry et al., 2019); where group norms foster

open acceptance and exchange of resources (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2018; Lockhart et al., 2014; Possemato et al., 2019; Haskett et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2017); and, ultimately, where there is a sense of trust between SFRG members.

It is important to note that, in the present day and even decades ago, SFRGs are not and have not been groups that arise organically. Rather, perhaps stemming in part from the fact that they are and were a commander's program, unit leadership has had an important role to play in structuring and supporting the group (e.g., Schumm et al., 2000). However, in the SFRG's earlier days as a volunteer program, the explicit leadership role was assumed by a volunteer, with the recommendation that that person be the best suited for the job (Schumm et al., 2000). Given that the new policy makes the unit leader the SFRG leader as well, the subsequent discussion draws from research into team leadership because the role played by the unit leader now assumes a particular urgency in establishing an environment in which SFRG members can gain support and establish trust.

The climate of trust discussed above is fostered by the leadership of the SFRG, characterized by a sense of familiarity with the leadership (particularly among spouses who do not interact with SFRG leadership as part of their day jobs), leadership that shows respect for different perspectives, and open communication (e.g., Akarsu et al., 2019; Allicock et al., 2017; Smith-Merry et al., 2019). Among these different concepts—leadership behaviors, unit climate, and supportive outcomes—we anticipate feedback loops such that positive, supportive experiences and open communication from leadership and within the group foster more of the same. Conversely, negative experiences might disrupt this virtuous cycle.

There is some evidence—beyond the findings of our systematic review of facilitators of and barriers to peer group engagement—to support this narrative of how SFRGs might work to create a network of support. Li, McCauley, and Shaffer (2017) reviewed the literature on leadership behaviors and work-family outcomes, primarily with a focus on work-family conflict and family-work conflict.⁴ They found that the literature is relatively sparse, particularly in terms of theoretical underpinnings. For example, when resource-based theories, such as the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) or the job demands–resources theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), are invoked, leadership behaviors are generically cast as “resources” on which employees can draw to manage the demands of employment. While providing a theoretical basis for the relationship between leader behaviors and family life, such an anodyne formulation potentially obscures relevant aspects and types of leadership behaviors and any differential effects they might have—leading to less-specific recommendations. Li, McCauley, and Shaffer do note that by far the most researched and hence most supported theory is that relationship-oriented behavior of leaders helps employees balance work and home life.

⁴ Work-family conflict and family-work conflict describe the role conflict direction. That is, work-family conflict describes the case in which the work role conflicts with the family role, while family-work conflict describes when the family role conflicts with the work role.

In Yukl's (2012) summary of the extensive research on leader behavior, this category of relationship-oriented behaviors entails behaviors that are seen as "supporting, developing, recognizing, and empowering" of employees (p. 68, Table 1). In the specific context of SFRGs, however, it seems likely that leader task-oriented behavior (including "clarifying, planning, problem solving" activities, p. 68) might also be relevant. Certainly, Li, McCauley, and Shaffer (2017) summarized some research showing that such task-oriented behaviors serve to reduce work role ambiguity and role conflict that themselves are predictors of work-family and family-work conflict. In the context of SFRGs, however, there is likely to be an aspect of reducing uncertainty regarding soldiers' schedules that is directly relevant not only to the soldiers but also to participating spouses, family members, and friends. As noted in interviews, schedule information might be most relevant when soldiers are preparing for time away from their families, because of either a deployment or training.

Research on climate also emphasizes the important role of leaders: Literature reviews note that leaders play a critical role in establishing and maintaining climate (e.g., Ehrhart, Schneider, and Macey, 2014). In some cases, leaders set appropriate policies themselves or an organizational vision and goals. However, even when their influence is not this extensive, they directly influence how and whether policies are enacted and hence the actual costs and benefits of given employee behaviors; these costs and benefits strongly influence employee behaviors (Zohar, 2002; see also Naylor, Pritchard, and Ilgen, 1980, and Zohar and Hofmann, 2012).

In the context of SFRGs, command leaders "own" the program and implement it in the manner of their choosing. Although Ehrhart, Schneider, and Macey (2014) pointed out that leader behaviors typically set a climate *for* something, their extensive summary of climate research highlights that climate for trust is not a common topic of research. However, Yukl's (2012) review of leader behavior highlights the role of leadership in setting a climate for innovation—specifically explaining that through encouragement of a sense of psychological safety within the group, leaders can contribute to a climate in which employees feel comfortable proposing novel ideas. In the context of SFRGs, a climate of trust would be one in which group norms of the open communication of challenges and reciprocity would be held.

In his discussion of climate for trust formation, Gibb (1964) wrote about how group leaders can help trust emerge via encouraging members' participation in leadership of the group itself and choosing group direction. A review of the peer support group literature (Chapter 3) also speaks to the utility of incorporating group member feedback into peer group administration. Costa, Fulmer, and Anderson (2018) reviewed the literature on trust in work teams and highlighted findings from game theory that suggest that trust emerges from repeated cooperative interactions. They also highlighted the importance of the feedback loop between positive interactions and trust. They further note that research on concepts of social identity supports the idea that trust is fostered when groups are made up of individuals with similar characteristics. This is also supported by the findings of the literature on peer group support discussed in the next chapter. Costa, Fulmer, and Anderson (2018) also reported that leader behavior is integral in

fostering team trust, and participative leadership might be particularly beneficial. Interviewees in our study underscored that effective SFRG leaders were particularly good communicators and brought families and soldiers into the fold of the group.

Leadership in Army units is not typically characterized as participative. However, membership participation in leadership might be particularly relevant for SFRGs given the inclusion of family members who may also serve as volunteers and have historically been involved in FRG leadership themselves. The literature of climate and trust suggests the importance of the role of unit leadership in fostering open communication and trust among “team” members—in this case, both unit soldiers and family members. With the new policy giving explicit leadership of the SFRG to the unit leader instead of to a volunteer, the importance of being willing to participate should not be understated. Now more than ever, the conclusion by Schumm et al. (2000) that well-functioning groups do not adhere to Army protocol and rank but rather foster inclusion of all members deserves focus; perhaps, given the recent usurpation of the volunteer FRG leader role by unit leadership, it may need even *more* focus.

Cohesion is also relevant for SFRGs, especially in light of the fact that informational and emotional support are key outcomes. Leadership is vitally important to cohesion in military units (Siebold and Lindsay, 1999), and successful bonding with leaders is an important dimension of cohesion (Siebold, 2007). Beal et al.’s (2003) meta-analytic summary of the literature on cohesion and job performance found support for the relationship between both task and social cohesion and performance. Given that the cohesion literature considers work teams, the finding for *task cohesion*—defined as the “shared commitment among members to achieving a goal that requires the collective efforts of the group” (MacCoun, 1993, p. 291)—is perhaps not surprising. However, the finding that *social cohesion*—defined as the “nature and quality of the emotional bonds of friendship, liking, caring, and closeness among group members” (MacCoun, 1993, p. 291)—is also relevant has clearer implications for how a “network of mutual support” (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019; Schumm et al., 2000), such as one fostered by a well-functioning SFRG, might be relevant for helping the group as a whole be more resilient and generally experience more positive outcomes.

Measuring and evaluating the impacts of SFRGs proves a complicated task. Indeed, in interviews, all respondents struggled to define what outcomes could be assessed or measured to evaluate the success of the SFRG. One respondent spoke highly of the previous inspections, which were not punitive but instead were an important opportunity for FRG leaders to ensure that they were in compliance and understood where they could improve or find support. And although another respondent was skeptical that the number of meetings or emails was the right measure of effectiveness, they did stress the importance of routine communications and social events in helping the SFRG organization develop credibility and trustworthiness with soldiers and families. Indeed, their comments underscore the conclusions of this logic model: that these activities and participants would produce an effective SFRG. An “effective” SFRG, interviewees said, “is when people get in trouble, they see the SFRG as an avenue of help.”

Summary

The logic model depicted in this chapter describes the workings of an effective SFRG in terms of inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, and indicators of these aspects may be chosen to help observers determine whether an SFRG is functioning well. We also discussed the theory of change that describes why this constellation of inputs, activities, and outputs might be expected to generate the desired outcomes, which include a network of support, resilience, and readiness. It is clear that leadership plays a key role, not only in directing the activities of SFRGs but also in recruiting engaged talent to help plan and direct SFRG activities and setting a climate of open communication and information-sharing.

Chapter 3. Maintaining Engagement in Social Support Groups: Insights from the Research Literature

The intent of SFRGs includes a desire to help members of the Army community form a network of mutual social support. Past research has proved this goal useful. For example, military spouses who are more engaged with their community are better able to cope with stress and be resilient (O’Neal, Mallette, and Mancini, 2018). Increased spouse perceptions of community support are associated with better family adaptation to military life as well (Bowen et al., 2016). More generally, social support is positively related to a host of beneficial outcomes (e.g., Taylor, 2011). Therefore, interventions using peer social support groups are becoming increasingly common for a variety of issues, including mental health support, physical illness support, and parenting. The intent of these groups is to establish a structured web of support for community members facing challenges and harvest the benefits of social support on their behalf.

That said, the literature on social support groups is broad and varied, and our current study is primarily interested in *how* best to establish social support groups to engage members and effectively create a web of social support, especially in the context of SFRGs, where military personnel serve as leadership but not all participants are actively engaged in military jobs themselves and must participate voluntarily. To glean suggestions for maintaining engagement in SFRGs, we conducted a targeted review of the growing literature on peer support groups to determine what factors might serve as facilitators of their success or barriers to it. Because very few articles empirically assessed the influence of facilitators or barriers on group engagement, we incorporated commentary by authors as evidence of expert opinions. Thus, the findings below should be interpreted as reflecting expert consensus rather than describing empirically derived causal relationships. The methodology of our review is described in detail in Appendix A, which also contains a chart detailing both our coding schema and the number of citations for each theme. Here, we focus on presenting a narrative review of our findings.

As mentioned previously, traditional support groups typically have an underlying unifying topic that is a shared experience, such as mental health support, physical illness support, and parenting. In contrast, the major unifying experience within an SFRG is military life. Although military life provides a unifying experience and context, it should be noted that the experience differs widely between SFRG members even within a single unit’s SFRG. At a minimum, the common experience of the soldiers in the group is more similar than the experiences of the family members in the group are, and soldiers presumably have more in common with the soldier that provides SFRG leadership than do the family members that make up the remainder of the group. Thus, SFRGs occur in a context that differs from that of the literature presented below in some ways, although the literature clearly also offers pointers that are relevant for creating an engaging and supportive SFRG.

Similarities Within Group Membership Can Be Valuable

Group engagement tends to be higher when **group members have shared characteristics, experiences, and backgrounds** (18 sources). In the context of SFRGs, that shared experience is military life. This theme is, of course, framed more generally in the literature. First and foremost, program content should be created and implemented to address a group of people with similar needs (Lammers et al., 2019). If members all have different wants and needs, the program may not be adequately equipped to address them all. Second, members find it easier to connect with others of the same age or condition because they have a mutual understanding (Haldar et al., 2017). Members actively seek others who are like themselves because they have a common language and interests to talk about. Support groups may also cover very sensitive topics, and members are more comfortable sharing if they recognize similarities across everyone's struggles (Kumar et al., 2019).

Peer Group Leaders Are Essential to an Engaged Support Group

The characteristics and qualities of the peer support group leaders (PGLs) are vitally important to group engagement and functioning. A large weight of support (28 sources) suggests that having PGLs who have shared characteristics and experiences with group members is helpful. In medical- or other health-related settings, PGLs serve a different role from traditional clinicians, aside from the fact that they may lack a formal degree, because PGLs have been through what members are currently going through. As a result, PGLs can provide perspectives using experience and use themselves as an example of someone who has endured many of the same challenges and has come out the other end (Baer and Baker, 2017; Whelan, Teahan, and Casey, 2020; Beehler, Clark, and Eisen, 2014).

PGLs who share similar characteristics with group participants, such as a similar cultural background, age, or education level, can relate to many of their lived experiences (Chinman et al., 2018; Magasi et al., 2019; Armstrong et al., 2019; Daniels, Bergeson, and Myrick, 2017; Chepkirui et al., 2020). For example, one study showed that veteran peers who have shared military service experiences are more likely to relate to one another in unique ways, helping lead to improved outcomes (Kaselitz et al., 2019). PGLs who are similar to their group membership have a good understanding of what members are going through and can better adapt and customize group activities for their respective groups (Lewinski and Fisher, 2016). Furthermore, having shared experiences can help PGLs explain program material in ways that are easier for members to deconstruct and digest (Crisanti et al., 2019).

In the context of SFRGs, unit commanders at the various levels (company, battalion, brigade) are named group leaders. Thus, soldiers, more so than family members, may find peer-like similarities with the commander as peer group leader. The literature has guidance for these situations, provided in 19 sources. It may be helpful to hire a co-leader (or solicit a volunteer, in the case of SFRGs) of a different background to develop better connections between the group

members and the leads. For example, some articles suggested having a male PGL and a female PGL facilitate the program together, especially if participants have a preference for a certain PGL gender (Lindsay and Cagliostro, 2020; Goldstein et al., 2018). In general, PGLs from diverse backgrounds have more cultural awareness overall and can be more cognizant of cultural contexts when leading groups (Dillinger and Kersun, 2020). One of our interviewees spoke about this issue and explained that, historically, the inclusion of a spouse in a leadership role made the program more approachable for other Army spouses.

Support Group Leadership Skills Can and Should Be Taught

Group leaders need effective communication skills to facilitate member engagement (40 sources). Skills offer an advantage over inherent characteristics of PGLs in that they can be explicitly taught. As mentioned earlier, because PGLs have shared experiences with group members, they are more relatable and can serve as peer role models. Leaders sharing personal stories with their groups is supported in the literature as an effective way to engage groups in discussion (Burke et al., 2019). An ideal group leader would be willing to share their personal experiences and instill hope with positive self-disclosure (Baer and Baker, 2017; Shue, McGuire, and Matthias, 2019; Daniels, Bergeson, and Myrick, 2017). They can share coping strategies that helped them overcome their challenges and demonstrate their success to their group (Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020). PGLs should ideally not only share but also model what they preach (Armstrong et al., 2019). Leading by example shows participants that the program is beneficial and increases engagement. The importance of communication skills was also underscored in all interviews conducted.

Because some peer support groups can cover very sensitive topics and intimate experiences, having similar experiences may aid PGLs in understanding how to handle such difficult situations. However, even without the benefit of shared experiences, they should be able to show empathy and provide emotional support (Akarsu et al., 2019). PGLs should ensure that they themselves are willing and able to address sensitive topics that may make them feel uncomfortable. PGLs should encourage members to ask questions and raise concerns that they otherwise would not outside this safe group environment (Connor et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2013).

PGLs should also exhibit **facilitator or teaching skills** (13 sources) that help them engage members during group activities. These skills include initiating discussions and encouraging individuals to actively participate (Lewinski and Fisher, 2016; Carron-Arthur et al., 2015). Studies have found that completion rates for peer group support intervention programs are higher when PGLs are skilled at providing personalized support relevant to the specific concerns and frustrations of each individual (Lewinski and Fisher, 2016; Nelson et al., 2019).

On the other hand, certain **PGL traits may turn participants away** (11 articles). Our literature suggests that by far the **greatest barrier for group engagement of this type is the lack of trust between participants and the PGL** and/or the overarching organization. For

example, it is very difficult for group members to engage if there is not an established relationship or rapport between them and the PGL (Lindsay and Cagliostro, 2020; Lott et al., 2019; Gabrielian et al., 2013; Smith-Merry et al., 2019). A few articles reported a lack of respect for PGLs because they are still viewed as group members rather than group administration (Shepardson et al., 2019; Repper and Carter, 2011). Given that peer support groups may cover sensitive topics and require self-disclosure from participants, lack of trust between the PGL or the overarching organization and the participants can negatively affect engagement in peer support groups, limiting their effectiveness. This is particularly poignant for SFRGs, where, as described previously, unit commanders would need to establish or maintain trust with spouses and family members who may not share as many similarities with them as do soldiers.

