

“United Forces and Families”

Kari Voliva:

Friends, welcome. It's my honor to welcome you to the United Forces and Family Session today. Supporting our Air Force family has been an important piece of AFAs mission since its inception in 1946. More than 75 years later, we remain committed to supporting all department of the Air Force families. We believe that consistent focus on improving the quality of life for all Airmen, Guardians, and family members is directly linked to stronger families, United forces and the mission effectiveness of our air and space forces. That's why AFA launched the United Forces and Families Initiative or F2 in September. For the first time at the Airspace and Cyber Conference, we incorporated multiple quality of life sessions and welcome more than 1000 military spouses. AFA also created the F2 task force to unite forces and families to strengthen quality of life for air space communities. This is a forward-looking impact focused group of advocates dedicated to bringing awareness, resources and solutions to some of the toughest issues impacting our military families. Our F2 vision is a culture where strong families continually build stronger forces. This session is one of the first products of our task force and we are thrilled that you're here. As we celebrate International Women's Day today, thank you for supporting the only all female panel at this event. It's my honor to introduce your moderator for today's session, Melissa Shaw. Melissa currently serves as the vice chair of the F2 Task Force and is the Vice President of Digital Solutions at Pioneer Utility Resources. She is married to Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Shaw and has been a military spouse for 11 years. The Shaws are an inner service transfer family from the US Army to the Space Force and the proud parents of three wonderful children. Please join me in welcoming Melissa Shaw.

Melissa Shaw:

Carrie, thank you for that wonderful introduction and thank you for all that you and the AFA team do behind the scenes to make events like this one happen. Thank you, Kristen, Major Pantaleon and Lieutenant Colonel Blakeman for sitting up here with me this morning. It's my honor to moderate this panel today, United Forces and Families. The four of us on stage represent active air and space force leaders, reserve families, single parents, dual military families, dual working families, and even an interservice transfer family. In addition to moderating today's panel, as Carrie mentioned, I'm also here to represent the AFAs brand new F2 task force designed to unite forces and families strengthening quality of life for our air and space communities. It's not lost on me that the F2 task force was established at the 50th anniversary of our all volunteer force.

Melissa Shaw:

With an all volunteer force comes career minded service members who can only continue to serve if both they and their families have adequate housing, food on the table, healthcare education, and in today's inflationary environment, military spouse employment is more important than ever. Thankfully, it's not just independent organizations like the AFA who are addressing and recognizing the need to speak on the role that quality of life plays for those of us who are married to someone wearing uniform or wearing the uniform ourselves. Our senior enlisted leaders spoke with a unified voice on the importance of addressing quality of life challenges last week. I sat on our couch in our house, and I personally watched Chief Bass and Towberman testify to the US House Appropriations Committee alongside other senior enlisted leaders from the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Army on the oversight hearing on quality of life in the military.

Melissa Shaw:

During that session, Chief Towberman said that without a quality of life that they value and know will always be there and all volunteer force may no longer be something that we can safely assume. Chief Bass told the Appropriations Committee that in order to be the Air Force our nation needs, we must prioritize both quality of life and the quality of service of our Airmen and their families. And this week we've heard a number of our most senior leaders in the air and space forces talk openly about the spectrum of resilience, the fact that mental health is health, addressing other quality of life challenges, and even talking about how those of us who are family members are a critical part of the team, that those of you who wear the uniform are on. Our forces and our families are inextricably intertwined. What's good for one is good for both, and the opposite also holds true. With me here today, our three leaders in our community each representing grassroots efforts across the DAF. Ladies, can you please briefly introduce yourselves this morning and tell us a bit about each of the organizations that you represent?

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

Of course. Thank you, Melissa. Good morning everyone. I am Major Bridget Pantaleon. I'm one of four co-founders of the DAF Family Life Action Group. The DAF Family Life Action Group is an all volunteer team that aims to bridge the gap between the Airmen, Guardians and their loved ones and the DAF senior leaders and our team is comprised of total force Airmen, Guardians, and their loved ones.

