

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved*  
*OMB No. 0704-0188*

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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 31 03 2016			<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master of Military Studies Research			<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> September 2015 – March 2016			
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b>  Focus on Gaps to Synchronize Efforts to Improve Personal Financial Readiness						<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A			
						<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A			
						<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A			
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  Rodriguez, Salomon, Major, USMC						<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A			
						<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A			
						<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A			
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA						<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>  N/A			
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  N/A						<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>  N/A			
						<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>  N/A			
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b>  Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.									
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>  N/A									
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> The Depart of Defense and the military services need to take action to improve upon the effectiveness of current personal financial management (PFM) programs. The negative impact that poor financial readiness has on operational readiness is evident in several studies conducted by federal agencies and non-profit organizations since around 2000. There are many public and private organizations that have produced personal financial readiness material to assist in the effort of enhancing personal financial readiness, but most of the available information does not reach the intended audience. The DoD and military leadership can better manage limited resources by making personal financial readiness a top priority, and developing proactive PFM programs that provide training, education and counseling to service members and their families.									
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Financial Readiness, Personal Financial Management Program									
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>						<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  UU	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  30	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> MCU CSC	
<b>a. REPORT</b> Unclass	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> Unclass	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> Unclass	<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b> (703)784 3330 (Admin Off)						

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**TITLE:**

**Focus on Gaps to Synchronize Efforts to Improve Personal Financial Readiness**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 15-16

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Approved: 31 March 2016

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## Executive Summary

### **Title: Focus on Gaps to Synchronize Efforts to Improve Personal Financial Readiness**

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**Thesis:** The current efforts by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the four military services to improve financial readiness have been unsuccessful over the last fifteen years as a result of existing gaps at various points in the system. The DoD leadership and the military leadership must shift focus to these gaps in order to synchronize the efforts of other federal agencies, as well as numerous other public and private organizations in order to effectively improve financial readiness which has proven to negatively impact operational readiness.

**Discussion:** Since the mid 1990s, the US Government along with many other public and private organizations have sought to improve upon the financial literacy of the nation as a whole. While these efforts are important, the military members and their families are a specific group that requires attention given the negative impact on resources that poor financial readiness can have on operational readiness. During the 1990s, most of the research completed did not specifically focus on the military as a population group and instead researched financial readiness of the entire population. Once the combat operations commenced in the early 2000s, personal financial issues for the military began to surface as service members were preparing to deploy. As a result of the personal finance issues that surfaced, more research was completed but the focus was more on the need for personal financial management programs. Currently, there is a lack of research to determine the effectiveness of the existing personal financial management programs. Given this lack of research there are overwhelming resources available, but that information is not effectively used to train, educate and counsel military service members and their families as they are designed to do. Viewing the problem from the top down, there is a gap between the DoD and the military services leadership. While all military services have a personal financial management program, there is a lack of consistency across the four military services and none of the programs meet the intent outlined by DoD Instruction that the programs be proactive vice reactive. This study identifies areas that require attention in order to improve financial readiness, which continues to deplete time and resources from operational readiness.

**Conclusion:** The DoD and military leadership have a shared interest in improving personal financial readiness because of the negative impact on operational readiness. Given the complex financial and economic environment of today, more military service members are vulnerable to personal financial issues without a solid foundation in training and education provided by personal financial management programs designed by the military services.

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## **Preface**

Improving personal financial readiness for military service members is no easy task, but every effort must be made to enhance personal financial management programs that will provide proactive training, education and counseling to military service members and their families. There are many federal agencies as well as numerous other public and private organizations that consistently produce personal finance resources and material. However, the information is useless if it does not reach the intended audience and the desired effects are not achieved. The Department of Defense (DoD) leadership and military services leadership are responsible for synchronizing the efforts of all key players in order to improve personal financial readiness for all military service members and their families. Until the proper attention is given to the existing gaps in the overall system, personal financial issues will persist and will continue to consume limited time and resources.

## **Introduction**

Over the past twenty years, the United States Government (USG), along with numerous other public and private organizations have increased their efforts to educate the nation on personal financial management (PFM) by using specialized programs, marketing campaigns and other types of training and education. PFM has different meanings for everyone, but for the purposes of this paper PFM readiness is specific to the US military and their families, and includes the ability to make well-informed financial decisions, discuss money and financial related matters openly, and planning or preparing for the future. Enhancing programs to improve financial readiness is important because it provides military members the ability to control their current finances, helps them plan for the future and minimizes distractions that can negatively impact operational readiness. The message to improve personal financial readiness is widespread and a variety of programs attempt to enhance the financial readiness of individuals and families across the nation. However, many financial programs are tailored for a specific audience and limit the scope of financial education provided. For example, there are programs that are designed by employers for their employees, community-based programs, faith-based programs and programs offered by universities and colleges.