In addition, PGLs should exhibit characteristics that make them seem **approachable and friendly** to better create a connection with members. The weight of support (16 sources) reinforces the importance of having interpersonal skills, such as being friendly, welcoming, trustworthy, nonjudgmental, and respectful (Armstrong et al., 2019), and having strong conflict resolution skills (Hodge and Turner, 2016). There is a balance to be found so that PGLs can provide nonjudgmental feedback and constructive criticism while still maintaining an environment in which members are willing to open up and share information with PGLs and the group (Robinson et al., 2019; Gabrielian et al., 2013).

The foregoing discussion does not necessarily assume that good PGLs possess all these characteristics prior to becoming group leaders. Thus, the literature suggests that PGLs and group members themselves **need to have systematic training and support** (the lack of which is described in nine sources as a barrier). Given the likely sensitive and stressful nature of PGL work, lack of support and supervision can significantly increase PGL staff attrition (Hodge and Turner, 2016). Some challenges cited include lacking confidence in facilitating group engagement and lacking group management skills (Abadi et al., 2020), not fully understanding the goal of the program or not being aware of other programmatic efforts (Shepardson et al., 2019), and not knowing the right protocol to handle difficult situations (McPeake et al., 2019). All of these may be alleviated by training.

PGLs should be carefully and thoughtfully recruited and trained (30 sources). Leading a support group is a hefty responsibility, and identifying the right person for the job is critical to the success and quality of the program and likely to influence participants' experiences. PGLs should be formally recruited by program leaders or other PGLs to identify candidates best suited for the role (Sokol and Fisher, 2016; Chepkirui et al., 2020). Furthermore, though PGLs can have a lot to offer their groups, such as their experience and passion for the topic, it is critical that they receive the necessary training and oversight (Sarrami-Foroushani et al., 2014; Whelan, Teahan, and Casey, 2020; Shepardson et al., 2019). This training can include effective communication and motivational interviewing (Lammers et al., 2019) or cultural sensitivity to be more receptive to the needs of a diverse group (Akarsu et al., 2019). Professionally trained PGLs are more equipped to manage a group of people and create a positive environment (Vaughan et al., 2018).

This may also suggest the importance of teaching appropriate group leadership skills for the applicable context, as in SFRGs.

The literature also speaks to the necessity of **finding the right level of oversight of PGLs** (mentioned in at least 17 sources). Support from the greater care team (in the case of mental and physical support groups) strengthens and builds confidence for the PGL (Hodge and Turner, 2016). This support may come in the form of additional support during program sessions to ensure smooth implementation, especially when dealing with difficult and disruptive group members (Crisanti et al., 2019). Consistent feedback improves program delivery confidence and reduces burnout (Hodge and Turner, 2016). While lack of support and training is an obstacle, too much supervision is unnecessary. The struggle is finding a balance between allowing PGLs to customize the program to the specific members they are serving and ensuring that the content is delivered appropriately (Hodge and Turner, 2016). Therefore, the literature supports that the relationship between PGLs and the primary care team is crucial to appropriate content delivery (Shepardson et al., 2019).⁵

Groups Should Be Oriented Around Providing Support and Building Trust

One key facilitator of group engagement is that groups should be oriented around providing support and building trust. This is mentioned in 38 sources in various forms. Peer support groups should incorporate activities and opportunities that create an environment of support and acceptance. Support should be proactively offered through the program curriculum through such approaches as promotion of self-value and independence (Whelan, Teahan, and Casey, 2020). By far the greatest weight of support emphasizes a group dynamic that provides accountability, support, and motivation to its members (Goldstein et al., 2018; Lockhart et al., 2014; Possemato et al., 2019; Haskett et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2017). The literature suggests that participants appreciate the opportunity to provide support to and receive support from one another, which in turn promotes greater engagement (Kumar et al., 2019; Haskett et al., 2017). For example, a study on heart failure patients found that participants reported that their health-care providers did not provide adequate emotional support, and support from a peer support group helped fill this gap (Lockhart et al., 2014).

Trust and rapport take time to build, and **PGLs can use many methods to create an environment that facilitates rapport and enables trust**, as described in approximately nine sources. For example, PGLs can reserve time to meet one-on-one with participants to address everyone's unique needs (Kingsnorth et al., 2011; Chepkirui et al., 2020). PGLs can provide quick responses and feedback, and, in cases in which PGLs have critical feedback of

⁵ In the literature, especially for mental health support groups, the primary care team coordinates and oversees the social support group program. For SFRGs, the broader care team may include leadership at higher levels, such as battalion and brigade; public affairs support; administrative support; and installation resources, such as Army Community Services.

participants, their criticism should be framed in a way that is acceptable to the participants (Harari et al., 2018). PGLs can also initiate rapport by encouraging participants to ask open-ended questions and actively communicate their needs and concerns (Allicock et al., 2017; Smith-Merry et al., 2019). PGLs can plan activities that promote engagement, such as exercise, arts and crafts, and team building activities (Borek et al., 2018; Lindsay and Cagliostro, 2020). When possible, programs should be centered around lessons that promote skills participants have learned in their past. For example, researchers used mission-focused teamwork strategies in their program to engage their veteran participants (Hernandez-Tejada, Acierno, and Sánchez-Carracedo, 2021).

Stigma and discrimination are cited as potential barriers to seeking support through peer support groups, as stigma against certain health conditions may prevent individuals from wanting to acknowledge their need for help (four sources, e.g., Dillinger and Kersun, 2020). Authors commented that fear of acknowledging a condition or of seeking help at all can lead people to avoid seeking peer group support, even from less formal groups, in an effort to not be ostracized by their community (Dillinger and Kersun, 2020). Although online support groups may be a way to address stigma and discrimination because individuals can seek help in a more private setting and be specialized to a dedicated need, online options may not be readily available or accessible to low-income and ethnic minority groups (Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020).

One important factor in support group structure that greatly influences how group members engage and interact with one another is **privacy**. Some sources describe participant concerns about confidentiality of personal information in group care (Connor et al., 2018). This concern can be especially relevant if group participants already know each other outside the group (Robinson et al., 2019; Crisanti et al., 2019; Connor et al., 2018), which may be particularly prevalent in small, close-knit communities. In the context of SFRGs, at least some group members know each other in the context of their work life. Moreover, privacy to deal with challenges they face may be rarer in the military context. This is an issue that unit leadership should monitor carefully to ensure that they are striking the right balance in SFRGs.

In addition, **group composition and dynamics** affect group cohesion and engagement. A particularly relevant barrier to participant engagement, noted by seven sources, is a poor group dynamic between members, which can manifest in many ways. Group participants may be judgmental or unwelcoming, creating a negative and dispiriting environment (Vaughan et al., 2018). Participants may report gossip and online attacks within the group (Vaughan et al., 2018). In addition, the anonymity of being in an online group can lead to poor behavior because of lack of monitoring (Gold, Normandin, and Boggs, 2016). One study reported participants describing “harsh” comments and negative feedback directed at each other (Robinson et al., 2019).

Contributions and commitment from fellow group members also influence group engagement (four sources). When participants do not come to a group activity ready to actively participate, it can be very apparent (Abadi et al., 2020). Those participants may lack motivation

and willingness to adhere to lessons and strategies taught during group sessions, and this lack of motivation and willingness can hinder effective engagement (Matthias et al., 2016).

Group Structure Can Facilitate Engagement

Certain characteristics of the **group structure can be adjusted to ensure a good group dynamic** that enhances engagement among members, as discussed by 21 sources. In general, fostering group interaction through various means can be helpful. Studies have found that smaller groups, but not too small, allow for more communication among members, although the appropriate size is not specified in the literature (Harari et al., 2018; Beehler, Clark, and Eisen, 2014; Akarsu et al., 2019). It also helps if the program structure is more fluid and offers opportunities for informal interactions among members, leading to greater comfort and camaraderie (Kumar et al., 2019).

Because groups should remain relatively small and close knit, it is **crucial that groups maintain high attendance** (Kumar et al., 2019). High engagement in forging connections in the group can be extended beyond the borders of the program (Kumar et al., 2019). Hence, one very important predictor for engagement cited in the literature is the ability for group members to develop meaningful connections with fellow members. When this type of connection was established, members were more eager to attend group sessions and disclose their struggles (Lockhart et al., 2014). A few studies found that rates of engagement increase with age, although these findings are not necessarily amenable to adjustment in the context of SFRGs (Ellison et al., 2016; Mase et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2019).

Programs Should Strike a Balance Between Structure and Flexibility

Other relevant themes relate more to administrative aspects of peer group activities and meetings. For example, group activities and meetings should have a **set and predictable structure and sequence**, referenced by 20 sources. Several articles cited the importance of a set agenda and materials to help guide group discussions (Beehler, Clark, and Eisen, 2014; Armstrong et al., 2019; Duckworth and Halpern, 2014; Burke et al., 2019). A structured program better orients participants at the start of the support group intervention and allows them to be better prepared through the duration of the program (Armstrong et al., 2019; Burke et al., 2019). Time should be allocated during meetings for different activities, including reviewing materials, asking questions, and conducting group discussions (Beehler, Clark, and Eisen, 2014), and for participants to practice the skills they have learned (Allicock et al., 2017). In addition, sending reminders for upcoming meetings and activities is beneficial because participants often have busy schedules. Reminders help participants plan ahead, therefore resulting in fewer no-shows and last-minute cancellations (McPeake et al., 2019; Akarsu et al., 2019). As an example of having a set and predictable structure and sequence, SFRGs may have regular meeting times or communication channels; specific communication topics, such as how to navigate the challenges

of upcoming deployments or trainings or more general military life; and time to schedule and prepare for group activities.

A standardized structure and format, with flexibility, of group activities and meetings can have a great influence on whether group members are willing to participate (28 sources). Research has found that participants enjoy group sessions that **follow a structured format while allowing for flexibility of content delivery and interaction among members** (Kumar et al., 2019; Possemato et al., 2019). A fair amount of evidence (19 sources) supports the importance of program flexibility to allow PGLs to recognize, evaluate, and adjust content to best tailor it to participants' needs (Dillinger and Kersun, 2020; Armstrong et al., 2019; Sokol and Fisher, 2016; Hodge and Turner, 2016). Length of time, intensity, and location are found to be important factors that should be adjustable for each group (Sokol and Fisher, 2016; Viswanathan, Myers, and Fanous, 2020; Martin et al., 2020).

To ensure that groups are flexible to respond to the evolving needs of participants, **PGLs should gather feedback and make alterations to improve program delivery** (two sources: Borek et al., 2018; Shue, McGuire, and Matthias, 2019). One study implemented a pipeline of feedback by administering a short survey, which the researchers found to be beneficial for providing insight into participant perspectives on program satisfaction (Shue, McGuire, and Matthias, 2019). In addition, it is beneficial to have informal, routine follow-ups between PGLs and participants. Group members should have input on decisions that affect the group, which enhances their likelihood of consistent engagement (Hodge and Turner, 2016). In one study, participants were able to set the agenda for what they wanted to accomplish in the group sessions with direction from the PGLs (Haskett et al., 2017). In the example of SFRGs, this might entail getting a sense for the challenges participants are facing and facilitating a discussion of Army resources available to help them alleviate those challenges.

Administration of the Group Can Also Facilitate Engagement

Groups Need Resources for Maintenance

One administrative issue is **cost**: cost of running the program for the providers and attendance for peer group members (20 sources). Sufficient funds are required to sustain a peer support group (nine sources). A consistent flow of funds to keep programs running pays for expenses such as payroll, rent, and program materials (Lammers et al., 2019; Hodge and Turner, 2016). Sustained funding can also provide reimbursement where appropriate for peer group activities (Akarsu et al., 2019). In the context of SFRGs, a few interviewees noted that adequate funding and fundraising is important to be able to provide support programs—such as social events and care packages—to families and soldiers free of cost to the members.

Arduous Enrollment or Technological Barriers Can Impede Engagement

There are also **barriers to registering for the group itself or technological challenges** that may hinder participant enrollment. Notably, an arduous enrollment process that includes significant paperwork and a screening process before acceptance into the peer support group (Gabrielian et al., 2013) can turn away potential participants. One other challenge for participants to engage is difficulty using technology. Some support groups may opt for a virtual platform to conduct group sessions, which can be a challenge for participants who are unfamiliar with technology (Gabrielian et al., 2013). For SFRGs, enrollment is typically not at issue; however, platform barriers may be.

Program Materials Should Be Accessible

Many sources (26) speak to the presentation of program materials. Specifically, group **program materials should be easy to read and readily available** to group members throughout the course of the program. Program materials should contain common language that is easily understood by the average person (Repper and Carter, 2011) and avoid stigmatizing language (Akarsu et al., 2019).

In contrast, difficulty accessing the program and materials is a barrier for participants to engage with program content (25 sources). For example, materials that are limited to hard copy or electronic versions do not provide participants with flexibility for their preferences (Vaughan et al., 2018). Materials delivered in an unstructured manner, with no layout or guide, lead to participants feeling overwhelmed and make it difficult for them to navigate the content (Shepardson et al., 2019).

Ensuring Ease of Access Is Important

Ease of access, in terms of location and platform of sessions, has a strong weight of support (51 sources). For example, participants are less likely to attend when group sessions are difficult to access because of meeting location such as locations in rural areas that lack access via public transportation or inner-city locations that have no parking and have high traffic (Sayres and Visentin, 2018; Martin et al., 2020; Haskett et al., 2017). Ideally, groups would include easily accessible options in terms of location or platform through which meetings and sessions could be held to improve attendance. For example, virtual or telephone access to group meetings helps remove constraints around geographic limitations (Akarsu et al., 2019; Duckworth and Halpern, 2014; Hussain-Shamsy et al., 2020), and online groups provide an alternative when in-person sessions are not feasible for members (Sokol and Fisher, 2016; Lanier et al., 2019).

However, there are unique barriers for groups that are held primarily virtually. Vaughan et al., 2018, related that the most common complaints of online groups are issues with usability and limited activities. Most evidence supports a hybrid mode of delivery instead of solely virtual or solely in-person sessions. A choice of modality adheres to participants' varying preferences

(Goldstein et al., 2018; Harari et al., 2018). Most importantly, the best platform to use would depend on the needs of the participants and would best work around their schedules. Regardless of how groups meet, it is crucially important that the platform assures anonymity and privacy where appropriate (Haldar et al., 2017).

One of the biggest obstacles to meeting attendance is scheduling, so, to enhance engagement of participants in peer support groups, it is important to offer both synchronous and asynchronous channels of communication. For example, these options could include having online discussion groups—in addition to group meetings—where group members can message or post at whatever time is convenient for them (Vaughan et al., 2018). Online discussion forums allow participants full control over how much or how little they choose to engage (Magasi et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2019; Lewinski and Fisher, 2016). However, maintaining the flow of information through synchronous and asynchronous communication channels can be challenging, and participant communication preferences may change over time, suggesting that peer support groups need to be responsive to participant communication preferences and flexible in how information is communicated by the group (Haldar et al., 2017).

In terms of relevant participant lifestyle characteristics that affect support group engagement, the two most frequently mentioned in the literature are participants having busy or inflexible schedules and participants having other responsibilities and obligations that are barriers to group participation (11 sources). Groups that have rigid meeting times can cause time conflicts for busy participants because it is difficult to coordinate and find a time that works for everyone if people have busy or constantly changing schedules (Connor et al., 2018). Having irregular work schedules outside the traditional 9–5 p.m., Monday through Friday schedule (Viswanathan, Myers, and Fanous, 2020) and working outside the standard 40-hour workweek can also be impediments to engagement (Lanier et al., 2019). Additional scheduling obstacles may include other health commitments or family care obligations (Martin et al., 2020; Kingsnorth et al., 2011).

Scheduling difficulties can have particular consequences for Army families engaging in a mutual support group, especially for reserve units that are spread out geographically. Dispersed geography is a challenge that multiple interviewees identified in their discussion of SFRG support for reserve units. For example, the spouse of an Army reservist described how many soldiers under her spouse's command live hundreds of miles away from the training location. She discussed the challenge of trying to foster community and share Army resources with families whom she might see in person only once a year. Another interviewee discussed how some units deploy as individuals or in small groups of two to three soldiers. In these cases, families require tailored or personalized information about deployments, a function that the SFRG *can* help serve but not the model for which most SFRGs are designed.

Summary

We engaged in a broad search of the literature on peer support groups to glean what aspects might serve as facilitators of or barriers to engagement. The intent was to summarize factors that might also be relevant to SFRGs. While some aspects discussed in the literature are potentially less relevant to SFRGs, such as sustainment costs, many are both relevant to and addressable by the Army.