Kristen Christy:

Good morning, I'm Kristen Christy. My husband is Tech Sergeant Sean Lang, a traditional reservist. We're stationed in Colorado Springs and I am here, besides being on F2 with Melissa, I am representing FFIT, Fortifying the Forces Initiative Team championed by Chief Bass and Chief Towberman and I'm going to read this, I apologize. Usually I don't have notes, but FFIT is, the mission is to accelerate actionable, actionable initiatives to create meaningful impact by building a stronger, more resilient force... Sorry. By improving mental health and suicide prevention, efforts to protect Airmen, Guardians, and their families and we include civilians in that as well in our initiatives. I'll talk more about that later.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

Great. Good morning. It's great to see everyone. I'm Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth Blakeman and I'm representing ACC's Sword Athena program. The program sources volunteers from across our MAJCOM to come together and to identify tackle and then hopefully remove any barriers to female and family readiness, and so look forward to the panel. Thanks.

Melissa Shaw:

Thank you. My first question today, we all define family a little bit differently. Each one of us brings a different family dynamic to this stage and also to the room in front of us in the entire air and space forces. Since we're here today to talk about family and the force, let's talk about what family means to some of us. Major Pantaleon, would you mind going first in talking a little about what family means to you?

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

I'd love to. Thanks Melissa. So I want to start really quick with a question for the crowd here. Who has heard, and dare I say, uttered the words that if the military wanted you to have a family, they'd issue you one. Right. We've all heard it, right? I know if you're in this room today, you probably haven't uttered that phrase, but if you have, let me be the first to inform you that that's not the perspective that

the military has some families today. The way that we look at and the way that we define families in 2023 is different from the way that we looked at and defined families in 1947 when we stood up the Air Force. It's different, like chief Bass mentioned on Monday, than when they wrote the policies that we operate under today. The definition of family, I believe, belongs to our Airmen and our Guardians.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

So whether you know are married and you have children or you don't have children, if you're a single parent, maybe you're the caregiver of an aging parent. Maybe you are an older sibling that came from a rough upbringing and you had to step up and you had to take care of your younger siblings. Or maybe you're a single Airman sitting here in the audience today and you have the family that you came from and you also have the family that you built along the way in your military service or you may have the family that you adopted in the version of a pet. Family means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, but that definition that belongs to our Airmen and our Guardians. My humble perspective is that family can be defined as those that journey along with us in our service and support us along the way.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

And one of the things that Melissa asked me to share a little bit of is my personal story and how my personal story has shaped the way that I view leadership and it has shaped the way that I view my definition of family. So some of the folks in the room here know me, some of y'all don't, but if you don't know me, I'm an intelligence officer. Love my job, love the mission, and I just so happen to also be the single parent with sole custody of two amazing little boys, Jack and Luke five and seven, wish they were here so you guys could see them. But they're also members of the Exceptional Family Member program. And I've had lots of challenges with my quality of life. I didn't join the service thinking I would become a single parent at all, let alone when I was six months pregnant with my second child.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

Lots of challenges, and I don't say that to elicit sympathy. I say that to provide the framework that it radically changed the way that I lead. And so when I look at the challenges that I had to overcome, I recognize that I sit in a position of privilege. I am an FGO, I'm a female officer, I make a decent amount of money. I can overcome childcare challenges financially. I have a fantastic family. There my brother's watching my kids right now so I could be here with you guys enabling my operations.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

I have a great family support structure. I have an incredible military family that stood up for me. What keeps me up at night as a leader is that there is a reflection of me at the Airman level. There is a single parent at the Airman level who doesn't have the financial flexibility to overcome childcare problems, who does not have a good family to reach back to for support. Maybe they're thousands of miles away from them and they haven't yet had the opportunity to build our military community and family. So now when I view leadership, I think every single one of these Airmen's family matter. How do I bring them in, how do I fortify our families? And so at the end of the day, our families, however we define them, they are force multipliers and they have operational consequence.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

Thanks, Melissa.

Melissa Shaw:

That was fantastic. Thank you. I don't think any of us have anything to add to that. Lieutenant Colonel Blakeman, I'm going to jump to you next if that's okay. Can you speak to a little bit to the Sword Athena program, can you talk with us about family in the context of that program? How does Athena help to create the operational readiness and resilience of Airmen and by extension their families? And before, I want to clarify this is an initiative of the ACC so I specifically did not mention Guardians in this context because this program primarily serves Airmen.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

Awesome. Thanks, Melissa.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

So Sword Athena stood up as a program. It's sponsored by the commander of a ACC, so General Kelly, but it stood up in 2020 under General Holmes and has been going strong ever since. As I mentioned earlier, it's a MAJCOM level program that's designed to go out and find where there are barriers for our female Airmen and by extension their families to them being able to serve to their full potential and do the mission. And so Sword Athena takes a grassroots approach for those of you who aren't familiar with the weapons and tactics community and the model that they use, Sword Athena leans heavily on that and is informed by it. So we go out to the field, we talked to the Airmen who are doing the mission, or we source ideas through their chains of command and bring those forward.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