In 2000, the Fannie Mae Foundation commissioned a national field study and published a report titled “Personal Finance and the Rush to Competence: Financial Literacy Education in the U.S.”<sup>1</sup> The report noted that as a result of the increase in efforts to promote financial literacy through public campaigns and financial educational programs, Americans are becoming more aware of the importance of personal financial readiness.<sup>2</sup> Despite the efforts and the increased awareness, recent data has shown little improvement in American’s financial literacy and financial decision-making skills. According to an article posted on The Motley Fool’s website,

the Federal Reserve reported that the total credit card debt owed by US consumers in 2015 was \$882 billion.<sup>3</sup> Another growing and concerning statistic is student loan debt, which totaled \$1.3 trillion in 2015.<sup>4</sup> While these high and growing numbers cover the nation as a whole, there are some similar concerns with regards to debt as they relate to military members and their families. For example, a study conducted by the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA) in 2014 reported that “military members appear to be more at risk with credit cards” than comparable civilians.<sup>5</sup> A similar report conducted by FINRA in 2012 focused on four categories of financial capability which included making ends meet, planning ahead, managing financial products and financial knowledge and decision-making.<sup>6</sup> Both reports indicated that while military members fared a bit better than the national norms, some members are still struggling to make ends meet and are making risky decisions such as paying the minimum on high credit card balances and using alternative borrowing methods like pay-day loans.

Since the late 1990s the Department of Defense (DoD) has renewed attempts to improve personal financial readiness for military service members and their families, but those efforts have not produced the desired results. In 2003 The DoD launched the “DoD Financial Readiness Campaign”, which is based on eight pillars of financial readiness designed to enhance financial readiness and money-management skills. The DoD partnered with over twenty-five federal and nonprofit agencies like the Better Business Bureau Military Line, the Federal Trade Commission, FINRA and the Social Security Administration to name a few. Since the launch of the campaign, many other agencies have joined in the efforts and have generated vast amounts of information from basic money-management skills to savings and investments. Although the information and resources created are beneficial, there are several gaps in the efforts to enhance personal financial readiness that require attention at various levels in order to increase the effectiveness of



the DoD's and military service's PFM programs. One major gap that exists is between the DoD's intent of what PFM programs should look like and the lack of meeting that intent across the four military services PFM programs. The DoD's intent is to create proactive PFM programs, but the DOD left it up to each of the four military services on how they design their respective programs. The second gap that exists is between the military service program managers and service members and their families. The efforts DoD and the numerous organizations that have partnered with the DoD have generated vast amounts of information on personal finance, but much of that information resides on websites or in resources located at family service centers and is not reaching the military service members and their families. Military service members and their families must first know that the information exists and then must actively seek out the information. Most military members and their families do not seek out the information until they have made a poor financial decision that is causing difficulty in their daily lives. The gaps that remain unaddressed are in need of attention from the leadership at various levels in order to improve upon the current financial management programs. By giving personal financial readiness its fair share of attention, the leadership will demonstrate that there is a genuine interest in ensuring that all efforts are brought together to reach the intended audience.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the current efforts of the USG as well as public and private organizations that have partnered with the DoD to improve the financial readiness of military service members and their families. Additionally, this paper will offer insight into the research that has been conducted on financial readiness as well as an overview of each of the military services PFM programs and challenges that exist within each service. This paper will conclude with some recommendations for senior military leaders and commanders at all levels

that will help them to better understand the gaps that currently exist in the overall effort to improve personal financial readiness. By understanding the gaps, leaders will know where to focus their efforts to ensure that the PFM programs are redesigned in way that allows military members and their families to receive the existing information that is critical to their personal success and the military's success.

The efforts to provide PFM education to all groups is equally important, but military members and veterans are a critical subset of the population because of the unique circumstances and challenges they face in their decision to serve their country. Combat deployments and frequent relocations with, and sometimes without, family are just a few of those unique circumstances that can have a significant impact on a service member's personal financial readiness. Other stressful aspects of being part of the military are the force reductions and the transition to civilian life following two major wars. To add to the stress of challenging life-transitions, there are over one hundred compensation benefits that include military pay, retired pay, survivor benefits and unemployment benefits. Understanding these benefits and facing new situations can be difficult for any military service member with little to no PFM education or training. The unique circumstances and new challenges combined with minimum training results in more service members facing financial difficulties that consume valuable time from their military leadership.