For example, almost 30 sources suggest that a structured group format with built-in flexibility facilitates engagement, while a further 20 emphasize set structure and predictability. Some sources go further and suggest engaging participants themselves in the running of the group, such as through gathering feedback; this could be applied by SFRGs to ensure that the right balance between structure and tailoring is provided to membership.

More than 60 sources discuss the importance of providing peer group leaders with training and support, an issue that is also relevant to SFRGs. Especially given demographic differences (such as the mix of soldiers and civilians encompassed by SFRGs), developing skill sets such as communication to bridge that gap may prove useful, as discussed in the literature. A further 30 sources suggest that tools to help group leaders foster trust and a climate of open communication would be of benefit.

Finally, more than 70 sources in the literature describe issues relating to ease of access; choice of location, platform access options, and accessibility of content are all factors that SFRG guidance can speak to and SFRG leaders can consider when forming strategic plans or standard operating procedures for their SFRGs. Current policy recommends but does not mandate communication through multiple channels and venues, both synchronous (such as in-person meetings) and asynchronous (such as social media posts), which would help address some of these empirical findings. Other sources in the literature discuss the challenges posed by a busy schedule as a barrier to engagement, and this is certainly an issue among Army families as well.

Chapter 4. Review of Recent Changes in SFRG Policy and Guidance

The SFRG program has, like the Army, evolved over time to better support Army members and their families (see Schumm et al., 2000; U.S. Army, 2018; U.S. Army, 2010). Until the change in 2019, FRGs were governed by policy outlined in AR 600-20 and AR 608-1, Appendix J (Army Family Readiness Group Operations). In 2019, Army Directive (AD) 2019-17 established changes to the program, including renaming it to *SFRGs*. HQDA EXORD 233-19 further details the implementation of the program. To understand the changes and potential implications for the program itself, we considered the guidance provided in each policy document as it related to specific components of the logic model presented earlier in this report. Through this examination, we identified opportunities for clarification that will better connect the program activities and intended impact of the groups. This chapter describes the results of this assessment.

Program Intent and Goals

Supporting Army families has been both an informal and a formal Army endeavor. As introduced in Chapter 1, FSGs were first recognized in the 1980s and were formal groups that convened and provided support for military families while soldiers were deployed (Griffith, 2020; Schumm et al., 2000). These groups evolved along with Army missions and life. In 2002, in line with higher deployment cycles, the Army established the Total Army Family Program, and it officially named and constituted FRGs in 2006. At that time, an FRG was officially described as

b. . . . a command-sponsored organization of Soldiers, civilian employees, family members (immediate and extended) and volunteers belonging to a unit. FRGs will provide mutual support and assistance, and a network of communications among the Family members, the chain of command, and community resources. FRGs will assist unit commanders in meeting military and personal deployment preparedness and enhance the Family readiness of the unit's Soldiers and Families. They will also provide feedback to the command on the state of the unit "Family."

c. Family readiness is the mutual reinforcement and support provided by the unit to Soldiers, civilian employees, and Family members, both immediate and extended (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-1).

FRGs became the formal connection between families and the chain of command and were envisioned to facilitate a bidirectional relationship between unit leadership and soldiers' families.

Renaming these groups *SFRGs* was intended to ensure that the links of the group included all unit personnel, including single soldiers. In interviews, a few respondents noted that while single soldiers had always been included in FRGs, the name shift confirmed their belonging within the group. The AD explains that “changing the name critically links the Soldier’s readiness to the Family. It also ensures that commanders incorporate all unit personnel, including single Soldiers and their Families, into the communication activities and community network of the SFRG” (AD 2019-17, 2019, 4.a). This change is intended to better incorporate “unit personnel, their family members, volunteers, and single soldiers into an integrated communication, information, and support network . . . that enable[s] a network of mutual support” (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.A). It also reemphasizes the role of the SFRG as a communication and information network and amplifies the goal of creating a community of mutual support across the unit and its families.

Roles and Responsibilities

One of the essential inputs to a well-functioning program is clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The policy sets out leadership and ownership of the program and supporting roles that are responsible for implementation of the program. In both previous and current guidance, the unit commander is ultimately responsible for the program. Appendix J, which governed FRGs, stated that “the FRG is a unit commander’s program formed in accordance with AR 600-20. . . . An FRG is a command sponsored organization of Soldiers, civilian employees, family members (immediate and extended) and volunteers belonging to a unit” (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-1, a-b). In the current policy for SFRGs, HQDA EXORD 233-19 determines that “Commanders at all echelons will establish an SFRG Chain of Command responsible for SFRG execution. The SFRG Chain of Command consists of unit commanders, rear detachment commanders or equivalent, Command Family Readiness Representative, and fund custodians” (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.B.1). Thus, the new guidance reemphasizes the ownership of the unit commander.

However, other roles are delineated in a way that could cause some challenges—particularly the roles of volunteers and CFRRs. A source of discrepancy between the two policy documents is the role of volunteers, particularly in leadership positions. Appendix J (AR 608-1, 2017) states that the “Soldier and Family Readiness System relies heavily on the support of a professional volunteer cadre” and explicitly allows FRGs to be staffed with volunteers in leadership and key roles, including FRG leader, treasurer, key caller, and welcome committee chair. In practice, FRGs frequently relied on a spouse—often the commander’s spouse—to lead them (Parcell and Maguire, 2014). The role of volunteers, particularly in leadership or key roles, is far less clear in the policy guidance for the established SFRGs. While, under the new guidance, volunteer recruitment is allowable—“Commanders may recruit volunteers as needed to support SFRG activities”—the language positions these roles as less essential and outside key leadership positions (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.C.6.B.8). Instead, the policy outlines the SFRG chain

of command inclusive of Army personnel. Under the new guidance, the leadership role that volunteers often played is transitioned to CFRRs.

A benefit of leveraging volunteers for FRG leadership roles had been to integrate a family member directly into the execution of the program. This provided a peer-to-peer connection for other family members, who perhaps saw their own experiences reflected in and core to program management. Confusion about the continued value and role of volunteers pervaded many of the research interviews conducted for this project. The Army would do well to clarify and better communicate this change and how it affects present and future volunteers. The connection to volunteers will be important to maintain, not just to support the execution of SFRG activities but to build and maintain interpersonal bonds that connect the unit to soldiers and families, and that connect families to each other. Moreover, given the breadth of the responsibilities that the revised policy places on the CFRR, it may be advisable to provide for additional support within the policy, such as through volunteers, in recognition of the importance of SFRG maintenance.

The CFRRs play an active leadership role in the execution of the SFRGs. Appointed by the commander, CFRRs are rear detachment commanders or equivalent, or noncommissioned officers who are sergeant grade and above.⁶ Soldiers who previously took on the role of Family Readiness Liaisons under the FRG program are redesignated to the CFRR position in the SFRG. Under the new policy, the CFRR serves as “the key integrator between the command and soldiers/families” (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.D.1.A). In addition to their principal duties (e.g., squad leader, team leader) as a soldier, CFRRs are responsible for the execution of SFRG activities, including communicating and passing information between and among command, soldiers, civilians, and families and coordinating events. Thus, many of the responsibilities that were often under the purview of two people, specifically the volunteer FRG leader and the Family Readiness Liaison, have, under the new SFRG policy, migrated to the CFRR. The CFRR role is thus critical to the operational success of the SFRG. The FRSAs, as allowed in the SFRG policy (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.B.3), who historically play a strong administrative assistance role (U.S. Army, 2010), might play a critical role in supporting the CFRR in their duties. However, though FRSAs are allowed in the current policy, funding for such positions is not automatically provided, and thus the full burden of both roles may in fact fall on the CFRR.

In shifting operational leadership from the volunteer FRG leader to the CFRR, the policy centralizes the importance of connecting soldiers to the SFRG. To best support the delegation of SFRG activities to CFRRs, it would be helpful for the Army to explain the capacity needed to carry out the role effectively. Indeed, one interviewee noted that CFRRs were likely to end up with many responsibilities. The Army could provide resources to commanders about not just the qualities and characteristics that are important for CFRRs to possess but also the capacity and

⁶ The person serving as CFRR may change over the deployment cycle (especially as personnel in the role may themselves deploy), which may cause some confusion.

time they will need to complete their CFRR responsibilities in the context of their other duties. CFRR responsibilities should complement, not compete with, the appointee's work.

Training

To ensure that each member of the SFRG leadership team understands their role and responsibility, the Army directs each member to pursue role-aligned training. The training that should support SFRG leadership is named more explicitly in the current policy that guides SFRGs than in previous guidance. The new policy outlines clear responsibilities for who must create what training and how SFRG leadership should be able to access the training. The EXORD directs the U.S. Army Materiel Command, the Chief of U.S. Army Reserve, and the National Guard Bureau Director to create and distribute learning training for unit commanders, CFRRs, and fund custodians; to update the Army Learning Management System; and to establish a web-based portal of training products and best practices (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.C.2–6). The need for relevant training resources was underscored in several interviews. These resources are reportedly forthcoming according to discussions with program personnel and will provide crucial resources that enable and empower SFRG leadership to complete their responsibilities.

Activities

The substantive change from the FRG to the SFRG as laid out in the EXORD affects SFRG activities. Here we review three areas: administrative activities, information-sharing activities, and community building activities.

Administrative Activities

Effective administrative activities that support the execution of the strategy are critical to a well-functioning program. Both the previous guidance over FRGs and the current guidance over SFRGs outline allowable activities, but both are relatively silent on how activities are chosen and how they map to unit-level goals. In previous guidance, there was explicit autonomy given to FRGs to determine the type and scope of FRG mission activities that would depend on the commander's budget, identified needs of the group, command interest and emphasis, participation and engagement by group members, and the unit's training and deployment schedule (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-2.b.1–7). The guidance also identified activities that were essential and common to all FRGs, including member meetings, newsletters, and email and phone communication plans. The guidance still stipulated that these activities depended on unit mission and schedule.

This language is absent from both AD 2019-17 and HQDA EXORD 233-19. While this autonomy is important in ensuring that groups are tailored to the needs of diverse units across the

Army, providing better guidance about the types of goals SFRGs should set, how the groups should set their goals for a given time frame, and how selected activities contribute to those goals could help increase group efficacy by providing a minimum recommendation for engagement. The Chapter 3 review of active participation in peer groups shows how a structured meeting and interaction plan with flexibility to modify the plan using the needs of participants is an established facilitator of group engagement.

Information-Sharing Activities

One of the key purposes of the program is to provide information to soldiers and families. In previous guidance, FRGs were directed to provide “a network of communications among the family members, the chain of command, and community resources” (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-1.b). This is reiterated in the current guidance, with an emphasis on including single soldiers into “an integrated communication, information, and support network” (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.A). Many of the activities of the SFRG are thus oriented around providing this communication and information and how to do so in one of several ways: face to face, virtually and synchronously, and virtually and asynchronously.

For in-person communication, previous guidance directed that member meetings were among the essential and common activities for all FRGs. Although it did not specify a tempo or requisite structure, the guidance explicitly provided for this interaction, by allowing the groups to use office space and office equipment to support the FRG (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-3.a). Depending on availability of funds, unit commanders could offer child care to facilitate in-person activities, including command-sponsored training (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-3.e.1). Additionally, the guidance allowed for the rear detachment commander to access logistic support such as meeting rooms during unit deployment. The current SFRG guidance provides much less information about prioritizing or facilitating in-person meetings, potentially leading to an inference that these are not considered a priority. Instead, there is more information about the use of asynchronous communication forums.

Asynchronous communication—through newsletters, email, or social media—is not new, but it is more heavily emphasized in SFRG guidance than in previous policy. Both the former guidance and the new guidance direct SFRGs to maintain up-to-date rosters for communication. The new guidance goes further and directs SFRGs to have a “standard operating procedure that will include an up-to-date alert roster and communication procedures. The SOP [standard operating procedures] *may* include additional information such as outlines of unit communication networks (including social media), frequency of communication” (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.C.6.B.3) (emphasis added). The role of establishing and executing communication plans and strategies falls to the CFRR (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019). Importantly, the new guidance emphasizes social media as a strategy to “meet the goals of the SFRG” (AD 2019-17, 2019, 4.e).

The SFRG policy could be clarified to better support the communication channels that groups leverage. First, there is no guidance on synchronous but virtual options for communication (e.g., virtual Zoom or Microsoft Teams SFRG meetings). Allowing and providing guidance for this option could help units cover large geographic areas. For example, virtual communication would potentially be relevant for soldiers who are part of the reserve component or located where families tend to live farther from post, potentially preventing families and soldiers from engaging with the SFRG. This might even be relevant for reserve component units where logistics such as scheduling conflicts would otherwise pose a challenge. Second, providing sample standard operating procedures for communicating with SFRG members may help CFRRs, in the service of the commander and in partnership with other SFRG leaders, to understand the cadence and communication channels they can leverage to best support information-sharing. Finally, in requiring SFRGs to collect and maintain rosters, the Army should provide guidance about how to store and protect personal information.

In addition to determining *how* to share information, SFRGs must determine *what* information to share. Policy is notably quiet on the topic, and commanders have the discretion to determine what is most beneficial to soldiers and families. In the current guidance about SFRGs, the policy does require that commanders ensure that “Better Opportunities for Soldiers (BOSS) are included in all SFRG activities” (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.C.6.B.7). Ostensibly, this directive is to ensure that the communications provided to the SFRG include information about programs to support not only Army families but also single soldiers.

There are many Army resources available for soldiers and families alike. One interviewee mentioned that they hoped SFRGs would serve as a comprehensive resource to families with the ability to connect members to various supplemental programs. The issue of privacy is also a consideration when dealing with the sensitive problems families face. While this is perhaps less relevant in the context of unit soldiers, SFRG leadership should be sensitive to how best to communicate about these challenges, in order to build trust that ensures that the information provided is accessible to all. Providing additional information to SFRG leaders on how to navigate supports such as Military One Source and highlight select resources to members could help ensure that relevant and timely information is being shared across the SFRG’s communication network. Additionally, while establishing and executing the communication strategy falls to the commander or to the CFRR if so delegated, it could be helpful for a brigade-level public affairs officer to support CFRRs by creating or editing social media content and messages that can be used by SFRGs to communicate available resources or other key pieces of information to members. Elevating this task could facilitate more cohesive and standardized communication across SFRGs, ensuring that information—particularly sensitive information—is conveyed through the most-appropriate means, whether social media, video conferencing, or email platforms most accessible to family members.

Community Building Activities

Finally, SFRGs undertake activities that promote community building and social cohesion and help create bonds across members of the SFRG that are critical in networks of mutual support. Some community building may happen through the information-sharing channels described above, but the new policy also explicitly points out that at least some social activities are important in establishing relationships and bonds. The previous guidance over FRGs stated that “FRG social activities can enhance family and Soldier camaraderie, provide stress relief, and reduce family loneliness during deployments” (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-2.e). The new guidance for SFRGs is less clear what mechanism will serve this function. AD 2019-17 provides that “SFRGs may conduct support and recognition activities that benefit members, such as births, birthdays, post-deployment recognition, and other social activities that benefit the SFRG. These activities greatly enhance Soldier and Family camaraderie, relieve stress, and reduce feelings of anxiety and isolation” (AD 2019-17, 2019, 4.c).

Yet the current EXORD does not include this information. Instead, in establishing the purpose of the groups, the guidance, as quoted previously, explicitly redirects group activities away from social activities and fundraising to information-sharing activities (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.A). The EXORD does allow the CFRR to “coordinate and communicate resilience events (post sponsored or unit sponsored)” (HQDA EXORD 233-19, 2019, 3.D.1.B.5). “Resilience events” are not scoped in the policy guidance. Thus, the allowability or advisability of explicitly social activities is not clear, and further clarity about aims and frequency of social events would be helpful. Furthermore, given the move away from explicitly social activities, it may prove helpful to provide clarity regarding what form of social events are explicitly discouraged, if any.

Funding and Fundraising

The Army has provided budget and financial resources to support the operation of the SFRG program. There are two primary sources of budgetary support. First, commanders should be budgeting appropriated funds to support the SFRG. According to the previous FRG guidance, appropriated funds would support FRG operations. The policy directed commanders to “consider FRG mission activity requirements when planning their yearly budget” using the needs of their unit (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-6.a). Commanders were further instructed to have a standard operating procedure whereby FRG leaders and volunteers could request support, and a sample standard operating procedure was provided in training materials (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-6.b). The new SFRG guidance does not speak to the process of allocating funds but does specify that appropriated funds cannot fund social activities (AD 2019-17, 2019, 4.f.2). It follows that appropriated funds support the administrative activities and information-sharing activities outlined earlier in this report.

