

# Who Cares for a 24-Year-Old Veteran Injured in the Line of Duty?

## Understanding the experience of parents caregiving for adult Veterans injured through service.



### Principal Investigator

**Heidi Cramm, PhD, OT**

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Trained as an occupational therapist, Dr. Cramm is a professor in the School of Rehabilitation Therapy at Queen's University, the Research Lead of the Families Matters Research Group, and Head of Family Research Strategy at the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research.

Dr. Cramm's research involves the mental health of defense and public safety families; health system access and navigation for military families and Veterans; and trauma.

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### Project Summary and Impact

Programs for military families are generally aimed towards the needs of young families with young children. Programs for Veteran families are generally geared towards ageing Veterans. Parents of young adult Veterans, however, often find themselves stepping into a caregiving role should their child be injured in the line of duty. These parents, many of whom have their own health, work, financial or relationship concerns, find themselves unexpectedly navigating a complicated caregiving situation without proper support.

Although the parents interviewed in Dr. Cramm's research reported significant ongoing commitment to their young adult Veteran children, for many, this meant financial losses and a move to be closer to their child. For others, the impact on career trajectory and/or job security were notable, moving beyond short-term leaves of absence to ongoing reduction in work hours. The ages at which many of these parents were intensively dealing with their child's health and well-being meant parents were unable to move into better paying jobs with greater responsibility connected with end-of-career stages, hence negatively impacting their pensions going forward.

**With funding from the Canadian Institute of Military and Veteran Health Research True Patriot Love (TPL) Research Initiative the Families Matter Research Group is working to improve research capacity and partnerships so that the families of those who serve, or who have served, across the military and public safety sectors, are getting the support that they need in a timely manner.**

## Key Findings

Dr. Cramm's research revealed that parents caring for young adult Veteran children are impacted in the following ways:

- **Taking on additional tasks.** Parents manage many of their Veteran child's daily tasks and take on their child's stress and responsibility associated with financial difficulties, job loss, housing, and parenting grandchildren.
- **Living in a constant state of worry.** Parents work to keep their Veteran child safe and, in many cases, prevent them from dying by suicide.
- **No support.** Parents find themselves at an utter loss of what to do, what to say—as well as what not to say. They reported a constant and draining experience of “walking on eggshells” and a trepidation about how to best help their Veteran child without “upsetting the apple cart.”
- **Negative impact on health, well-being and relationships.** Parents seek out mental health services to help develop healthy boundaries and deal with compassion fatigue.
- **Disappointment with the Canadian Armed Forces and/or Veterans Affairs Canada.** Parents struggle to reconcile the service that their child made and the heavy impact that followed, with no sense of support. They felt “forgotten”, that they “didn't matter.”

## What Now?

Dr. Cramm's research has laid the groundwork for important future research, policy, and practice improvements to support families of young adult Veterans. Specific recommendations for future action include the following:

- **Family-centered circle of care that includes and acknowledges parents' important role** in the success of the Canadian Armed Forces and its Veterans.
- **Public awareness** surrounding the nature of military service and the military-to-civilian transition process of release.
- **Interpersonal support** that reflects parents' needs.
- **Psychoeducation and couples and/or family therapy** to help manage parent-child boundaries, social/familial judgement and parenting a child with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Dr. Heidi Cramm and her team from Queen's University are the first to interview parents of young adult Canadian Armed Forces Veterans transitioning to civilian life while recovering from military-acquired illness or injury.

“This research has been a privilege to conduct and is some of the most important work my team and I have done,” says Dr. Cramm. “Parents matter to the success of the Canadian Armed Forces and the recovery of ill or injured Veterans. Bearing this responsibility impacts them greatly, and currently, there is little in the way of support.”

The Families Matter Research Group is an interdisciplinary team of clinicians and scientists whose research focuses on the needs of the families of Canadian Armed Forces members, Veterans and public safety personnel. Some of this research surrounds topics such as mental health, post-traumatic stress, operational stress, work-family conflict and trauma.

## Funding Sponsor

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True Patriot Love Foundation (TPL) is a national charity dedicated to providing essential support and resources to Canadian military members, Veterans and their families. TPL believes in supporting research, establishing evidence-based programs, and increasing access to programs and treatments dedicated to advancing the health and well-being of military personnel, Veterans, and their families.



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