In 2000, a study conducted by the Military Family Institute along with the US Navy determined that at least 15% of Navy service members experience financial difficulty. Furthermore, the report stated that service members' poor financial readiness cost the US Navy over \$250 million annually due to lost productivity in order to address financial related issues.<sup>7</sup> The study concluded by stating, "the impact of PFM difficulties on operational readiness is far

greater than other quality-of-life issues”.<sup>8</sup> Given the findings of the research, the DoD and each of the military services established a heightened interest to develop effective PFM programs to assist military service members in making well-informed decisions when it comes to financial matters.

In addition to the concerns and interest in maintaining readiness for the current force, the military must be concerned with and aware of the negative impact that poor financial decisions can have in life during or after transitioning from military service. Similar to the complex benefits and entitlements for active duty personnel, the programs and benefits for veterans and military retirees are also difficult to understand. A recent change that will impact service members entering the service at the beginning of 2018 is the modernization to the military retirement system. In an attempt to bring the benefits more in line with the private sector, the change eliminates the automatic pension for members who retire after 20 years of service, and implements a blended retirement plan that includes a 401(k).<sup>9</sup> Recent changes such as the one to the retirement system will require that service members make well thought out and informed decision that will most certainly impact their financial future. Establishing a solid baseline with financial training, education and counseling for service members throughout their time in the military will assist them in building financial resiliency that will benefit them as they transition from the military.

The Fannie Mae report from 2000 by a team of personal finance experts stated the military has a long history of providing financial literacy training. The Army was the first of the four military branches that started providing training in the 1960s. The Air Force followed in the 1980s, and the Navy and Marine Corps developed programs of their own in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> While the programs provide overwhelming amounts of information and many non-profit organizations

have contributed to the development of resources to augment the programs, there is still a disconnect between the programs and the military members they are designed to assist.

The abundance of information on personal finance available on the Internet, in books and other sources are a benefit to those who know where to find and make sense of the information. The big push to assess and improve upon financial literacy in the US during the 1990s prompted a variety of financial experts to increase their research efforts to determine the importance of financial education. While there has been some research conducted to determine a need for personal financial education in the military, there is a lack of research to determine the effectiveness of PFM programs in the military. The majority of the information available is based on studies and surveys conducted by various organizations to determine the financial capability of military personnel.

A main element of the Fannie Mae report of 2000 was to examine the challenges experienced by program managers, and to identify techniques that are effective in improving financial literacy.<sup>11</sup> The report dedicated a chapter to the military PFM programs and established that the military services had a long history in providing personal financial education to its members because of the challenges confronting the leadership.<sup>12</sup> The report also stated that the military services had developed a "...multifaceted, multi-tiered approach to providing information, education and counseling." The portion of the report dedicated to the military programs stated the programs were well established and integrated into training plans across the services.<sup>13</sup> The analysis of the report was completed prior to the start of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and was arguably a bit premature on stating that the programs were effective. Not soon after the wars started, more deployed personnel experienced personal financial issues and the "well established" programs were tested for their effectiveness. The

ineffectiveness of the programs gained more attention as combat operations commenced because more personal financial issues surfaced in preparation for deployments. For example, in a GAO report published in 2005, stated “some deployed service members faced additional problems with receiving family separation allowances and communicating with creditors and family.”<sup>14</sup> While the problems were easily addressed, the Fannie Mae report made the assumption that the training offered to the military service members was effective.

As the personal financial readiness issues surfaced during combat operations, additional research was conducted in 2002 by the Research and Development (RAND) Corporation, National Defense Research Institute (NDRI). RAND is a federally funded research and development center that conducts research for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Joint Staff and other defense agencies conducted additional research to determine the need for and benefits of providing financial education for military personnel.<sup>15</sup> The results of the research were published in January of 2002 and were grouped into three categories. The first category focused on the nature and number of problems that existed across the services. The report stated that about twenty percent of junior enlisted service members had difficulty in making ends meet.<sup>i</sup> The second category of the results compared the junior enlisted force with civilians and determined that the military population had substantially more financially related problems than the civilian population.<sup>ii</sup> The final category of the report suggested that the unique circumstances that are part of the military lifestyle, such as deployments and the separation of families, contribute to more financial problems. Overall the study suggested that financial problems were

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<sup>i</sup> The study reported that the twenty percent of those that experienced difficulty making ends meet were self reported, but that percentage was similar to objective measures that reported twenty-six percent of junior enlisted members experienced specific problems with debt. Some examples of those that experienced problems were pressured by creditors to pay bills, had utilities shut off, or pawned valuables to pay off debts.