Both previous and current policy allow commanders to authorize the SFRG to maintain one informal fund. The guidance about how to use and raise informal funds is consistently rigorous in both previous and current policy. The current guidance simply states that informal funds are used for “non-mission-essential activities in accordance with this directive” (AD 2019-17, 2019, 4-f.1). The previous guidance was more explicit on what constituted allowable activities and provided examples that included “newsletters that contain predominantly unofficial information and purely social activities, including, but not limited to, parties; social outings, volunteer recognition, and picnics” (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-7.a.2). In some interviews, respondents expressed confusion about how and why funding rules changed between policies; it would be helpful to provide more-explicit guidance about allowable uses and the purpose of informal funds.

Both previous and current policy are explicit about what uses are unallowable for SFRG informal funds, which include mixing with appropriated funds or other informal funds, purchasing items that should be funded with appropriated funds, or purchasing gifts unrelated to family readiness. The current guidance adds that directly providing funds to a charity or specific soldier are likewise unauthorized uses of the funds (AD 2019-17, 2019, 4.f.2). To support the proper use of funds, both previous and current guidance require commanders to appoint a Fund Custodian to oversee the SFRG funds and to create and execute a standard operating procedure to manage, raise, distribute, and audit the funds.

While the current guidance notes that SFRGs are shifting away from fundraising activities, it also raises the cap for informal funds. Previous guidance specified that informal funds were not “to exceed an annual gross receipt (income) cap of \$5,000 per calendar year from all sources, including fundraising, gifts, and donations” (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-7.e). This cap was raised in the new SFRG guidance, and informal funds now cannot exceed a cap of \$10,000 “at any given time in a calendar year from all sources” (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-7.e). Additionally, brigade or equivalent commanders can grant an exception for an increased cap up to \$25,000 for a period not to exceed three months, renewable every six months (AD 2019-17, 2019, 4-f.2). Given the magnitude of this allowable informal fund cap increase, it would be helpful to identify when and why SFRGs might take advantage of this provision. Specifying the authorized uses of these funds and the fundraising cap while also addressing language that recommends curtailing or shifting away from fundraising would clarify the role of fundraising in the current SFRG program.

Program Evaluation

Under previous guidance, FRGs were required to complete an annual evaluation of the program. Under the current guidance, SFRGs are required to produce audits of the funds used to support the program, but commanders are explicitly disallowed from adding “additional reporting requirements to the operation and execution of SFRGs” (AD 2019-17, 2019, 4.d.).

Furthermore, an inspection of the program is not required. These policies reduce the burdens of compliance; however, they do little to shed light on SFRG inputs and activities, let alone provide information about what activity structure might reap the most benefits. These inputs and activities are key components of an effective SFRG program. The extent to which each is implemented and leveraged will vary, by design, to meet the needs of any particular SFRG given each unit's unique context. Yet without evaluation built into the program, it is difficult to know how integrated and effective SFRGs are across the Army.

Summary

In this chapter, we outlined the policy changes that explicitly shape the current iteration of SFRGs and aligned those changes with the logic model described in Chapter 2. We identified where prior policy provided more guidance and discussed how that guidance might be helpful, and we outlined changes in emphasis evident in the new policy. Because the rollout of the change was not accompanied by changes to AR 600-20 or AR 608-1, Appendix J, it seems that further explication through those or other policy documents could close some of the gaps where the existing policy is silent or the changes cause confusion. In tandem with other study activities, the points outlined in this chapter speak to opportunities for clarification that will better connect the program activities and intended impact of the groups.

Chapter 5. Perspectives of Army Spouses on SFRGs

Previous chapters have examined SFRGs from several perspectives. The literature speaks to potential best practices for social support, the logic model speaks to the inputs and processes inherent in program implementation, and the theory of change speaks to the mechanisms that help those processes achieve the desired ends. The policy review compares the new policy as written with prior policy, in the context of the logic model, to illuminate where lack of clarity or gaps exist. However, these activities do not speak directly to how the policy is currently being implemented after more than a year of enactment or the perspectives of spouses who are an essential element of these groups. Although we were able to conduct some interviews with various individuals affiliated with SFRGs in their current status, true implementation evaluation requires a more general perspective, which we were able to obtain through an ongoing panel study of Army spouses.

In January 2021, we surveyed a sample of Army spouses and asked them about their experiences with SFRGs, the change from FRGs to SFRGs, and their perceptions of SFRGs. The survey was administered as part of the Today's Army Spouse Panel (TASP), and 1,556 spouses responded to the survey (Trail et al., 2023). Because TASP participants were recruited from a survey of Army spouses fielded in 2018 (Trail, Sims, and Tankard, 2019), respondents were married to soldiers of higher ranks compared with the current Army spouse population as a whole (see Trail et al., 2023, for a description of the survey methodology and respondent details). For the purpose of examining the change from FRGs to SFRGs, the respondents' relative maturity was advantageous as they had been affiliated with the Army long enough to have potentially participated in both FRGs and SFRGs, enabling them to evaluate whether and how the change affected the groups.

Thus, we asked spouse respondents a series of questions about their awareness of the change, experience with FRGs and SFRGs, and perceptions of changes to the program if they had participated in SFRGs after the change. All results were weighted to be representative of the population of Army spouses eligible for the 2018 survey *brought forward in time* (i.e., spouses still married to active component soldiers). Because the impetus for changing FRGs to SFRGs was in part because of the negative reputation of FRGs, we also asked all spouses to report their perceptions of SFRGs, regardless of whether they had attended FRGs or SFRGs. This enabled us to empirically assess actual reputation among spouses. We also conducted statistical analyses to determine whether some subgroups of spouses significantly differed in their awareness or participation in SFRGs. Specifically, we conducted regression analyses examining whether responses differed by spouse employment status, the distance spouses lived from the nearest Army installation, whether they had children in the household, their soldier's pay grade, and

whether their soldier had experienced a deployment since 2018 (see Appendix B for regression results).

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Table 5.1 displays the characteristics of respondents to the survey. Around 30 percent of spouses were working full-time, and 46 percent were not employed and not looking for work. Just over 80 percent of spouses lived close to post or on post, and 18 percent lived far from post (e.g., 21 miles or more away). As noted in the prior section, because of the nature of the panel, few respondents were the spouses of junior enlisted soldiers. Finally, almost 30 percent of spouses were married to a soldier who had experienced a deployment since 2018.

Table 5.1. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Demographic	Percentage
Current employment status ^a	
Working full-time	29.5
Working part-time	12.9
Unemployed and looking for work	11.4
Not employed and not looking for work	46.3
Distance of residence from nearest Army installation ^a	
On post	29.1
5 to 20 miles away	52.7
21 miles or more	18.2
Presence of dependents in the household ^a	
No dependent children	19.0
One or more dependent children	81.0
Soldier pay grade ^b	
E1–E4	6.8
E5–E9	71.1
O1–O3	9.6
O4+	12.5
Soldier experienced a deployment since 2018 ^b	
No	71.2
Yes	28.8

NOTE: *N* = 1,556.

^a Features information from responses to the RAND TASP survey, August 2020 and January 2021.

^b Information sourced from U.S. Army, “Total Army Personnel Database,” dataset, undated.

Awareness of the Change and Participation in SFRGs

Most Spouses Were Not Aware of Recent Changes to FRGs

We first asked all respondents, “How aware are you of recent changes to Family Readiness Groups (FRGs)?” Responses suggested that most spouses were not aware of the change from FRGs to SFRGs: 35 percent of respondents indicated that they “know that FRGs are now SFRGs,” while 60 percent of respondents indicated that they were “not aware of any recent changes to FRGs,” and 5 percent of respondents had “never heard of FRGs.”

Further analysis revealed that spouses who live far from post (21 miles or more) were significantly less likely to know that FRGs are now SFRGs (27 percent) than those who lived close to post (5 to 20 miles away; 36 percent), or those who lived on post (40 percent). Spouses of senior enlisted soldiers were also less likely to know that FRGs are now SFRGs (33 percent) compared with spouses of junior or senior officers (47 and 39 percent, respectively). In addition, spouses whose soldier had experienced a recent deployment (since 2018) were more likely to be aware of the change than those whose soldiers had not experienced a recent deployment (40 and 34 percent, respectively).

Fewer Spouses Participated in SFRGs Than FRGs

For those spouses who did not indicate that they had “never heard of FRGs,” we asked, “How familiar were you with Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) – before the recent changes (in 2019)?” Results indicated that most respondents had participated in FRGs, to a lesser or greater extent. Among spouses who were aware of FRGs, 64 percent had attended FRG meetings, 37 percent reported they had occasionally attended FRG meetings, 6 percent reported they regularly attended meetings, and 22 percent reported they were an FRG leader or volunteer. Almost 36 percent reported they had never attended an FRG meeting or activity, although they were aware of FRGs.

In contrast, when participants were asked, “How familiar are you with Soldier and Family Readiness Groups (SFRGs) – currently,” responses indicated that post-change awareness was less widespread. Indeed, 68 percent of respondents had never attended an SFRG meeting or event (although they were aware of SFRGs), whereas 21 percent had occasionally attended SFRGs, 4 percent had regularly attended, and 7 percent said they were an SFRG volunteer. Overall, 35 percent of spouses had never attended either an FRG or SFRG meeting or event.

Among those spouses who had participated in FRG activities, just under half (48 percent) had also participated in SFRGs. In contrast, among spouses who had not participated in FRG activities previously, only 4 percent had participated in SFRGs.

Regression analysis examining the 32 percent of respondents who had attended SFRG meetings or events versus the 68 percent who had not attended SFRG meetings revealed several significant differences when examining pay grade, deployment status, distance from post,

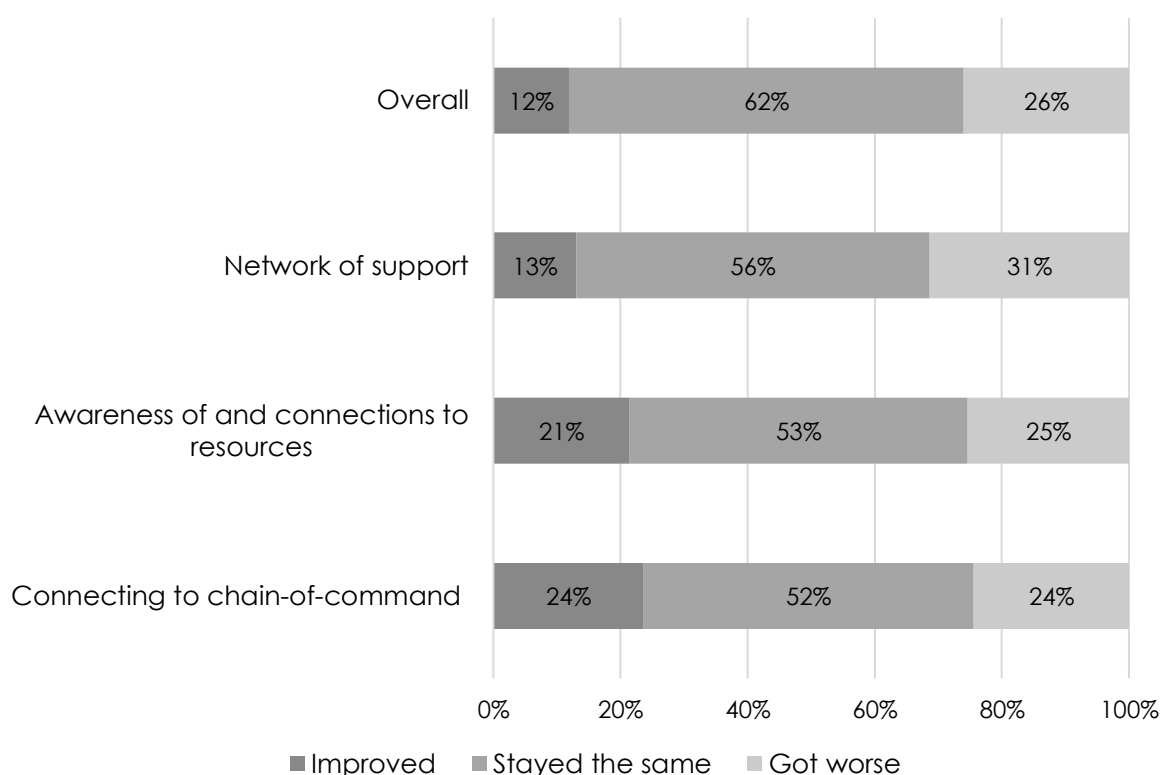
presence of children, and employment status simultaneously. Spouses who lived on post (34 percent) or close to post (34 percent) were significantly more likely to have participated in SFRGs than those who lived far from post (24 percent). Spouses who had a dependent child were also more likely to have participated in SFRGs than those without a child (33 versus 26 percent, respectively). Spouses of senior officers were less likely to have participated in SFRGs (24 percent) than spouses of junior officers (38 percent) or senior enlisted soldiers (34 percent). Also, spouses whose soldier had experienced a recent deployment were more likely to have participated in SFRGs than those who had not experienced a recent deployment (40 and 29 percent, respectively).

Spouse Perceptions of Changes Between FRGs and SFRGs

To assess the changes spouses perceived between FRGs and SFRGs, we asked a series of questions of those spouses who had attended both FRGs and SFRGs (32 percent of spouses). Because of the relatively small number of spouses in this group ($n = 468$) and the resulting small sizes of subgroups, we did not conduct any statistical analysis on subgroup differences in responses.

We asked spouses to assess how the change from FRGs to SFRGs affected the program overall and to assess the impact of the change on the group's network of support, awareness of and connections to resources, and connecting to the chain of command. Across questions, around 40 percent of respondents reported that they did not know how much the change had impacted the groups. It is unclear why they felt they did not know about the impact of the change, because they had attended both FRG and SFRG activities. Excluding those respondents, the most common response across questions was that the groups had *stayed the same*. As shown in Figure 5.1, of those spouses who expressed an opinion, 52 to 62 percent perceived that SFRG groups stayed the same after the change. Although around a quarter of respondents perceived that the groups got worse after the change, more spouses reported seeing improvements related to awareness and access to resources (21 percent reported improvements) and connecting to the chain of command (24 percent reported improvements).

Figure 5.1. Perceptions of Changes Between FRGs and SFRGs Among Spouses Who Expressed an Opinion



SOURCE: Features information from responses to the RAND TASP survey, August 2020 and January 2021.
 NOTE: $N = 468$. Because of rounding, percentages might not add up to 100 percent. Spouses could respond “Don’t know” to each question. The percentage of spouses responding “Don’t know” to each question was 38 percent for overall perceptions of change, 46 percent for network of support, 42 percent for awareness of and connections to resources, and 39 percent for connecting to chain of command.

Spouse Perceptions of SFRG Funding and Fundraising Activities

We asked spouses who had attended FRGs and SFRGs two questions concerning the funds available for SFRG activities. The first question asked spouses to think about the amount of funds available for SFRG activities and indicate whether there were enough funds for those activities. Most spouses (63 percent) reported that there are not enough funds for SFRG activities, 35 percent reported that there are enough funds, and 2 percent reported that there are “more than enough funds” for SFRG activities.

Because an over-emphasis on fundraising activities was seen by leadership as one reason for revamping FRGs into SFRGs, we asked spouses to report their perceptions of the number and extent of fundraising activities carried out by their SFRGs. Few spouses (around 5 percent) thought that there are too many SFRG fundraising activities, while 53 percent reported that there

are not enough fundraising activities and 41 percent reported that “there are the right amount of SFRG fundraising activities.”

