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**Non-profit Operation Homefront Helps Build Strength,
Security and Stability One Military Family at a Time**

Cover Story

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Photo credit: Operation Homefront

Family Friendly

Non-profit Operation Homefront Helps Build Strength, Security and Stability One Military Family at a Time

It is no secret that today's military families, active-duty troops, and veterans face a variety of challenges, ranging from financial and housing issues to food insecurity and difficulty accessing children's services. Fortunately, there is a national non-profit that focuses specifically on families and their needs: Operation Homefront. This organization has helped thousands of military families across the U.S. overcome short-term "bumps in the road," so they don't face long-term, chronic problems.

Operation Homefront was founded in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2022. "Shortly after the attacks, in a garage in San Diego, three military wives set out to help Navy families who were struggling to make ends meet as their loved ones deployed for longer, and more frequent, overseas tours of duty," explains senior director Erin Burgy. "Through their extraordinary efforts, Operation Homefront was born.

"The mission of Operation Homefront is to build strong, stable and secure military families so they can thrive – not simply struggle to get by – in the communities they've worked so hard to protect," Burgy continues. "Our vision is to be the provider of choice for short-term and critical financial assistance, long-term stability and recurring sup-

port programs to military families."

Operation Homefront serves a broad spectrum of military families, including junior enlisted active duty, deployed, and post-9/11 wounded, ill, or injured service members or veterans, including those who are transitioning out of the military. It also serves veterans with a service-connected wound, illness, or injury.

The organization targets some of the specific challenges facing our nation's military families, including frequent moves; adjusting to new communities; transitioning from active duty to civilian life; the often lengthy gap between military pay ending and veteran benefits beginning; and an overall lack of financial preparedness. "Contributing factors include the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on housing market, lack of knowledge with Veterans Administration loans, unemployment and underemployment, lack of financial literacy, uneven access to government programs and high unemployment for military spouses," Burgy points out. She also cites some key statistics: "2.4 million veterans live paycheck to paycheck; 1.5 million live below the poverty line; 1.5 million veterans are considered housing cost-burdened; and 20% of veterans and military families report being food insecure."

The organization is led by a former military officer, Brigadier Gen-



Photo credit: Operation Homefront


Pictured are some of the many recipients from Operation Homefront's many programs and services

Shining the Spotlight on Military Kids

One of Operation Homefront's key initiatives is the Military Child of the Year, an annual event held each April that reflects the positive impact that impressive young military children have made on their families, their schools, and their communities.

Now in its 15th year, the Military Child of the Year Award is the nation's premier recognition of the outstanding achievements of military children. The annual awards recognize outstanding young people ages 13 to 18. Recipients represent each branch of the armed forces — Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, National Guard, and Space Force. Recipients are chosen for their scholarship, volunteerism, leadership, extracurricular involvement, and other criteria, all while facing the challenges of military family life.

All Military Child of the Year Award recipients are flown with a parent or guardian to Washington, D.C., and they are recognized at a gala event, during which senior leaders of each branch of service present the awards. Honorees also receive \$10,000 each, a laptop computer, and other donated gifts.

This year, 35 finalists were selected by a panel of judges chosen by Operation Homefront's senior leadership. The final seven award recipients will be announced in March, and the annual awards gala will be held April 13, 2023. 



eral John I. Pray, Jr., USAF, Retired. Pray serves as president and chief executive officer. Operation Homefront is funded by corporate and foundation partners and individual donors; 88% of expenditures go directly toward delivering programs and services to the military families who need it most.

Operation Homefront has developed a three-pronged approach to helping military families. In the "relief" category, the group provides short-term critical financial assistance in the form of checks paid directly to lenders, vendors, and other providers for food, utilities, home repairs, rent and mortgage payments, or other needs. They also provide rent-free transitional housing for wounded service members and transitional homes for veterans. In the "resiliency" area, the organization promotes long-term family stability by awarding mortgage-free homes to qualifying families across the U.S.

In the "recurring family support" category, Operation Homefront provides baby showers to help new military moms welcome the newest member of the family; celebrations to recognize military spouses; holiday programs to provide meals and toys; and back-

packs filled with school supplies for military kids. Operation Homefront also sponsors an annual Military Child of the Year celebration each April. The annual awards recognize outstanding young people for their scholarship, volunteerism, leadership, or extracurricular involvement all while facing the challenges of military family life. (See sidebar.)

By all accounts, the organization has provided vital assistance to tens of thousands of military families. For instance, Operation Homefront has:

- Fulfilled more than 53,000 requests for help and provided more than \$37 million through the Critical Financial Assistance program.

- Graduated more than 700 families from the Permanent Homes for Veterans program and provided more than \$102 million in home equity.

- Graduated 16 families from the Transitional Homes for Veterans program, established in 2018, and defrayed more than \$800,000 in mortgage costs to military families.

- Housed more than 700 military families in the Transitional Housing (Villages) program, providing more than 6,400 months of free

housing and defraying more than \$7.6 million in rent and utility costs.

- Since 2010, provided more than 160,000 holiday meals to almost 675,000 individual military and veteran family members through the Holiday Meals for Military program.

- Since 2008, provided more than 500,000 backpacks filled with school supplies to military children nationwide through the Back-to-School Brigade® program.

- Since 2008, provided critical baby supplies to more than 20,000 military new and expecting moms through the Star-Spangled Babies program.

- Honored some 9,000-plus military spouses at Homefront Celebrations.

"By connecting the American donor community to our military families through a robust array of valued and life-changing programs, Operation Homefront is able to help military families overcome many of the challenges inherent in military life," Burgy comments. "The result is stronger, more stable, and more secure military families – which makes stronger communities and a stronger America."