<sup>ii</sup> An average of twenty percent of service members reported being pressured by creditors, compared with ten percent of the civilian population. Likewise, twenty-seven percent of service members experience problems compared with nineteen percent of a comparable civilian group.

related to spending patterns and management skills.<sup>iii</sup> The recommendation of the study was for the military services to “implement a systematic evaluation of financial management programs.”<sup>16</sup> To this date there are no follow up studies or research by RAND to their study.

While no additional studies were completed by RAND, other studies were conducted to determine what DOD actions were required to address service member’s personal financial issues. The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) completed a study and published a report in May of 2005 in response to a request from Senator Richard J. Durbin. The study found that the financial conditions of deployed and non-deployed service members and their families were similar, but deployed service members and their families may face additional financial problems related to pay.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, the delay in communicating with creditors while overseas created problems for deployed service members. Further, the GAO report suggested “the DoD lacks an oversight framework...for evaluating the effectiveness of personal financial management programs across the services”.<sup>18</sup> Lastly, the GAO report found that some junior enlisted members across all services were still not receiving the PFM training.<sup>19</sup> The report further establishes the argument that although the DoD has personal finance training and education programs, service members are not using the programs or are not receiving the information.

Within the last couple of years, more non-profit organizations have sponsored studies and research conducted by personal financial educators, economists, sociologists and psychologists to analyze the ongoing issue of PFM problems among military service members. Additionally, more organizations, universities and financial institutions are partnering with the DoD to provide educational resources to assist in the effort of increasing financial literacy. One example is the

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<sup>iii</sup> Two factors were determined to be unrelated to financial distress for service members. First, financial problems are not impacted by whether a service member resides on or off base and second, financial problems are not related to family income.

Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University whose goal is to bring organizations together to support military families. MFRI at Purdue University conducted a study at the request of the Office of Military Community and Family Policy, to examine the income and expenditure patterns of military families with young children.<sup>20</sup> Like MFRI, other organizations are beginning to explore specific areas to address ongoing personal financial related concerns. The research has consistently determined a need for the DoD and the military services to provide PFM training because of the negative impact financial related problems have on military readiness. As previously mentioned, the efforts have established overwhelming amounts of information that is useful, but until that information is proactively transmitted in an easy to understand method to service members and their families the PFM programs will remain ineffective and financial related problems will likely persist.

Given the complex and dynamic environment of the financial world along with the staggering statistics of financial related issues across the US, one would find it hard to believe that anyone would be opposed to providing financial education. While few, there are some experts whose arguments center around research that indicates personal financial education does not improve consumer performance. These experts also argue that big corporations who sell complicated and questionable products fund many of the financial literacy programs for marketing purposes. One particular expert opposed to financial education is Laura Willis who is a Professor of Law at Loyola Law School at Los Angeles. In an article published in the *American Economic Review*, Willis states that given “the abysmal state of most consumers’ financial literacy...effective financial education would need to be very extensive, frequent and personalized for each consumer”.<sup>21</sup> Willis argues that mass education campaigns do not properly address the complexities of the constant changing environment.<sup>22</sup> As an alternative to financial

education, Willis suggests providing pro bono professional assistance to navigate through the difficult market. This would require a great number of certified financial planners to cover down on the wide range of situations that military members encounter.