Spouse Perceptions of SFRG Utility

Finally, we asked all spouses, including those who had never attended FRGs or SFRGs, to report their perceptions of SFRGs along several domains. The domains were chosen to assess spouses’ positive and negative perceptions of SFRGs, including negative perceptions of FRGs found in prior research (e.g., Booth et al., 2007) that may persist for SFRGs (e.g., that SFRGs are too “cliquey”). Instructions for the questions were as follows: “Below are some perceptions people might have about their unit’s Soldier and Family Readiness Group. We are interested in your perceptions even if you are not very familiar with SFRGs or FRGs. Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements.” Spouses rated each statement on a five-point scale, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

Two questions assessed spouse perceptions of the trustworthiness of information provided by SFRGs. As shown in Figure 5.2, about half of spouses agreed or strongly agreed that the information provided by SFRGs is accurate (50 percent) and useful (53 percent). Few spouses disagreed or strongly disagreed with these statements (5 and 7 percent, respectively), while around 40 percent responded that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements. Indeed, “neither agree nor disagree” was the predominant response for the other statements, suggesting that the plurality of spouses do not have strong opinions on the positive or negative aspects of SFRGs other than that they provide useful and accurate information.⁷ Still, it is useful to examine where some spouses have more-positive or more-negative perceptions of SFRGs, as these perceptions could be instructive to leadership.

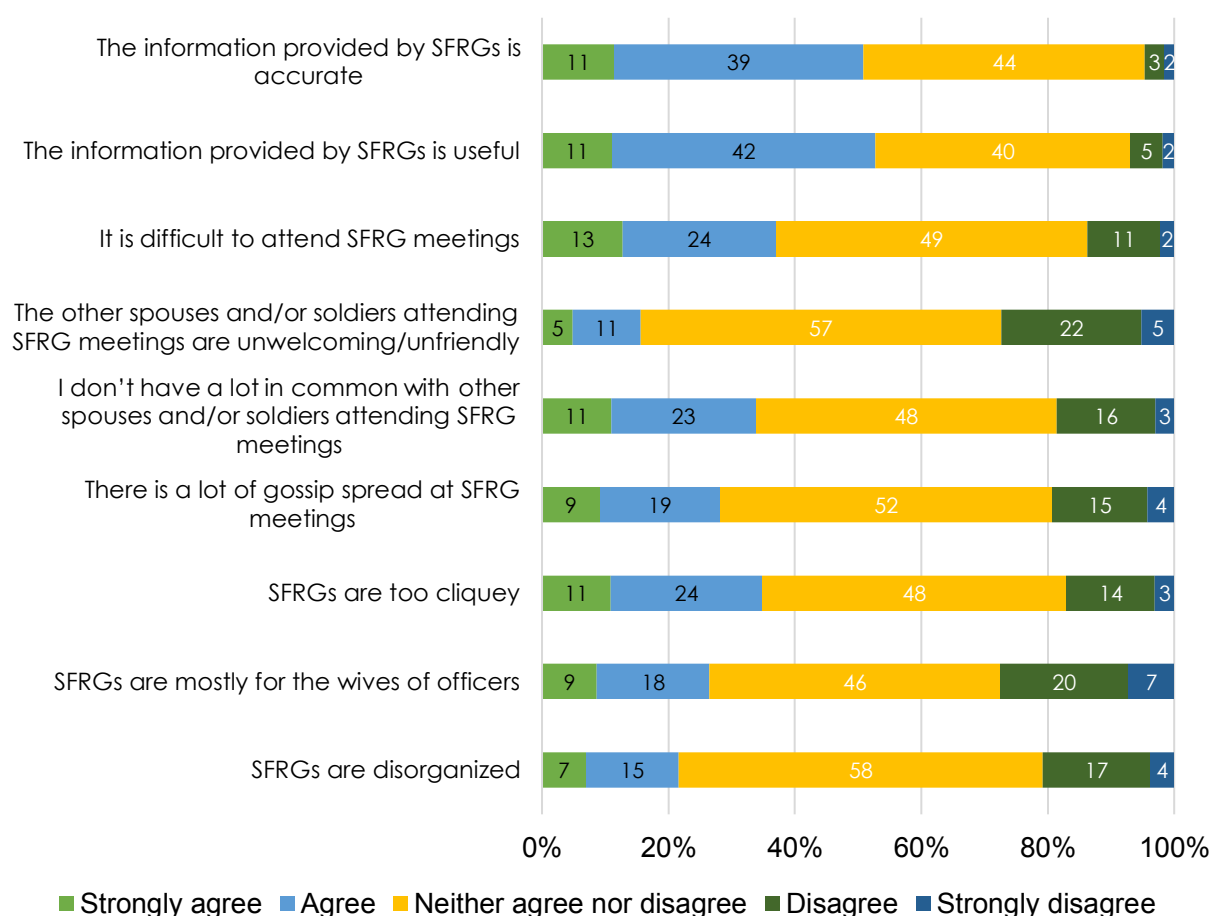
One question assessed perceptions of logistical difficulties attending SFRGs. When asked their perceptions of difficulty attending SFRGs, 37 percent of spouses reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that it is difficult to attend SFRG meetings, and 12 percent of spouses disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

There are also potential social barriers to attending SFRG meetings and activities, and we asked two questions to assess spouses’ perceptions of these social barriers. First, we asked respondents the extent to which they agreed that “the other spouses and/or soldiers attending SFRG meetings are unwelcoming/unfriendly.” As shown in Figure 5.2, most spouses did not agree or disagree with this statement, and only 16 percent agreed or strongly agreed, while 27 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This suggests that concerns about being welcome in the group are not a prominent barrier to participation in SFRGs. Another potential social barrier is not fitting in with a group, so we asked respondents the extent to which they agreed that they “don’t have a lot in common with other spouses and/or soldiers attending

⁷ Possibly in part because some had not attended these activities.

SFRG meetings.” Just over a third of spouses agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 19 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. So, of the social barriers to attending SFRG meetings and events, perceptions that one does not have a lot in common with other attendees are a more common barrier than perceptions that the groups are unwelcoming or unfriendly.

Figure 5.2. Spouse Perceptions of SFRGs



SOURCE: Features information from responses to the RAND TASP survey, August 2020 and January 2021.

NOTE: *N* = 1,464. Because of rounding, percentages might not add up to 100 percent.

In addition, spouses might have perceptions of the social atmosphere of SFRGs that they do not like. Three perceptions that have been documented in studies of FRGs are that the groups have a lot of gossip, that the social environment is “cliquy,” and that the groups are mainly for the wives of officers. We asked about each of these perceptions. About 28 percent of spouses agreed or strongly agreed that there is a lot of gossip spread at SFRG meetings, while 19 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Over a third agreed or strongly agreed that SFRGs are too “cliquy,” while 17 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Finally, 27 percent of spouses agreed or strongly agreed that “SFRGs are mostly for the wives of officers,” while 27 percent

disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. These results suggest that perceptions that SFRGs are “cliquey” are slightly more prominent than perceptions that they are gossipy or that they are mostly for officers’ wives.

Finally, we asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that “SFRGs are disorganized.” Almost 60 percent of spouses neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, while 22 percent agreed or strongly agreed, and 21 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Summary

These findings suggest that awareness of the policy change from FRGs to SFRGs is not widespread among relatively experienced active component spouses. Of those who are aware of the change, most perceived that the groups had stayed the same. Our examination of spouse perceptions of SFRGs and FRGs suggests that spouses tend to consider SFRGs to be a good venue through which to obtain information that is both accurate and useful, which is one of the key functions of SFRGs and is explicitly emphasized in changes to the policy.

Spouses also tend not to agree with the statement that “the other spouses and/or soldiers attending SFRG meetings are unwelcoming/unfriendly,” although some do perceive a logistical challenge regarding meeting attendance. Other barriers discussed in the literature on SFRGs, such as that they are too “cliquey” or that SFRGs are mostly for officers’ wives, did not appear to be substantive barriers among spouses. However, it is important to highlight that about a third of spouses perceived that they do not have a lot in common with other attendees, which could serve as a barrier to attending SFRG meetings and events. This is particularly relevant because the peer support group notes that a very influential facilitator of engagement is the perception that participants have a lot in common with each other.

Chapter 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

SFRGs have the potential to be a primary conduit of information and support to both single soldiers and married soldiers and their families. This project (1) developed a logic model to describe how SFRGs can be implemented to produce desired outcomes and why properly implemented SFRGs should produce those outcomes, (2) elucidated lessons from the literature for successfully implementing similar peer support groups, (3) compared the current policy and regulations for SFRGs with those for FRGs to determine gaps in policy and ensure that SFRGs meet their goals, and (4) described the results of a recent survey of Army spouses that assessed their perceptions of SFRGs and the change from FRGs to SFRGs. The current chapter summarizes the study findings and offers recommendations for successfully implementing SFRGs. First, we discuss important caveats to consider when evaluating our findings.

Caveats

Although we cast a wide net in exploring peer support groups and SFRGs in conducting our assessment, we were not able to include several relevant stakeholders in our effort, most importantly commanders. Given their key role in leading SFRGs both before and after the policy change, their perspective on implementation is important. We did supplement our research with some interviews, but those were limited. We also did not collect perspectives systematically from the reserve component, where SFRGs operate differently. At the same time, the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes of SFRGs are intended to follow the same basic form in both components; hence, our results apply generally to both. Although the policy that was rolled out in fall 2019 was in force for more than a year at the time of our survey of spouses, one of our main findings was that many spouses were unaware of the changes. This is something that future studies of SFRG implementation should keep in mind, as it suggests that the rollout may have been patchy. Additional, more-systematic research efforts may similarly show that full rollout is not accomplished, rather than speaking effectively to implementation best practices subsequent to the rollout.

Summary of Findings

Our literature review targeted available evidence regarding best practices for facilitating engagement for peer support groups and barriers to their successful implementation. Although the context of these groups is often different from SFRGs—for example, they are typically in a civilian setting, and groups may be formed to assist individuals faced with physical or behavioral health challenges or who are parenting for the first time—the general findings are still relevant for the Army’s interest in forming a network of support within the Army community among

participants who choose to attend these groups and understanding how best to engage members of that community.

The literature review suggests that a structured group format with some predictability but with built-in flexibility facilitates engagement. The flexibility should center around the needs of the individual group, so some mechanism for assessing those needs would be helpful to incorporate into SFRG policy, be it membership canvassing by the CFRR or volunteer members or a survey mechanism.

Many sources in the literature discuss the importance of providing PGLs (in this case, unit commanders and CFRRs) with training and support, an issue that is also relevant to SFRGs. Especially given demographic differences (i.e., current policy dictates that a soldier lead a group of mixed soldiers and civilians), developing skill sets such as communication to bridge that gap may prove useful, as shown in the literature. The literature review also suggests that helping SFRG leadership develop interpersonal tools to help group leaders foster trust and a climate of open communication would benefit SFRGs.

The literature review shows that choosing PGLs with similarities to group membership yields benefits in terms of engagement. With SFRG leadership set in policy, it becomes somewhat more challenging for leadership selection to accommodate the demographic makeup of the group membership. However, the literature review did suggest that having multiple group leaders that reflect different aspects of membership may be one solution. Certainly, FSGs and FRGs have historically used spouse volunteers to great advantage, so this possibility has historical precedent despite the deemphasis of the role of spouse volunteers in the current policy.

Both the literature review and the policy comparison suggest that the selection of the CFRR and facilitation of that role in terms of time and other resources to perform the role will be integral. Changes to both the policy (infusing the CFRR role with more explicit responsibilities previously undertaken by multiple personnel) and context (decreasing support and systematic funding for positions that previously offered administrative assistance, such as the FRSA) mean that the CFRR role requires more capacity than previously. Indeed, it is likely that CFRR responsibilities will take significant time and dedication. For the sustainability and efficacy of the role, the Army should consider reducing other commitments and responsibilities that the designated soldier holds so that they may effectively carry out their SFRG responsibilities.

Additionally, while the desire to connect the SFRGs more closely with the command structure has the potential to increase the reliability and the utility of the information provided, the deemphasis on administrative support provided by volunteers and formally by the Army presents some concern. It may be advisable to include specific recommendations in policy for how best to incorporate help in various forms, through volunteers to share leadership or through resources typically found above company levels, such as public affairs personnel that can help company-level SFRGs manage asynchronous social media posts.

Finally, one of the findings from the literature review with the greatest weight of support speaks to the importance of minimizing group activity accessibility issues. Choice of meeting

location, platform access options, and accessibility of content are all factors that SFRG guidance can speak to and SFRG leaders can consider when forming strategic plans or standard operating procedures for their SFRGs. Current policy recommends but does not mandate communication through multiple channels and venues, both synchronous (such as in-person meetings) and asynchronous (such as social media posts), which would help address some of these empirical findings. Certainly, sources in the literature discuss the challenges posed by a busy schedule as a barrier to engagement, and our survey revealed that this can be an issue for Army spouses as well.

In addition, the SFRG program logic model and policy comparison suggest gaps in implementation of SFRGs that could lead to difficulty obtaining the intended program outcomes. First, while new guidance for SFRGs reemphasizes the ownership of the unit commander, there is a disparity between the old and new guidance on the role of volunteers in the groups, particularly whether volunteers can serve in a leadership position. In particular, volunteers are allowed under the new guidance, but the policy outlines an SFRG chain of command of Army personnel, and the leadership role that volunteers assumed under FRGs is transitioned to CFRRs. As noted above, this change centralizes the role of CFRRs in SFRGs, and it would be helpful for the Army to specify the qualities and characteristics that are important for CFRRs to possess, including the skills and time they will need to complete their CFRR responsibilities in the context of their other duties and how volunteer efforts will be accommodated into the SFRG leadership structure.

The role of training to support SFRG leadership is more explicit in the current SFRG policy than it was in previous guidance. The emphasis in the literature, which emphasized the importance of training for PGLs, and the structure and content of SFRG training, will be important for determining the success of SFRGs.

In contrast, the new guidance does not specify the activities needed to successfully implement an SFRG. Although the prior and new guidance allow for autonomy at the unit level to determine the specific content and structure of SFRG activities, the new guidance does not specify the need for synchronous group communication, including in-person or virtual meetings, and it does not specify the content of communications, specifically the type of information that should be shared with group members. In addition, the new guidance explicitly redirects group activities away from social activities and fundraising to information-sharing activities.

While this shift in emphasis is understandable given the reportedly negative reputation of FRGs as social clubs, it neglects the previously specified role of FRGs to “enhance family and Soldier camaraderie, provide stress relief, and reduce family loneliness during deployments” (AR 608-1, 2017, App. J, J-2.e). Thus, even though the new guidance stresses the role of SFRGs in producing a network of social support among unit members and their families, it does not explicitly provide a mechanism for achieving that goal. It also does not provide guidance regarding how fundraising for social activities should be incorporated to help support the goal.

Additionally, the new guidance does not make allowances for monitoring or evaluation of the implementation of SFRG inputs, activities, or outcomes, which will make it difficult to know how integrated and effective SFRGs are across installations or units within installations. This may also potentially be a barrier to collecting and disseminating SFRG best practices.

Finally, survey results suggest that awareness of the policy change from FRGs to SFRGs is not widespread among relatively “experienced” active component spouses. Of those who are aware of the change, most perceived that the groups had stayed the same. Overall, spouses tend to consider SFRGs to be a good venue through which to obtain information that is both accurate and useful, which is one of the key functions of SFRGs and is explicitly emphasized in changes to the policy. Although some spouses face logistical challenges that make it difficult to attend SFRG meetings, other barriers discussed in the literature on SFRGs—such as that they are too “cliquey” or that the groups are solely for the wives of officers—did not appear to be substantive barriers among surveyed spouses.

Recommendations

SFRGs need flexibility to adapt to the needs of the unit and to contextual factors such as upcoming deployments, but our research suggests that the Army should provide some basic guidance for required group activities, informational content, and group structure. Failure to impose some basic guidelines might result in uneven implementation of SFRGs across installations and units. Although we did not compare existing SFRG policies and practices to *ideal* policies and practices, the literature review, logic model, and policy review, in their totality, speak to best practices for implementing and administering SFRGs. It is in this spirit that we offer the following recommendations.

Army policy should be more explicit about the types of social activities that are acceptable in SFRGs. Community building and creating a network of social support are a central aspect to the SFRG logic model and are specifically mentioned in Army policy as one of the primary objectives of SFRG groups. Group activities that are not exclusively about information-sharing but are intended to enable community building among participants should be specified as a core activity for SFRGs. Thus, efforts to provide affordable, broadly inclusive activities that give soldiers and their families opportunities to get to know both each other and leadership better should be targeted in SFRG policy and guidance.