As a team across our MAJCOM, we collaborate on those ideas, work with our staff champions at ACC or in other organizations across the Air Force and we come up with solutions. And then what Sword Athena does is it provides that conduit to bring those ideas solutions directly from the field to COMAC for action, so some examples of things Sword Athena has tackled over the last few years. So Sword Athena was one of the key drivers in building the requirements and the development of new bladder relief solutions and flight suit modifications for female aviators. We drove support for north nursing mothers in our command by making lactation rooms and inspectable item for the IG. We've updated policies to ensure that Bluetooth pumping devices can be used in many of our skiffs across the command and my personal favorite, we made our childcare development center parking lots, no hat, no salute zones. You want to talk about high risk with a two-year-old, that is it.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

Our process runs throughout the year, but next year week we have our milestone event where we bring representatives from each of our wings and our NAFs to Langley and we work together and what COMAC's asked us to look at this year is look through the Sword Athena lens at models such as agile combat employment and the rollout of Afro Gen and try and anticipate where they're going to be challenges or issues for our families or female Airmen and bring them forward now so we can tackle them ahead of the curve and be ready.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that Sword Athena is obviously part of a very powerful network of sister organizations, all the ones represented on this stage. There's seven other MAJCOM Athenas that have now stood up across the Air Force and we are partnered very closely with the women's initiative team, who takes many of the things that we bring forward from the MAJCOMs and drives big policy changes at the DAF and DOD level. So I'll stop there, but if you think Sword Athena, just remember organization and

really any Athena right at the MAJCOM level that's out there trying to remove barriers and ensure all Airmen can serve to their full potential.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

Thanks.

Melissa Shaw:

Lieutenant Colonel Blakeman, if folks are interested in learning more about the Athena programs, is there a website or somewhere else that they could go to, they could jot down to look up when they get home?

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

So one of the best ways to get connected is on Facebook. I know it's not cool anymore to use Facebook, but we do have a Sword Athena page there and if you have a CAC enable or a CAT card, you can access our Mill Connect website, which we've just launched. And if you have questions about how to get in contact with any of the other Athenas, you're welcome to email me and I'll connect you to those POCs as well.

Melissa Shaw:

Great, thank you. Connection to resources is one of the most critical things that we can help as key spouses, as leaders, as family members, connecting folks to the resources they need is one of the most important things that we can do, so thank you.

Melissa Shaw:

My next question is for you Kristen. In an all volunteer force, we have Airmen and Guardians who we hope to retain and develop to become the world's leading airspace and cyber war fighters. Career military service members are likely to experience personal and professional and family challenges throughout their careers at different stages of life that could pull their attention in small or large ways away from the mission itself. Kristen, you are a nationally recognized expert in resilience. You speak all over the world, you've championed the DAFs Fortify the Force initiative team, you've spearheaded the National 988 hotline and you helped to found, well, you didn't help to found, you did found National Resilience Day. Can you please talk a little bit about the connection between resilience, our families and war fighting.

Kristen Christy:

A Absolutely. We talk about air space and cyber superiority, but without human superiority, we don't have any of that in any domain and that includes our families in that human superiority. I think as human beings, we want to feel protected, respected and connected. I know the department of the Air Force is working on that, to help our families be resilient. You all have to go through suicide prevention and a lot of other resilience training. We have master resilience trainers and the department of the Air Force saw how important it was for our spouses to be on the same page and so we have a spouse toolkit and it's taking our master resilience modules and just withering them a little bit for our spouses because it's a unit. Many of you know my story, lost my first husband to suicide after deployment. When Don was deployed, we agreed that there were sacred spaces, things that he couldn't talk about, things I couldn't talk about.

Kristen Christy:

It wasn't clearance related for him, it was just things he couldn't formulate. I want to say communication in the family unit leads to resilience. If I could go back 15 years, I would change the way I communicated with my husband at that time. I think communication is a foundation to resilience in the family and when the family is resilient as a unit, then the war fighting mission has a good chance because they've got that human superiority and then we can have the airspace and cyberspace superiority for our Airmen and their families. I recommend as Airmen, bring your families into what you're doing, tell them what you're doing as much as possible, as much as you can. Their eyes may glaze over, but they need to hear it. Our Guardian families, I really recommend our Guardian spouses and families read The Guardian, yes, the Guardian Ideal.