While not as vocal, another small group that is opposed to personal financial education are some employers. According to survey results published in the previously referenced Fannie Mae Foundation 2000 report “employers...are finding that financial education may be an effective tool for attracting and retaining value workers in today’s tight labor market”.<sup>23</sup>

Although there is data to support the positive impact that employer-provided financial education can have on a company, not all companies agree that providing personal financial education is the employers’ responsibility. Deciding how much responsibility an employer has with regards to addressing employees financial wellness is based on resources. After all, personal financial issues are a personal matter, and therefore an individual’s responsibility. In March 2015, GAO convened a forum in which a select group of experts gathered to discuss financial education in the workplace. Participants of the discussion groups represented the private sector, federal government agencies, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions. The information discussed during the forum was published in a report titled *Financial Literacy: The Role of the Workplace*, and while the majority of the report highlighted ways that employers can assist their employees specifically with providing financial education resources, there were some challenges identified that addressed concerns for some employers. With regards to the challenges, the GAO report stated that some participants noted that not all companies are created equal, and smaller companies are not able to make personal financial education a high enough priority to allocate limited resources.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the report stated that some executives are skeptical of the impact of providing financial education and do not view personal financial



education as their responsibility.<sup>25</sup> Narrow in on the DoD, specifically the military services, and a similar statement is briefly mentioned in *DoD Instruction (DoDI) 1342.22, Military Family Readiness*. Listed in the first subparagraph in the PFM services section, it states "...service members are responsible for their personal finances".<sup>26</sup> While personal finances are a personal responsibility according to the DoD, trends outlined in recent reports as well as the time and effort required to address personal financial issues by military leadership is enough evidence to prove a need for the military to take a proactive approach to improve financial literacy among its members.

### **Current Program Analysis**

*DoDI 1342.22, Military Family Readiness* states that the "family readiness system shall offer proactive personal life cycle financial management services that provide service members and their families with the tools and information they need to develop individual strategies to achieve financial goals and address financial challenges."<sup>27</sup> While the requirements are clearly outlined in the DoD Instruction, recent studies and surveys show that there are still some gaps between the services' personal financial programs and service members. As outlined in the GAO 2005 report, the PFM programs are underutilized. A proactive approach would require the PFM training programs be integrated into annual training plans and made more available to service members. A key element in the DoD's guidance for the services PFM programs is one that emphasizes the importance of being proactive and preventive. Current programs still seem to be stuck in a reactionary phase for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons is that money is a personal and private matter and therefore service members are hesitant to seek financial advice. Another reason for not taking a proactive approach is that unit-training schedules are focused on operational readiness and other requirements that do not include financial readiness.

While those reasons are difficult to dispute, openly discussing personal financial readiness and making it high on the list of priorities will hopefully make financial readiness a matter that is no longer labeled as personal or private. By removing the stigma of being a private matter, individuals will not have to suffer the financial stress alone and can seek knowledge and information prior to making important financial decisions.

### **United States Army**

The United States Army was the first service to develop a PFM program back in the 1960s.<sup>28</sup> The PFM program is very briefly outlined in *Army Regulation 608-1*, which is the Army Community Service regulation that outlines the standards for the services offered in the Army Community Service centers. *AR 608-1 Section V, Financial Readiness*, states that the program is designed to provide prevention education, mandatory training, financial counseling services and assistance with debt liquidations, consumer advocacy services and emergencies.<sup>29</sup> On the official US Army benefits website, [myarmybenefits.us.army.mil](http://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil) it states that eight hours of personal financial training is required within the first ninety days of arriving at the first duty station for first term enlisted soldiers (E1-E4).<sup>30</sup> The website also states that support will be provided to commanders when requested. In addition to the official US Army benefits website, the Army Community Service maintains personal finance information on [myarmyonesource.com](http://myarmyonesource.com).<sup>31</sup> While there are numerous links with a variety of information on PFM, the program is designed in a way that Soldiers would have to seek out and search for the information on several websites. Searching through large amounts of information on multiple websites on a variety of personal financial categories can easily become overwhelming and an ineffective way to learn how to improve financial readiness.

Additionally, a flyer for the financial readiness program refers soldiers to the online training as an alternative to the eight-hour mandatory training. This flyer gives the indication that service members do not require person-to-person interaction and can complete the requirement on-line. In addition to the providing information on their websites, the US Army through the Army Service Center has created a virtual game called Army Gold Financial Game to provide realistic training as well as a financial readiness application called Money Matters. Both are geared toward eighteen to twenty-five year olds, but there is no information available to determine the use and effectiveness of the game or the mobile application.