These social activities can include activities held around information-providing SFRG meetings (e.g., after-meeting coffee hours), social activities outside formal meetings (e.g., picnics, group trips to local parks, formal balls), volunteer public service events (e.g., group outings to clean up a local park or participate in volunteer activities such as Habitat for Humanity), and fundraising activities with the specific purpose of funding other explicitly targeted activities for which participation would be facilitated by defraying costs such as tickets or meals (i.e., costs for junior enlisted personnel and their families who may otherwise be

prevented from participation by monetary constraints). Although fundraising is not an essential SFRG activity or desired outcome in the way that community building and a network of support are, our interviews suggested a lack of clarity regarding its role given the changes in the new policy. Thus, additional clarification regarding acceptable purposes of fundraising and the role that these funds should play might be warranted as well. As noted in the literature, enabling SFRG participants to suggest group social activities might increase their commitment to the group and would offer the opportunity for less involved group members to have a stake in the SFRG.

Our survey results suggest that many spouses perceive SFRGs as good sources of information, and current policy reemphasizes the importance of SFRGs in providing information to participants. To aid in the distribution of information through SFRGs, **it might be useful for Army G-9 to provide key topics, lists of potential topics, or guidance for topics the Army would like SFRGs to address as part of their activities.** These suggestions could include ideas for how to incorporate outside speakers to facilitate the presentation of information. For example, one suggestion could be that a representative from the Army Employment Readiness Program could come to an SFRG meeting and present information on local job opportunities for family members and transitioning soldiers and information on local volunteer opportunities for soldiers and families.

To ensure that SFRGs meet a basic level of activity to engage and inform participants, **the Army could provide suggestions on SFRG meeting frequency and more specifics and guidance on the minimal levels of other forms of outreach (e.g., social media posts).** The literature review spoke to the essential nature of interpersonal exchanges between members for fostering engagement. An SFRG that does not demonstrate consistent and regular activity over time might risk losing participants who are less motivated to maintain contact with the unit, which would subsequently make the SFRG less inclusive.

Because commanders and other SFRG leadership are busy with other, perhaps higher-priority tasks, SFRG activities might lapse until they are perceived as critical (e.g., when a deployment is forthcoming), which would reduce the ability of SFRGs to reach program goals of consistently providing information to participants and building a network of community support. To prevent this, the Army should provide policy guidance to maintain consistent SFRG activities. For example, guidance could specify that SFRG meetings should occur monthly (the traditional frequency of SFRG meetings) or specify a minimum in terms of frequency. Guidance could also specify that SFRG leadership should post new information to the group's social media site at least once a week, and SFRG newsletters should be distributed at least once a quarter.

Although the use of volunteers is emphasized in current and past SFRG policy, the role that volunteers can play in SFRGs is unspecified. Moreover, responsibilities previously held by multiple individuals are now vested in CFRRs. Thus, **we recommend that the Army should clarify further the role of volunteers and CFRRs.** Specific policy guidance is needed on whether spouses or other family members can take leadership roles in SFRGs. According to the

literature, when group leaders cannot be selected, it can be helpful to have multiple leaders that align with various demographics of group participants. Thus, in units with more married couples, for example, a spouse could serve as the co-leader of the unit SFRG. Moreover, it is clear from the policy discussion that CFRRs have been tasked with multiple duties in SFRGs. The Army could designate in policy that a volunteer should be recruited to support the unit CFRR in performing their tasks.

Although SFRG policy explicitly negates any role for compliance inspections, the implementation literature review suggested that program performance monitoring and evaluation is central to ensuring that the program is meeting stated goals. **We recommend that the Army incorporate measurement of performance indicators into SFRG policy.** Our logic model speaks to some facets of program performance that could be measured and monitored to assess whether SFRGs are functioning well. The Army may consider how best to incorporate such measurement and assessment: an informal process used at the battalion or brigade level to ensure that SFRGs within the unit are all functioning at similar levels or a more formal process used by the Army in assessing unit commander performance. Either way, measurement and tracking of performance indicators will help commanders monitor the “health” of their SFRGs and the impact of any changes they implement on SFRG performance.

New SFRG policy specifies that role-specific training will be provided to SFRG leadership team members. At the time of this writing, the training has not been executed, but the literature review and logic model clearly indicate the importance of training and support in increasing participant engagement and improving SFRG function. **We recommend that leadership training provide templates and sample materials for executing SFRGs.** These templates and sample materials should cover all aspects of group activities included in the program logic model: group administration, information-sharing, and community building activities. Templates and sample materials for group administration could include sample steering committee agendas, sample SFRG strategic plans, and templates for building and maintaining rosters of SFRG participants. Such templates need not be developed from scratch; for example, prior FRG “smartbook” materials contain some of these items (U.S. Army, 2018).

Templates and sample materials for information-sharing could include sample agendas and activities for SFRG meetings on key topics (e.g., child care and parenting, Army Community Services resources and programs, financial planning workshops), electronic and hardcopy newsletter templates, social media post templates about key topics, sample strategies for maintaining a consistent and engaging social media presence, and sample templates for maintaining lists of military and community resources for referrals. Templates and sample materials for community building activities could include sample protocols to ensure inclusivity and goal-driven social activities, sample activities and protocols for increasing family familiarity with unit command, and sample fundraising activities that also help build unit community. These templates and sample materials could be adopted from existing SFRGs or developed by Army Headquarters. Providing templates and sample materials to SFRG leadership will increase

consistency across SFRGs, reduce the administrative burden on leadership, and help leaders execute the program as intended.

Conclusion

Our research supports the utility that an effective SFRG can have in fostering engagement in the Army community among leadership, soldiers, and families. The updated Army policy has indicated its support for these groups and emphasized important roles such as information-sharing. But the new policy guidance is less clear on some areas that can have important influence on the overall success of these groups in achieving their missions. Our recommendations highlight gaps in the policy guidance that, if strengthened, can improve the likelihood of achieving the outcomes for which the Army aims.

Appendix A. Literature Review Methodology and Weight of Support

To glean suggestions for maintaining engagement in SFRGs, we conducted a targeted review of the growing literature on peer support groups to determine what factors might serve as facilitators of their success or barriers to it. Because very few articles empirically assessed the influence of facilitators or barriers on group engagement, we incorporated commentary by authors as evidence of expert opinions. Thus, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting expert consensus rather than describing empirically derived causal relationships. In this appendix, we describe the methodology of that literature review.

Search Strategy

This review was conducted to identify the current literature on the factors that facilitate or serve as a barrier to implementing social support groups. Our research questions centered on how best to structure groups for connection and social support to facilitate participant engagement, and our search strategy reflected that focus. To identify the literature, we accessed the electronic databases PubMed and PsycINFO. The initial search was conducted in PubMed; however, to ensure that all the literature was being captured, a later search was conducted in PsycINFO. The same search terms were used for both databases. Main outcomes of interest included barriers, facilitators, engagement, and retention of peer support groups. These terms were used as the final search categories. Additional terms were identified by commonly listed types of support groups, such as anti-racism, bereavement, parenting, disability, and veterans. These terms were informally determined to be repeatedly referenced or reported in articles about peer support groups. Key word searches included “peer support” and “[a commonly listed type of] support group” and “an outcome term.” Table A.1 contains a visual presentation of our search strategy.

Table A.1. Literature Search Terms

Key Term	Outcome Term	Common Type of Support Group
Peer support	Barriers	Anti-racism
	Facilitators	Bereavement
	Engagement	Parenting
	Retention	Disability
		Veterans
		Alzheimer's
		Caregivers

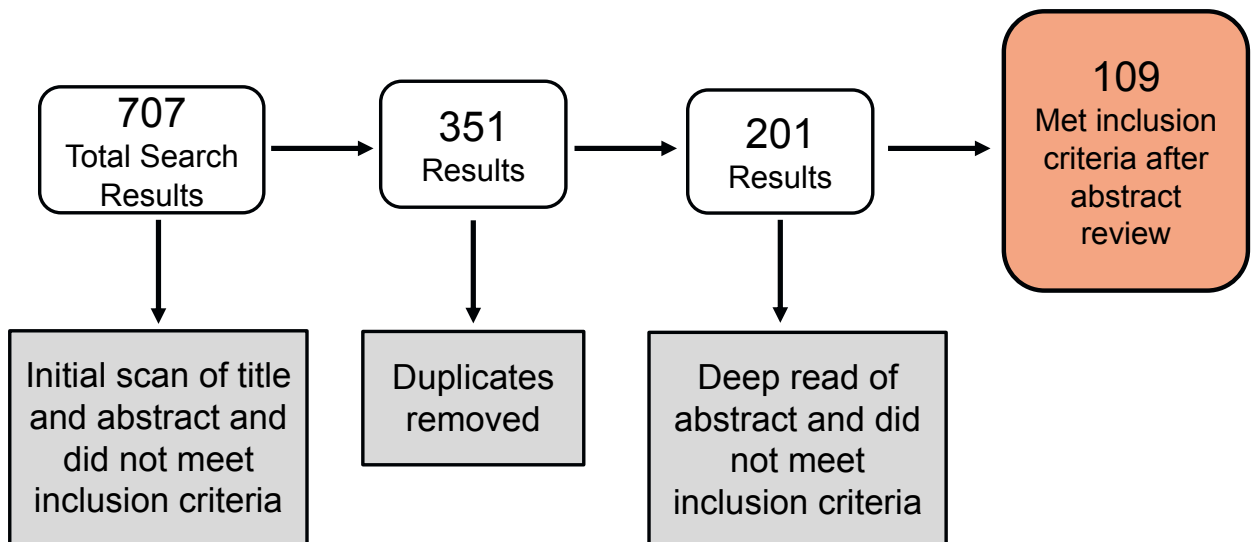
Key Term	Outcome Term	Common Type of Support Group
		Marriage
		Divorce
		New moms
		Breastfeeding
		Pain management
		Relationship
		Dementia
		Addiction
		Eating disorder
		Stroke prevention
		Diabetes
		Mental health

NOTE: Every search contained a combination of a key term, an outcome term, and a common type of support group.

We included articles if they reported on a peer support group that was conducted in the United States, was led by a PGL, hosted meetings online or in person, and held regular meetings. We excluded articles if they described a group that was conducted outside the United States, included participants under the age of 18, or only involved clinician-led (rather than peer support) groups. These search parameters reflect the nature of SFRGs: groups for a particular purpose (deployment preparation and general support), consisting largely of U.S. citizens, led by “peers” (unit commanders and their delegees), and thus not explicitly therapeutic.

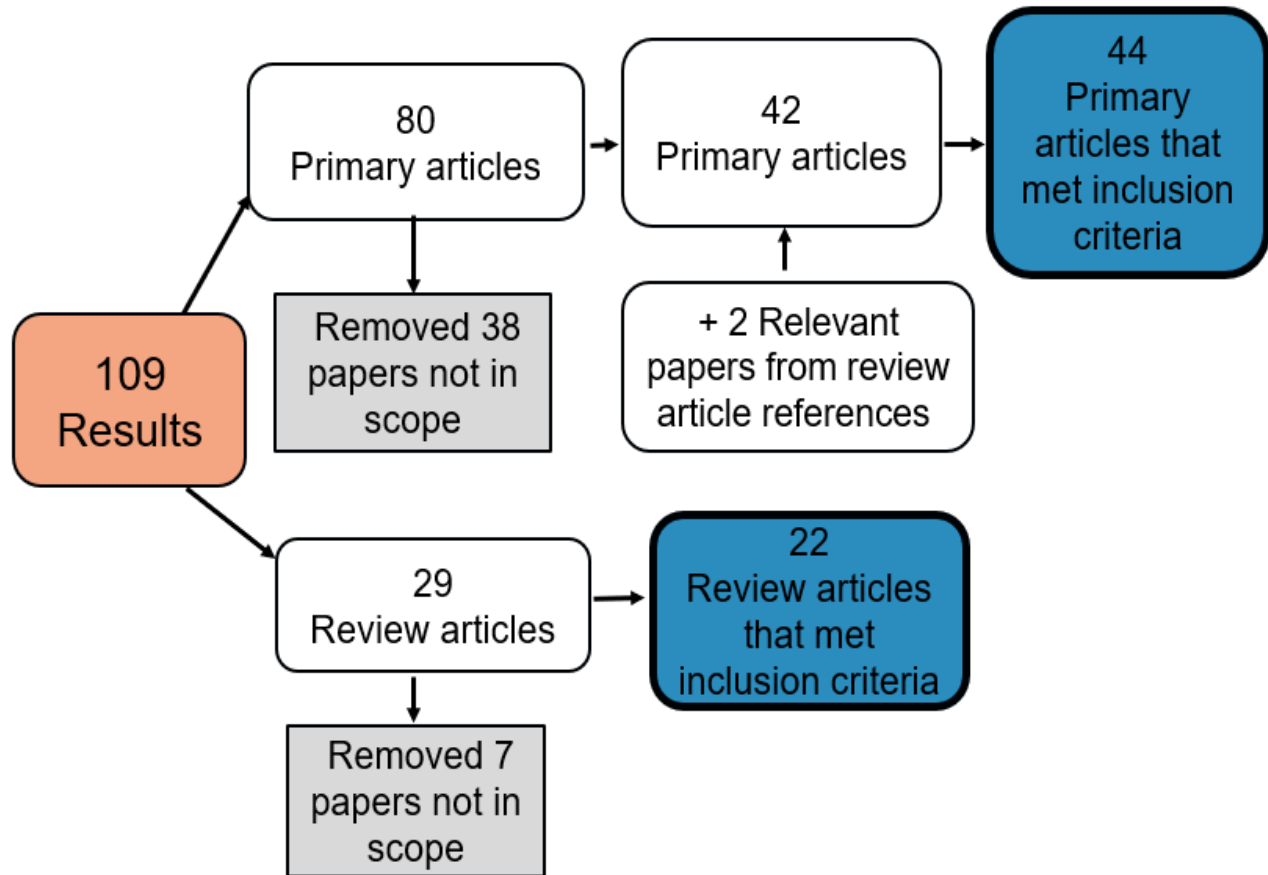
The initial PubMed and PsycINFO search yielded 707 articles. We quickly screened titles and abstracts against obvious inclusion and exclusion criteria. Commonly excluded sources included those focused on peer support but not on structured peer support *groups* and studies conducted outside the United States. Duplicates of the remaining articles were removed. Articles remaining after this initial screen warranted a closer read of the abstracts. Figure A.1 illustrates the number of articles excluded at this screening phase. Articles excluded at this point had a simple rationale recorded for exclusion.

Figure A.1. Process for Selecting Articles for Literature Review Abstraction



We included the 109 articles judged to be relevant using the initial screen in a more thorough read and abstraction. During the data abstraction process, we excluded several more articles after reading them in their entirety and determining that they were out of scope for the review. Figure A.2 shows the number of articles excluded at this second screening phase.

Figure A.2. Further Literature Review Screening Process



Coding

With our focus on facilitating engagement for SFRGs, we reviewed the remaining relevant articles, identifying common themes for participants in peer support groups. We created large category codes that we later supplemented with subcategory, exemplar, and subexemplar codes. Categories are codes using our research questions (e.g., how should peer support groups be structured to enhance engagement?). Subcategories are common overarching themes and practices that were identified during the literature review that address our research questions. Exemplars are examples of practices and methods that fit under each subcategory. Some exemplars proceed to branch into additional subexemplars that describe more-specific and more-refined recommendations. In general, our codes were grouped as a barrier to engagement in social support groups or a facilitator of such engagement, using a very liberal and inclusive approach to begin. We created exemplars or subexemplars for each new facilitator and barrier identified.

An associate researcher coded all the PubMed articles. As part of the codebook development, our research team engaged in several rounds of cross-coding randomly selected articles to ensure a common understanding of the codebook. We reconciled conflict by refining the definitions of codes or aggregating codes to reach a common agreement on the usage of each code.

Subsequently, another researcher coded the PsycINFO articles. To ensure compatibility and agreement, our team cross-coded several articles to ensure that the codebook was applicable to the new articles found in the PsycINFO search and we reached consensus on interpretation prior to inclusion of these additional articles. In some cases, we excluded articles included under the initial liberal rules used for the PubMed search, as these initial rules were clarified and tightened through consensus.