Kristen Christy:

I think it's very important that you have, as family members, we have an understanding of what our military members are dealing with to an extent, but to be on the same page and really to communicate with one another because as a family unit, we need to be resilient to be on... I call life is an emotional battlefield. Wherever you live, wherever the mission, the military mission is, life is an emotional battlefield and we need to arm ourselves with resilience and help each other out but especially as a family unit.

Melissa Shaw:

For our family, one of the things that we've identified about the time that my husband decided whether or not he was going to make this a career or if he wouldn't when he was a little bit earlier in his career and we're deciding, are we going to make it career, are we going to try to hit 20 or are we going to just get out and go take civilian jobs? We realized that it was critical for me to be part of those conversations, me to understand what the opportunities were in front of us and what some of the risks were with those opportunities as well and to ensure that I never have a victim mentality in that relationship because he does have those conversations with me at every step of the way. I have at least a reasonable set of expectations about what's ahead and that communication is critical to me being able to then support him in his service.

Melissa Shaw:

So his communication with me has been critical and I encourage those of you who are wearing the uniform in the room right now to talk to your spouses and loved ones. Like Kristen said, as much as you can, there's some things you can't talk with us about, but if you can encourage communication with your spouse, with your loved ones as you're making those career decisions, you'll find that we're able to support you a lot better along the way.

Melissa Shaw:

I'm going to direct my next question back to Major Pantaleon. Let's talk about the FLAG program in a little bit more detail. You described earlier that the FLAG is an organization that bridges the gap between Airmen, Guardians and their families and DAF senior leaders. How does FLAG bring information about those challenges from the field up to senior leaders? What does that communication look like?

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

Thank you, Melissa, and I'm really excited to talk to you guys about FLAG. If you can't tell yet, I'm really excited about Total Force Quality of Life. So the Family Life Action Group, we stood this up because we

really cared about quality of life and we really love our Airmen. We just went live in February and we love our Guardians too. We just went live in February and stood up our first three initiatives so right now we are tackling spousal employment, housing, and special needs children, access to childcare. That's our first three ones, so we went live last month, but we've been building it for over a year. And so the way that we seek to improve we're laser focused on total force quality of life. Our process in order to improve that quality of life looks like three things. And I'm going to make it sound real easy, but it's not.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

The first thing that we do is we listen to the concerns from the field, then we leverage our partnerships when appropriate, we action change. And then the third thing that we do is we increase the communication between DAF senior leaders and the people that are most impacted by their policies. That sounds really cool, but it's not easy. And let me tell you why it's not easy and the way that we attack this three step process.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

When we talk about total force quality of life here, we follow the beautiful guidance from Mrs. Brown and her Thrive team and so what we focus on is childcare, education, healthcare, housing, employment, and policies that impact quality of life. And so when we say we listen, the way that we listen today is going to be different than the way that we listen in the future. Today we utilize this grassroots network to understand what's going on out there in the field.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

Mrs. Brown's thrive team has unprecedented access to the spouses and their stories and what's going on today. We have a great working relationship with them to bring in those stories. We also partner heavily with the Fortify the Force initiatives team. They've got a family focus group that ideates and that comes up with ideas and they pitch them over our way. And then we also push out data calls to get that heartbeat of the force and from that, we take those issues and we identify what trends are occurring and what might need DAF level intervention. But in the future, and I promise my team, I would not talk about data and artificial intelligence too much because I'm a huge nerd, but what the future will look like is we aim to create a sustainable data solution, harnessing advanced technology that will enable that communication and trend analysis up and down the chain.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

And then once we figure out what's going on, we take action. What we do is root cause analysis and then we partner with our other organizations, our network within the DAF to try to enable the execution of the solutions that we propose or to get more information to bring that back to our Airmen, Guardians and their families. But we all know that these problems are not easy to solve. With complex problems, we elicit the help of our senior leader champions. We're super blessed to have Major General Downs and Brigadier General Lovette as our senior leader champions and we seek their advice to help us get in the right doors and into the right offices to advocate for change and if necessary, help push outside of the DAF up to the DOD to make programmatic changes. At the end of the day, we close the loop, we provide the feedback on the solutions we attempted to make or successfully made or the additional resourcing and information that our Airmen, Guardians and their families need, and we push it out through our many mechanisms of communication, which you'll hear about a little bit later so that they understand what that process looks like.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