### **Air Force**

According to the previously mentioned Fannie Mae Foundation report published in 2000, the Air Force was second to the Army in creating a financial management program during the 1980s.<sup>32</sup> Similar to the US Army, the US Air Force very briefly outlines their personal financial readiness services as part of a larger program referred to as the Airman and Family Readiness Centers (A&FRC) in *Air Force Instruction 36-3009*. The instruction states that the “A&FRCs will offer information, education and personal financial counseling to help individuals and families maintain financial readiness and build resiliency”.<sup>33</sup> The Air Force does mandate that officers and enlisted personnel receive PFM training within the first ninety days of reporting into their first duty station.<sup>34</sup> While there are some benefits to mandatory training, there is no information that explains how the training is tracked or other details to emphasize the priority given to financial readiness. The language contained in the Air Force instruction implies that the program takes on a more reactive approach than a proactive approach, which goes against what is outlined in *DoDI 1342.22*. The Air Force Personnel Center website provides a variety of links to other sites, but offers no detailed plan on how to address ongoing financial readiness issues.

## **US Navy**

Of the four services researched, the US Navy has done the most to assess the need and to publish detailed guidance in a Secretary of the Navy Instruction (SECNAVINST) dedicated to the PFM program. *SECNAVINST 1740.4*, published in 2007, provides a comprehensive policy and identifies responsibilities for the implementation of the Navy's PFM program.<sup>35</sup> According to a study commissioned by the Navy in 1997, the Navy's program was instituted in 1990.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the Navy's PFM program was developed to assist sailors in becoming financially responsible with the end goal of reducing the impact and costs to the Navy of dealing with poor financial decisions made by sailors. The study found that at least fifteen percent of Navy service members were experiencing financial difficulties and the annual costs to the Navy was around \$250 million.<sup>37</sup> The costs were a combination of the time lost in productivity for both the service member experiencing the problem, as well as the costs of processing and counseling resulting from letters of indebtedness, bankruptcies, bad checks, wage garnishments and assistance provide by the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society.<sup>38</sup> The current program has evolved since 1990 and research indicates that the Navy has made considerable progress in developing a program that provides tools and resources to Naval Commands to better manage the PFM program. *SECNAVINST 1740.4* is an amplification of DoD policy that contains a mission, actions, and outlines responsibilities that takes the program beyond the family centers and to the command level. While there is a substantial difference in the Navy's program compared to that of the other services, it is unknown if it is any more effective.

## **Marine Corps**

The Marine Corps' recent efforts demonstrate the service's desire to further develop a program that focuses on mission readiness and personal financial stability. In December 2014,

the Marine Corps published the service's first ever policy for a PFM program in *Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1700.37, Personal Financial Management Program*. Similar to the US Navy, the Marine Corps' program offers guidance and resources to unit commanders for a program that covers missions and responsibilities from the Headquarters Marine Corps level down to the assignment of Command Financial Specialists (CFS) as a collateral duty at the command level. Additionally, the Marine Corps' PFM Program implements the use of non-commissioned officers who will be relied upon to bridge the generation gap between junior Marines and the command leadership. *MCO 1700.37* states that the programs "primary focus is a proactive and preventive approach to financial education."<sup>39</sup> A proactive approach is a key element for a program since most Marines do not seek assistance until after a problem has occurred. Another method to attempt to achieve a proactive approach is the implementation of the personal readiness seminar (PRS) outlined in Marine Admin (MARADMIN) 581/14 posted on Marines.mil. The intent of the seminar is to provide an overview on the Marine For Life Cycle model and introductory personal finance topics.<sup>40</sup> Marines will attend the PRS upon assignment to the first permanent duty station and at approximately twelve to twenty-four months before the end of active duty or retirement.

The new changes and developments recently promulgated by the Marine Corps were approximately four years in the making. Based on the availability of information, the Marine Corps' PFM program appears to be one of the most aggressive of the military services. While still in the early stages, it is yet to be determined how Marine commanders will embrace the program requirements, and prioritize financial readiness given the numerous competing requirements in readiness and preparation for combat. According to the Marine Corps PFM Program Manager Jessica Perdeu, the Marine Corps does not currently have a method to track

who is a CFS across the enterprise. However, the Marine Corps is working on developing a tool in order to benefit from appointed CFS's experiences at future assignments as they execute permanent change of station (PCS) orders. Since the program guidance has been recently released, there is little known across the service about the policy. Perdeu stated that a brief is presented to incoming Commanders and Sergeants Major at the Lejeune Leadership Institute Commanders Symposium.<sup>41</sup> The Marine Corps will use results from the command inspection program to ensure compliance at the unit level. The inspection checklist to be used is pending review and approval.<sup>42</sup> Similar to the Navy's program, the Marine Corps is attempting to take a proactive approach, but the responsibility is on commanders and the leadership at the command level to ensure the information is made available to Marines and their families to enhance the effectiveness of the PFM program.