After finalizing the codebook and coding all the articles, we proceeded to count the number of times each exemplar or subexemplar uniquely appeared to assess the “weight of support” for each code. That is, we determined the frequency with which a given facilitator or barrier to engagement was supported in the literature as a rough assessment of its empirical support and importance. Because many of the articles we reviewed as part of our effort were review articles, the individual sources cited in support of a given theme count in the weight of support as being a citation in support of that theme. Rather than counting both the individual citations within a review article and the review article itself, we summed these individual citations to provide weight of support, and the review article citation is not included in the sum. Table A.2 describes the coding schema and weight of support on which the narrative review presented in Chapter 2 is based.

Table A.2. Literature Citations and Weight of Support

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
Facilitator Codes		
How should peer support groups be structured?		
• Peer support groups should have a set structure for each meeting and be held in a predictable fashion at a predictable time and place. – Programs should have a set agenda, guidelines to lead conversations, and a formal program flow to follow.	Primary: Beehler et al., 2014 Review: Armstrong et al., 2019, cited: Oke et al., 2007; ARTD Consultants, 2008; Shulver, 2012; Barros et al., 2008; “Department,” 2011; Jackson, 2006; McEwin et al., 2015; McLean et al., 2014; Needham and Jackson, 2012	15

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
	Duckworth and Halpern, 2014, cited: Sin and Norman, 2013	
	Burke et al., 2019, cited: Barbic, Krupa, and Armstrong, 2009; Eisen et al., 2012; Fukui et al., 2010; van Gestel-Timmermans et al., 2012	
– Programs should have time allocated for staff to learn how to use program tools or platforms.	Primary: Allicock et al., 2017	2
	Review: Dillinger and Kersun, 2019, cited: Selick et al., 2016	
– Programs should have time allocated for participant training on how to use program tools or platforms.	Primary: Allicock et al., 2017	1
– Reminders for appointments and follow-up appointments increase engagement.	Primary: McPeake et al., 2019	2
	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2010	
• Groups should be structured (content, exercises, tone, or ambiance) around providing support and building trust.		
– The program curriculum itself should proactively offer support.	Review: Chepkirui et al., 2020, cited: McFadden et al., 2017	3
	Whelan et al., 2020, cited: Matchar et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2018	
– Groups should provide accountability, support, and motivation for members.	Primary: Goldstein et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2019; Lockhart et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2019; Possemato et al., 2019; Haskett et al., 2017	16
	Review: Hughes et al., 2017, cited: Voigt et al., 2014; Adolfsson et al., 2008; Heisler et al., 2009; Castillo et al., 2010; Sukwatjanee et al., 2011; Monninkhof et al., 2004; Haslbeck et al., 2015; Roger et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2014; Harvey et al., 2014	
– Options for continuous support should be offered after initial program is over.	Primary: Anthony et al., 2019	2

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
	Review: Chepkirui et al., 2020, cited: McFadden et al., 2017	
– Programs should offer additional, timely, one-on-one or individual support and responses to individual questions (e.g., responses outside group meetings).	Primary: Harari et al., 2018; Kingsnorth et al., 2011	3
	Review: Chepkirui et al., 2020, cited: McFadden et al., 2017	
– Programs should ensure privacy and anonymous interactions for sensitive topics.	Primary: Haskett et al., 2017	1
– When possible, programs should be centered around lessons that the group of participants have already learned (e.g., viewing the program as a team-based, mission-focused effort as service members have been trained to do in the past).	Primary: Hernandez-Tejada et al., 2021	1
– Peer group leaders should build trust and rapport with participants by encouraging participants to ask open-ended and pointed questions.	Primary: Allicock et al., 2017; Beehler et al., 2014	4
	Review: Smith-Merry et al., 2019, cited: Angell et al., 2014	
	Sokol and Fisher, 2016, cited: Chapman et al., 2004	
– Activities should promote bonding between facilitator and peer (e.g., engagement in crafty tasks, physical movement such as taking walks).	Primary: Borek et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2020; Goldstein et al., 2018	3
– Online programs should take steps to ensure high levels of connectedness in virtual groups (e.g., have a moderator who encourages discussion).	Primary: Haldar et al., 2017; Owen et al., 2016; Trail et al., 2020	5
	Review: Carron-Arthur et al., 2015, cited: Gruzd and Haythornthwaite, 2013; Sudau et al., 2014	
• Group members should have shared demographic characteristics, interests, experiences, or common identities that create opportunities to interact, communicate, and bond.		
– Groups with demographic similarities or shared interests and needs are more likely to have high engagement.	Primary: Lammers et al., 2019; Haldar et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2019; Lockhart et al., 2014; Connor et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Magasi et al., 2019;	18

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
	Lott et al., 2019; Mase et al., 2015; Matthias et al., 2016; Crisanti et al., 2019	
	Review: Hughes et al., 2017, cited: Roger et al., 2009; Heisler et al., 2009; Mousing and Lomborg, 2012; Thompson et al., 2014; Barlow et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2007	
Positive group dynamics and group composition enhance engagement among members. These factors are usually not a part of the group structure and arise organically among group members.		
- Smaller group sizes allow participants more opportunities to speak; hence, individuals may feel more compelled to speak out rather than blend into the crowd.	Primary: Beehler et al., 2014 Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gonyea et al., 2014	2
- Older participants in a group are more likely to be engaged.	Primary: Ellison et al., 2016; Mase et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2019	3
- Participants are more likely to be engaged if they are interactive with and informal among each other.	Primary: Lott et al., 2019	1
- Participants are more likely to be engaged in groups with consistently high levels of attendance.	Primary: Kumar et al., 2019 Review: Webber and Fendt-Newlin, 2017, cited: Castelein et al., 2008	2
- More-active members increase the sustainability of the group.	Primary: Kumar et al., 2019; Lockhart et al., 2014 Review: Armstrong et al., 2019, cited: Abad and Williams, 2007	4
- Group members are more likely to engage if they find that they are able to develop deep connections with fellow members.	Carron-Arthur et al., 2015, cited: Stearns et al., 2014 Primary: Lockhart et al., 2014; Trail et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2020; Haskett et al., 2017 Review: Hughes et al., 2017, cited: Herre et al., 2016; Voigt et	9

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
	al., 2014; Haslbeck et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2007	
What are the ideal characteristics of a PGL?		
Group leaders who share common characteristics with group members increase engagement.		
Group leaders and members should have shared cultural backgrounds.	Primary: Chinman et al., 2018; Magasi et al., 2019 Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Eisdorfer et al., 2003; Gallagher et al., 2010; Belle et al., 2006; Czaja et al., 2013; Gallagher et al., 2008; Gallagher et al., 2007; Gallagher et al., 2015 Armstrong et al., 2019, cited: Johnston and Sullivan, 2004; Shulver, 2012; "Department," 2011 Chepkirui et al., 2020, cited: Dennis, 2003 Lewinski and Fisher, 2016, cited: Jernigan and Lorig, 2011 Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: Barrenger et al., 2019; Angell et al., 2014 Smith-Merry et al., 2019, cited: Hartwell et al., 2009 Daniels et al., 2017, cited: Kangovi et al., 2014	18
Group leaders have shared experiences or understanding of situations that group members have been exposed to.	Primary: Anthony et al., 2019; Kaselitz et al., 2019; Crisanti et al., 2019; Beehler et al., 2014 Review: Baer and Baker, 2017, cited: Kessler et al., 2014 Chepkirui et al., 2020, cited: Dennis, 2003 Sokol and Fisher, 2016, cited: Babamoto et al., 2009; Chapman et al., undated	10

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
	Whelan et al., 2020, cited: Clarke et al., 2013	
	Daniels et al., 2017, cited: Repper and Carter, 2011	
Programs should ensure group leaders can address the needs of group members from diverse backgrounds.		
- Programs should use additional co-leaders when the group is diverse, from mixed backgrounds (non-Hispanic/Hispanic), and/or different genders (male/female), to allow for more connection with leaders.	Primary: Lindsay et al., 2020; Goldstein et al., 2018 Review: Dillinger and Kersun, 2019, cited: Yang et al., 2014	3
- Ideal group leaders should have high emotional intelligence/be agreeable—more often describes personality type characteristics or abilities rather than skills (e.g., approachable, nonjudgmental, friendly, welcoming, trustworthy, respectful, culturally appropriate, experienced in leading peer groups, and with a positive attitude).	Primary: Robinson et al., 2019; Shepardson et al., 2019; Gabrielian et al., 2013 Review: Armstrong et al., 2019, cited: “Department,” 2011; Lakhani and Macfarlane, 2015; ARTD Consultants, 2008; Williams et al., 2016; Knaus and Warren, 2015; Williams et al., 2015; Shulver, 2012; Jackson, 2013; Warr et al., 2013; New et al., 2015; McLean et al., 2018; Jackson, 2011; ARTD Consultants, 2008 Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Livet et al., 2008	16
Ideal group leaders should exhibit communication and other interpersonal skills, and supportive behaviors—this applies to behaviors that can be taught (i.e., skills) rather than inherent characteristics of the individual.		
- Group leaders should model the behaviors or lessons they teach.	Primary: Kingsnorth et al., 2011 Review: Armstrong et al., 2019, cited: Cumming and Wong, 2008; Abad and Williams, 2007; ARTD Consultants, 2008; Johnston and Sullivan, 2004; Barros et al., 2008; “Department,” 2011; Jackson, 2006; Jackson, 2011; Jackson, 2013; Knaus and Warren, 2015; Warr et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2016	14

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
– Group leaders should provide group members with emotional and informational support.	Baer and Baker, 2017, cited: Davidson et al., 2012 Primary: Trail et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2018; Hernandez-Tejada et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2013; Lindsay et al., 2020 Review: Baer and Baker, 2017, cited: Davidson et al., 2012	7
	Chepkirui et al., 2020, cited: Dennis, 2003 Primary: Shue et al., 2019; Beehler et al., 2014 Review: Baer and Baker, 2017, cited: Davidson et al., 2012	16
– Group leaders should share personal experiences to instill hope with positive self-disclosure.	Shalaby et al., 2020, cited: Naslund et al., 2016 Burke et al., 2019, cited: Cook et al., 2012; Jonikas et al., 2013; Barbic et al., 2009; Eisen et al., 2012; Fukui et al., 2010; van Gestel-Timmermans, 2012; Pickett et al., 2012; Rusch et al., 2014; Russinova et al., 2014; Castelein et al., 2008; Resnick and Rosenheck, 2008; Boevink et al., 2016 Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gonyea et al., 2014	1
– Group leaders should be capable of addressing and not shying away from uncomfortable or controversial issues that arise (e.g., racial inequality).	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Burgio et al., 2003 Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Livet et al., 2008	2
• Ideal PGLs have teaching skills, which often relate to goal setting, providing feedback, and task-oriented behavior.		
– PGLs should encourage group members to set goals and make plans.	Primary: Nelson et al., 2019 Review: Lewinski and Fisher, 2016, cited: Lorig et al., 2010; Glasgow et al., 2003; Case et al., 2009; Jernigan and Lorig,	7

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
	2001; McKay et al., 1998; McKay et al., 2003	
– PGLs should encourage engagement from group members.	Review: Carron-Arthur et al., 2015, cited: van Mierlo et al., 2012	3
	Lewinski and Fisher, 2016, cited: Jernigan and Lorig, 2011; McKay et al., 2002	
– PGLs should provide personalized feedback.	Review: Lewinski and Fisher, 2016, cited: Burkow et al., 2013; Jernigan and Lorig, 2011	2
– PGLs should stay on topic and help group members track their progress.	Primary: Lott et al., 2019	1
• PGLs should be carefully and thoughtfully recruited from reputable sources and should be trained and managed in a standardized and hands-on manner.		
– PGLs should receive formal training of program materials and content.	Primary: Lammers et al., 2019; Vaughan et al., 2018; Shepardson et al., 2019	7
	Review: Repper and Carter, 2011, cited: Ochocka et al., 2006	
	Sayres, 2018, cited: Clark et al., 2018	
	Whelan et al., 2020, cited: Matchar et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2018	
– PGLs should be formally recruited by clinicians, PGLs, or community group members.	Primary: Shepardson et al., 2019	3
	Review: Chepkirui et al., 2020, cited: Cherrington et al., 2010	
	Sokol and Fisher, 2016, cited: Krieger et al., 2002	
– PGLs should receive peer-supervision/support from other group leaders or overseers.	Primary: Matthias et al., 2016; Shue et al., 2019; Crisanti et al., 2019	17
	Review: Chepkirui et al., 2020, cited: Harris et al., 2015	
	Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: Gillard et al., 2013; Hurley et al., 2018	

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
	Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: McPherson et al., 2016; Bustamante et al., 2012; Ahluwalia et al., 2010; Boucairet et al., 2011; Emukah et al., 2008; Gurtler et al., 2007; Novins et al., 2013; Gaven and Schorer, 2013; Beidas and Kendall, 2010; Pallas et al., 2013; Sanders and Turner, 2015	
– PGLs should be trained to create boundaries as peer leaders instead of friends.	Primary: Shepardson et al., 2019	2
	Review: Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: "Predictors," undated	
– PGLs should receive cultural sensitivity training to be more receptive to needs of diverse groups and adapt the program and lessons to accommodate the group as a whole.	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Belle et al., 2006	1
How should groups be administered?		
• While programs should have a structured format to follow, group structure and PGLs should allow for flexibility of content delivery and organic conversation that fits the needs of each group.		
– Content coverage should be structured to be different lengths of time and intensity to allow for flexible approaches to better fit participants' needs.	Primary: Borek et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2019; Possemato et al., 2019; Viswanathan et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2020	19
	Review: Armstrong et al., 2019, cited: Williams et al., 2015; ARTD Consultants, 2008; Johnston and Sullivan, 2004; Jackson, 2013; Williams et al., 2016	
	Dillinger and Kersun, 2019, cited: Nilsen et al., 2014; Onwumere et al., 2010; Selick et al., 2016	
	Sokol and Fisher, 2016, cited: Flanagan and Hancock, 2010; Krieger et al., 2005; Krieger et al., 2009	
	Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Aitaoto et al., 2009; Boucar et al., 2011	
– Programs should include follow-up and check-in communication for participants	Primary: Lockhart et al., 2014	2

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
with PGLs after hard meetings or at the end of the program—participants should not feel left alone.	Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Novins et al., 2013	
– There should be regular feedback and communication between participants and PGLs to ensure that participants are happy with the structure of the program.	Primary: Borek et al., 2018; Shue et al., 2019	2
– There should be opportunities for participants to talk about challenges with program material, difficulty carrying out home assignments, and problem-solving to address the barriers encountered. Any challenges experienced should be normalized.	Primary: Lockhart et al., 2014; Lanier et al., 2019 Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2008; Czaja et al., 2013; Winter et al., 2007	5
• Program materials should be easy to read and follow, written in a positive tone, useful, and readily available at the beginning of and throughout the group session.		
– There should be a program guide to help enforce structure.	Primary: Owen et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2020; Matthias et al., 2016 Review: Burke et al., 2019, cited: Barbic et al., 2009; Eisen et al., 2012; Fukui et al., 2010; van Gestel-Timmermans et al., 2012	7
– There should be resources available to reinforce what is taught in group sessions.	Primary: Matthias et al., 2016	1
– Program materials should use common and easy-to-understand language.	Review: Repper and Carter, 2011, cited: Mead and Macneil, 2004	1
– Program materials should use destigmatizing language.	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gonyea et al., 2014, Czaja et al., 2013; Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2007; Belle et al., 2006; Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2015	5
– Program materials should use verbiage that can be efficiently translated to other dialects or languages.	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2007; Czaja et al., 2013; Belle et al., 2006; Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2015	4
– Programs should have hard copies or online copies publicly available.	Primary: Cooper et al., 2020 Review:	3

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
	Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2015; Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2008	
– Program material should focus on education rather than diagnostics.	Primary: Possemato et al., 2019	2
	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Glueckauf et al., 2012	
– Program content should be widely perceived as effective and/or have been shown to produce effective outcomes in the past.	Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Shapiro et al., 2014; Barrera and Castro, 2006; Mazzucchelli and Sanders, 2010	3
• Group members should have the option to provide input into how program content is formatted and administered.		
– Members should feel free to guide or pivot conversations when needed.	Primary: Haskett et al., 2017	2
	Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: August et al., 2006	
• Groups should be easily accessible in terms of location or platform in or on which meetings and sessions are held, which allows for better attendance and augmented learning.		
– Groups should offer virtual or telephone access to meetings.	Primary: Lanier et al., 2019	15
	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Burgio et al., 2003; Czaja et al., 2013	
	Duckworth and Halpern, 2014, cited: Ben-Zeev et al., 2013	
	Hussain-Shamsy et al., 2020, cited: Baumel et al., 2018; Rathbone et al., 2017; van den Heuvel et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019	
	Lewinski and Fisher, 2016, cited: McKay et al., 2001; Bond et al., 2010	
	Sokol and Fisher, 2016, cited: Baqui et al., 2008; Krieger et al., 2005; Krieger et al., 2009; Elder et al., 2005; Elder et al., 2006	