### **Program Challenges and Recommended Actions**

The DoD has taken an interest in ensuring that military services are developing programs because of the negative impact that poor financial readiness can have on operational readiness. Other than mandating that a PFM program be developed, the DoD has given flexibility to the services on how they design and implement their programs. Developing a program that provides training, education and counseling of a complex matter across a large organization is no simple task, and while the services have made some progress, data contained in recent surveys shows that there are still a large number of service members experiencing financial difficulties. The DoD understands the overall task of translating large amounts of complex information into an easy to understand format for service members and their families, but the path to make the connection between the PFM programs, and service members and their families is the real challenge. Research and other studies have determined a need for financial management

training, but in order to achieve maximum results there are at least three critical tasks that need to occur. First, the senior DoD leadership needs to make financial readiness a priority and communicate their intent across all military branches. Secondly, the current programs must be redesigned since they are mostly focused on improving military members financial readiness and can unintentionally exclude family members. Finally, the DoD and the services need to take a more aggressive approach to make it proactive as directed in written DoD policy. One thing for certain is that there is a want and need for assistance from the service members in navigating through the dynamic and complex financial environment of today.

The DoD has achieved great success in partnering with public and private organizations to develop educational information, but more effort is needed to guide the services in getting the message across to the service members. Several gaps exist at critical points in the overall efforts that limit the effectiveness of PFM programs. The first gap that requires immediate attention lies in the message from the DoD to the military services. The guidance is rather clear in *DoDI 1342.22, Military Family Readiness* by stating that the "...family readiness services shall offer proactive personal life cycle financial management services that provide Service members and their families with the tools and information they need..."<sup>43</sup> The services are not limited by DoD in designing their programs, yet other than offering mandatory training upon initial entry for only junior service members, they do not appear to meet the life cycle financial management approach. In other words, the programs are still reactionary. In order to overcome this gap in communication between the DoD and the military services, the DoD needs to ensure compliance with the DoD Instruction. The DoD intent is clear and in order to maintain some freedom in program development the military branches need to meet the intent or deal with a more prescriptive program from the DoD.

A second gap in the overall effort to increase personal financial readiness is between the installation financial counselors and the service members working aboard the installation. According to a comprehensive report that published the results of the 2014 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, 84% of active duty service members agreed that more focus should be placed on a preventive financial education.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the report stated “only 10% of respondents indicated that they utilized service member training to learn about personal finance.”<sup>45</sup> The low usage is likely attributed to the fact that personal financial counselors are a part of the installation command, which is separate from the operational commands, and unless service members take the time and effort to leave behind a busy work and training schedule, they are unlikely to receive any personal finance training or education. Unless of course they make a poor financial decision that has negatively impacted their life or career and they are directed to seek the counseling. While the effectiveness is unknown due to the lack of research, the Marine Corps and the Navy’s PFM programs have recently taken a more active approach compared to the Army and the Air Force’s programs. Both programs mandate that the unit level commanders appoint a Command Financial Specialist who is above the rank of E-6 and would be the “command’s principal advisor on the policies and matters related to personal financial management.”<sup>46</sup>

As the military services attempt to connect the dots between their respective PFM programs and service member’s usage of the programs, civilian military spouses are also left out of the process. The program guidance for all services specifically state that the programs are family focused. A report published in the *Journal of Financial Counseling and Planning*, identified the results of a study in which the authors determined that “civilian military spouses preferred to seek financial assistance from formal, non-military sources such as professional



financial planner/counselor and informal financial resources such as family and other military spouses.”<sup>47</sup> The results of the study should be a concern for the military services for the simple fact that programs are not attracting the attention of military spouses. The lack of engagement by civilian military spouses can be even more concerning since critical responsibilities fall on a spouse who remains back to manage the household when a service member is deployed.<sup>48</sup> More emphasis can be placed on programs that focus on assisting civilian military spouses with training and education in PFM education. One such program is the FINRA Foundation Military Spouses Fellowship Program that was started in 2006. The program is designed to assist military spouses in obtaining an Accredited Financial Counselor® certificate and in turn those trained spouses assist military families in improving their financial readiness.<sup>49</sup> The military services should actively work with other partnered organizations to generate more interest in programs like FINRA’s.