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
– In-person support groups should take place on neutral ground (e.g., churches, community centers, general conference rooms).	Review: Dillinger and Kersun, 2019, cited: De Jong and Schout, 2011	1
– A mix of modalities and hybrid access to group meetings enhances engagement (e.g., telephone and home visits).	Primary: Harari et al., 2018; Goldstein et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2020; Gold et al., 2016 Review: Sayres, 2018, cited: Clark et al., 2018 Shalaby et al., 2020, cited: Davis, undated Sokol and Fisher, 2016, cited: Balcazar et al., 2005; Babamoto et al., 2009; Baqui et al., 2008; Broadhead et al., 2002; Elder et al., 2009; Elder et al., 2005; Elder et al., undated	13
– Mobile accessibility should not compromise the site design or aesthetic of program use.	Primary: Magasi et al., 2019	1
– Programs should allow for convenient use of multiple platforms to engage participants, dependent on the needs of participants.	Primary: Robinson et al., 2019; Crisanti et al., 2019; Viswanathan et al., 2020	3
– Programs should implement “drop-in centers” where an individual can stop in to talk to group leaders or experienced group members.	Review: Sayres, 2018, cited: Fox et al., 2015; Colchamiro et al., undated; Gregg et al., 2015	3
– Programs should assure anonymity or privacy where appropriate.	Primary: Haldar et al., 2017	1
– Programs should offer both synchronous and asynchronous channels.	Primary: Vaughan et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Magasi et al., 2019 Review: Lewinski and Fisher, 2016, cited: Burkow et al., 2013; Jernigan and Lorig, 2011; Pacaud et al., undated; Glasgow et al., 2003; McKay et al., 2002; McKay et al., 2001; McKay et al., 1998; Liebreich et al., 2009; Lorig et al., 2010; Case et al., 2009 Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: Naslund et al., 2014	14

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
Programs should ensure sufficient funds to administer the group.		
Programs should offer reimbursement for travel or telephone expenses.	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Glueckauf et al., 2012	1
Programs should seek consistent funding to pay for miscellaneous expenses (e.g., continuously supporting staff and leaders, providing buildings for meetings, and covering the cost of program materials and refreshments).	Primary: Lammers et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2018; Haskett et al., 2017 Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Emukah et al., 2008; Massatti et al., 2008; Swain et al., 2010; Kay et al., 2010; Loman et al., 2010	8
Barrier Codes		
How does stigma and discrimination prevent SFRG participation?		
Stigma against certain health conditions can prevent acknowledgment of these conditions.	Review: Dillinger and Kersun, 2019, cited: McCann et al., 2011	1
Stigma around help-seeking behavior can prevent participants from joining a peer support group.	Review: Dillinger and Kersun, 2019, cited: Matsumoto et al., 2003; Yang et al., 2014	2
While online groups provide more accessibility than in-person groups, they may still be susceptible to discrimination against groups that do not have ready access to Wi-Fi or smart mobile devices.	Review: Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: Naslund et al., 2014	1
What are detrimental or nonideal PGL characteristics?		
Group members may not be comfortable around group leaders of different backgrounds or cultures.	Primary: Connor et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2020; Gold et al., 2016	3
Participants are less likely to be engaged if there is a lack of trust and lack of a relationship between them and the PGLs or the overarching organization.	Primary: Lindsay et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2019; Lott et al., 2019; Shepardson et al., 2019; Gabrielian et al., 2013 Review: Repper and Carter, 2011, cited: Mowbray et al., 1998; Davidson et al., 1999 Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Boucar et al., 2011	8
It is detrimental for PGLs to lack training or support.		
A lack of oversight or guidance from other peer leaders in different groups or from	Primary: Cooper et al., 2020	3

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
clinicians could lead to different variations of program content delivery.	Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Onken et al., 2014; Emukah et al., 2008	
A lack of assistance from clinicians, other peer leaders, or other instructors in teaching program lessons could lead to uncertainty about content delivery.	Primary: Lott et al., 2019	1
A lack of training in the program materials and how to lead groups of peers through lessons and oversight could lead to PGLs feeling anxious and poor teaching quality.	Primary: McPeake et al., 2019; Abadi et al., 2020; Shepardson et al., 2019; Shue et al., 2019 Review: Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: Kemp and Henderson, 2012	5
PGLs with poor teaching styles can cause low engagement.		
The PGL is unenthusiastic or unformed about program content or has a lackadaisical teaching style.	Primary: Lindsay et al., 2020	1
How do the costs of program participation affect group participation?		
The fee for joining the group or intervention may deter enrollment of participants.	Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Bustamante et al., 2012	1
What is the cost of the program to the community or hosting organization?		
A lack of funding for supporting peer staff hinders program management.	Primary: Connor et al., 2018; Liang et al., 2018 Review: Sarrami-Foroushani et al., 2014, cited: Dougherty and Tse, 2011 Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: Gagne et al., 2018	4
A lack of reimbursement for travel and technology expenses hinders participant engagement.	Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Eisdorfer et al., 2003; Burgio et al., 2003; Czaja et al., 2013; Winter and Gitlin, 2007	4
A lack of funding for staff trainings on course materials negatively affects the quality of program delivery.	Primary: McPeake et al., 2019; Connor et al., 2018 Review: Sarrami-Foroushani et al., 2014, cited: Dougherty and Tse, 2011	3

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
A lack of available resources or understanding deprives peer leaders of recognition and acknowledgment of work or sacrifices.	Review: Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: Cronise et al., 2016	1
A lack of access to equipment, production, or sustainment costs (e.g., funds for producing training materials, purchasing new technology, developing apps, providing support in a variety of formats, purchasing peer support programs, or using rooms).	Primary: Connor et al., 2018	1
A lack of reimbursement or payment for peer leaders or trainees, hence requiring PGLs to volunteer their time.	Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Shapiro et al., 2014; Gaven and Schorer, 2013; Massatti et al., 2008	3
A lack of stable program funding to support continued availability of the peer group.	Primary: McPeake et al., 2019	1
A lack of space (location or size of facility) to hold programs.	Primary: Abadi et al., 2020; Shue et al., 2019	2
What are participant lifestyle characteristics that are an impediment to participation?		
Household obligations or responsibilities hinder participant engagement.	Primary: Connor et al., 2018; Abadi et al., 2020; Lott et al., 2019 Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gonyea et al., 2014; Glueckauf et al., 2012	5
Busy or inflexible schedules decrease participant engagement.	Primary: Lott et al., 2019; Mase et al., 2015; Matthias et al., 2016; Lanier et al., 2019; Viswanathan et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2020	6
A lack of support systems and respite care hurts participant engagement.	Primary: Kingsnorth et al., 2011 Review: Akarsu et al., 2019, cited: Gonyea et al., 2014; Winter and Gitlin, 2007	3
A lack of familiarity with technology hinders participant engagement.	Primary: Gabrielian et al., 2013	1
Participants are less likely to engage if there is an arduous enrollment process (e.g., if it is time consuming to fill out paperwork, get accepted in the program, or start the program once admitted).	Primary: Gabrielian et al., 2013	1
Certain demographics of participants were less likely to participate—older, white, depressed,	Primary: Lockhart et al., 2014; Mase et al., 2015	2

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
less educated, and those who already have good social support.		
Participants highly reliant on medication fear that engaging in a program would lead to them being weaned off medication.	Primary: Shue et al., 2019	1
What is a nonideal program structure or administration?		
- Poor group structure can result in low engagement rates. - Privacy concerns within the group hurt participant engagement.	Primary: Connor et al., 2018; Crisanti et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2019; Viswanathan et al., 2020	4
- Poor group composition hurts engagement among members. - Unfriendly or divided group dynamics (e.g., a lack of respect between participants and peer leaders or between participants) result in less engagement.	Primary: Lockhart et al., 2014; Vaughan et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Gold et al., 2016; Lott et al., 2019; Matthias et al., 2016; Crisanti et al., 2019	7
- The unwillingness of participants to see how the program was beneficial causes participants to be less engaged.	Primary: Abadi et al., 2020; Lott et al., 2019; Mase et al., 2015; Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2012	4
- The program materials are not easy to read and not readily available or are available in nondesirable locations. - Content or materials are delivered in a nondesirable format.	Primary: Vaughan et al., 2018	1
- Content or materials are delivered in an unstructured manner (no layout, no program guide or syllabus to follow, obviously no ahead-of-time preparation or knowledge of the subject).	Primary: Shepardson et al., 2019	1
- Structured questions in group materials that are too open-ended make it challenging for participants to articulate answers.	Primary: Allicock et al., 2017	1
- Group members have concerns about the validity and truthfulness of program content.	Primary: Vaughan et al., 2018	1
- Nonideal design and administration of the peer group hinders participant engagement. - It is a barrier if the availability of groups is not well advertised or offered to potential participants.	Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Hodgins et al., 2013; August et al., 2006; Boucar et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2015; Gaven and Schorer, 2013	5

Codes	Articles	Weight of Support
– Participants are less likely to engage if groups are hard to access (e.g., rural, inner-city, lacking public transportation or parking).	Primary: Connor et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2020; Haskett et al., 2017	6
	Review: Sayres, 2018, cited: Fox et al., 2015; Colchamiro et al., undated; Gregg et al., 2015	
– A lack of options to access the program (e.g., only phone, in person, online) is a barrier.	Primary: Vaughan et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2020; Lott et al., 2019	4
	Review: Shalaby and Agyapong, 2020, cited: Draine and Herman, 2007	
– Program materials are offered for long periods of time, but PGLs are available only during business hours.	Review: Duckworth and Halpern, 2014, cited: Baumel et al., 2018	1
– Programs are not considered a significant part of treatment or service (i.e., optional) and are not regularly engaged in.	Review: Hodge and Turner, 2016, cited: Massatti et al., 2008; Bustamante et al., 2012	2
– Programs last longer than six months; contacts between participants and the PGL drop off, and outcome measures decrease at this point in time.	Primary: Ellison et al., 2016; Trail et al., 2020	2
– Program length is so long that the program is tiresome or redundant or so short that participants do not get enough content.	Primary: Lindsay et al., 2020; Crisanti et al., 2019	2
– Online peer groups can be difficult to navigate and operate on limited forums.	Primary: Haldar et al., 2017; Lindsay et al., 2020; Vaughan et al., 2018	3

Appendix B. Survey Results

Tables B.1 and B.2 show the regression analysis examining whether groups of spouses significantly differed in their awareness of and participation in SFRGs (described in Chapter 5).

Table B.1. Logistic Regression Results for Awareness of Recent Changes to FRGs

Variable	Level	Estimate	Standard Error	t Value	P value	Odds Ratio
Intercept		-1.0425	0.2787	-3.74	0.0002	
Presence of children	• One or more dependent children in the household	0.1755	0.1723	1.02	0.3087	1.192
Pay grade	• Omnibus effect for pay grade				0.0010	
	• Junior enlisted (E1–E4) versus senior enlisted (E5–E9)	0.0475	0.3194	0.15	0.8817	1.049
	• Junior officer (O1–O3) versus senior enlisted (E5–E9)	0.6157	0.1641	3.75	0.0002	1.851
	• Senior officer (O4 or higher) versus senior enlisted (E5–E9)	0.3193	0.1329	2.40	0.0164	1.376
Distance respondents live from post	• Omnibus effect for distance respondents live from post				0.0021	
	• Close to post (20 miles or less) versus on post	-0.2571	0.1380	-1.86	0.0627	0.773
	• Far from post (more than 20 miles) versus on post	-0.6622	0.1881	-3.52	0.0004	0.516
Employment status	• Omnibus effect for employment status				0.3782	
	• Employed full-time versus unemployed	0.2559	0.2318	1.10	0.2699	2.035
	• Employed part-time versus unemployed	0.3470	0.2605	1.33	0.1831	2.359
	• Not in labor market versus unemployed	0.3651	0.2160	1.69	0.0912	2.201
Deployment status	• Soldier experienced a deployment since 2018	0.4781	0.1306	3.66	0.0003	2.084

SOURCE: Features information from January 2021 TASP survey results (Trail et al., 2022).

NOTE: Awareness of recent changes to FRGs was assessed by the following question: “How aware are you of recent changes to Family Readiness Groups (FRGs)?” Responses indicating that respondents “know that FRGs are now SFRGs” were coded as 1, and responses indicating that respondents were “not aware of any recent changes to FRGs” or had “never heard of FRGs” were coded as 0 for analysis. *N* = 1,507.

Table B.2. Logistic Regression Results for Participation in SFRGs Among Respondents Who Had Heard of FRGs

Variable	Level	Estimate	Standard Error	t Value	P value	Odds Ratio
Intercept		-0.9530	0.2812	-3.39	0.0007	
Presence of children	• One or more dependent children in the household	0.4290	0.1853	2.32	0.0207	1.536
Pay grade	• Omnibus effect for pay grade				0.0008	
	• Junior enlisted (E1–E4) versus senior enlisted (E5–E9)	-0.6892	0.3891	-1.77	0.0767	0.502
	• Junior officer (O1–O3) versus senior enlisted (E5–E9)	0.2307	0.1707	1.35	0.1767	1.260
	• Senior officer (O4 or higher) versus senior enlisted (E5–E9)	-0.4546	0.1478	-3.08	0.0021	0.635
Distance respondents live from post	• Omnibus effect for distance respondents live from post				0.0075	
	• Close to post (20 miles or less) versus on post	-0.0521	0.1443	-0.36	0.7180	0.949
	• Far from post (more than 20 miles) versus on post	-0.5739	0.1981	-2.90	0.0038	0.563
Employment status	• Omnibus effect for employment status				0.2021	
	• Employed full-time versus unemployed	0.0316	0.2314	0.14	0.8914	1.032
	• Employed part-time versus unemployed	0.00915	0.2657	0.03	0.9725	1.009
	• Not in labor market versus Unemployed	-0.2530	0.2196	-1.15	0.2495	0.776
Deployment status	• Soldier experienced a deployment since 2018	0.5023	0.1339	3.75	0.0002	1.652

SOURCE: Features information from January 2021 TASP survey results (Trail et al., 2023).

NOTE: Participation in SFRGs was assessed by the following question: “How familiar are you with Soldier and Family Readiness Groups (SFRGs) – currently?” Responses were coded as 1 if respondents indicated that they had attended SFRGs occasionally or regularly or said that they were an SFRG volunteer and 0 if they indicated that they had never attended an SFRG meeting or activity. *N* = 1,449.

Abbreviations

AD	Army Directive
AR	Army Regulation
CFRR	Command Family Readiness Representative
EXORD	Execution Order
FRG	Family Readiness Group
FRSA	Family Readiness Support Assistant
FSG	Family Support Group
HQDA	Headquarters, Department of the Army
NAS	National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
PGL	peer support group leader
SFRG	Soldier and Family Readiness Group
TASP	Today's Army Spouse Panel

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The U.S. Army's 2019 policy update to Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) aims to increase readiness and resilience among Army families. Through this update, the Army renamed FRGs to *Soldier and Family Readiness Groups* (SFRGs) to emphasize the inclusion of soldiers, as well as family members; deemphasized the role of volunteers in favor of newly established Command Family Readiness Representatives (CFRRs); and shifted the focus of group activities from socialization to communication.

The Army asked RAND Arroyo Center to help determine the degree to which policy updates were successfully implemented across Army installations and how they were received by Army families. The authors of this report found that awareness of the SFRG policy change is not widespread among Army spouses and that aspects of the program could be improved if the Army minimized logistical issues with access, provided resources for leadership training, and incorporated a method of measurement for SFRG performance indicators. Their findings, however, also suggest that effective SFRGs can foster engagement in the Army community among leadership, soldiers, and families.

Overall, the updated Army policy indicates support for these groups and emphasizes important group functions, such as information-sharing. But the lack of clarity in policy guidance on areas with an important influence on mission success could prove a barrier to achieving the outcomes for which the Army aims.

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