A fourth and critical gap or disconnect is that mandatory training is targeted towards junior service members. While a good majority of the junior enlisted members are the ones to report PFM problems, other service members are not exempt from having personal financial issues. Current programs mainly focus on junior service members and mandate training upon initial entry, but lack the life cycle approach directed by *DoDI 1342.22*. While focusing on junior service members can be a priority, all members need to be provided training and education. The need to train and educate all service members throughout their careers is important because service members have different experiences during a military career. Furthermore, PFM training throughout a career is important because some transitions can be unanticipated. Finally, good financial planning and readiness is essential whether one stays in the military for a short time or a long time.

As the financial environment becomes more complex and personal finance issues persist, the response has been an increase of personal finance campaigns and a creation of larger coalitions that create more products to promote financial readiness. While the resources being developed are beneficial and more organizations are partnering with the DoD, not enough attention given to the importance of financial readiness by the senior military leadership. Service leaders across the military services need to actively communicate their intent to make personal financial readiness a higher priority. The senior leadership's interest will resonate with the commanders at the unit level and may impact personal financial readiness in two ways. First, the top-down approach will promote an environment where discussing personal financial matters is normal. Secondly, the leadership's interest will encourage program managers to increase effectiveness of personal financial readiness since they have support from the leadership.

Program managers, along with other certified professionals across military installations, can work externally with public and private organizations that have partnered with the DoD and can in turn enhance collaboration by working with appointed command financial specialists to assess needs for the unit. This coordinated effort will allow for a more comprehensive approach to addressing the gaps that exist in the improving personal financial readiness. A focus of effort can be placed on identifying key transition points throughout a service members career in which they receive training and counseling to assist them in understanding the potential increase in challenges during these transitions. Some examples of key transition points are upon initial enlistment, upon arrival at a new duty station, change in marital status, change in family size, and upon receipt of orders for a permanent change of station.

Further, as more emphasis is placed on building well-connected programs, commanders across the services will incorporate PFM training into their annual training plans. Financial

readiness is a key part of military readiness and it should be treated as such. Allotting time for PFM seminars will pay dividends for the military services. Increasing the visibility and availability of certified financial counselors and designated command financial specialists will generate increased interest and awareness that will lead service members to seek assistance more often and hopefully reduce any stigma of discussing personal financial matters with their leadership.

## **Conclusion**

The DoD is making the appropriate decision along with key leaders in the government to address the persistent issues of personal financial readiness in the military. The large number of benefits, the rapidly changing economy and the unfortunate predatory practices all add on to the unique challenges already experienced by military service members. While the current programs have evolved and matured greatly over the years with the assistance of organizations external to the DoD, there are still gaps that need to be addressed to increase the effectiveness of the programs. Service leaders and other senior leadership need to increase the attention and importance given to personal financial readiness so that there will be an increase in awareness and a concerted effort by all groups and organizations that have an interest to improve upon the programs and resources that currently exist. When the senior leaderships' interest increases, it will help generate the momentum needed to make the service's PFM programs more proactive and less reactionary. Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors and Marines are interested in the information and deserve to be mentored in all facets of life, especially financial matters. Research shows that the benefits to improving financial literacy at the work place will increase productivity. Studies conducted by the US Navy in 2000, the RAND Corporation in 2002, GAO in 2005 and the final report released by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission in

2015 are proof that gaps remain in the military PFM programs. Additionally, the reports highlight that the cost to the services and the impact to operational readiness are significant enough that PFM education is a critical task to be taken on by the DoD. Dedicating the appropriate amount of attention to personal financial education as well as the management of the programs will give service members the confidence to make informed decisions, thus allowing the commander the ability to focus more on preparing for a specific mission rather than countless hours addressing personal financial matters that are a service member's responsibility.

With the recent drawdown efforts by the military services after the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there must be added emphasis to ensure that service members are prepared for voluntary and involuntary transitions to civilian life. With a solid foundation established by much needed and wanted PFM training, more military service members will make more informed decisions during their careers and better plan for life after the military. The USG and the DoD must continue to stay engaged and ahead of the challenging economic environment created by new military programs and benefits. Additionally, the USG must stay engaged in order to keep legislation current to counter predatory practices that seek to take advantage of military service members. Lastly, DoD can expand upon the coalitions and campaigns to assist veterans and service members alike. By continuing to partner with public and private organizations, research institutions and other government organizations, additional research can be conducted to address increasing suicides and homelessness amongst veterans. There is an interest and a need by both the service members and those seeking to assist service members in improving upon financial readiness; it is now up to the leaders of the military services to take the lead in closing the gaps across the programs.

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