I want you to think back really quick about the story I told you about how I'm a single parent, hard knock life. One of the challenges that I had to overcome was the PCS overseas. I was boarded, selected to be a DO for a really awesome operational unit. Long story short, my kids are EFMP, my orders got canceled. That's fine. My career survived. We're all good here but what was the real tragedy of that situation is that operational unit of hundreds Airmen were left without a director of operations for an assignment cycle.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

If FLAG was around when I went through that situation or FLAG was around before I went through that situation, Airmen would've been able to give that feedback. I would've been able to say, I'm having challenges with EFMP, maybe months before those challenges happened and we would've been able to enable PROACTION to look at our EFMP PCS processes before they had operational consequence. So the value proposition for FLAG is that we enable decision advantage. We enable senior leaders to be proactive instead of reactive to problems across quality of life.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

I always talk too much, Melissa. I'm sorry. That's it.

Melissa Shaw:

One of the things that we heard, I think it was General Saltzman earlier this week who talked about how important it is to stay in front of the challenges, to be forward-thinking about how we solve whatever the challenge is in the military, whether it's operational or whether it's quality of life affecting operations. Would either of you like to add on to anything that Bridget has shared with us this afternoon, this morning? It's still morning. This morning.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

I would just add that and Chief Towberman talked about it too, not putting families in a position where they're having to make choices about serving or taking care of their family members to the max extent possible. I think your ideas on being proactive across all of these organizations to best posture families as they handle those challenges is the right way to try and keep Airmen in the force and Guardians

Kristen Christy:

And I have been a family member in the military for, well, usually I say 39 plus years plus shipping and handling, but for 55 years. This has been my way of life and to see the changes that are going on now and the policy changes. I mean, just a few years ago you all wouldn't have been able to wear your hair down. I'm seeing all these policy changes coming out and I think that's just a testament to the Department of the Air Force, DOD as a whole that they understand they have got to change. I mean, General Brown says it, "Accelerates change or lose." I like to say, "Accelerate change and win." It's saying the same thing, but it's just... I wish my mom were alive as a military spouse back when to see all these changes because we're taking steps not just one step but steps forward to really be the ultimate military force as a family total force.

Melissa Shaw:

The total force, I think too, it includes our service members and our senior leaders making internal policy changes, decisions, leadership styles, all of that. It involves organizations in the private sector. It involves industry partners, it involves local communities, it involves organizations like the AFA and other service groups out there who are trying to support us peripherally and I think that it takes all of us looking at these challenges from a 360 degree perspective because there are things that may move slower for change within the military that a private nonprofit can make happen really quickly.

Melissa Shaw:

If more of our private sector partners were engaged around military spouse employment, imagine the impact that that could have. Some are knocking out of the park and doing a great job, but imagine the impact you could have for that younger Airman's family if that Airman's husband or a wife was able to find gainful employment outside the home to help with things like PCS costs. I read from BlueStar Families that in their last annual research that they had done, the average family, the active duty family who had gone through a PCS in the last couple of years had incurred nearly \$8,000, I think in out-of-pocket PCS costs. As an FGO family, we can make that work. We have some reserves put away from years of working, that for a younger family that could be debilitating. Imagine what we could do if we all continue to work together to solve these problems.

Melissa Shaw:

Kristen, I know that you are the last one to contribute here, but I'm going to jump right back to you. General and Mrs. Brown gathered feedback from that grassroots level by talking to Airmen, Guardians and their families, all across stations around the world that informed what became the Five and Thrive guide that you referenced earlier, Lieutenant, sorry, major Pantaleon. The five that we talk about when we talk about Five and Thrive are childcare, education, healthcare, housing, and military spouse employment. The Five and Thrive according to their website are directly tied to military family readiness, resilience and retention of the force, which in turn impacts mission execution. Kristen, better than anyone that the resilience to overcome challenges like these five is readiness. Can you tell us more about some of the resources that exist out there? Lieutenant Colonel Blakeman, you referenced some of them. I just talked about that 360 perspective, but Kristen, can you talk about some of the resources that are out there for Airmen, Guardians, and their families, please?

Kristen Christy:

Yeah, and you all have a lot more. We could spend three hours on all the resources that are available on an installation and off base. We all represent relatively new resources available to you all in uniform, in your family's civilians and your extended family. We are taking care of my father-in-law who has dementia, and my brother-in-law who's schizophrenic so our family dynamic is a little bit different. Our kids are adults and out of the house, but there are so many resources. I really foot stomp the chaplain's office, 100% confidential. I mean, seriously, 100% confidential. I think one of the stigmas that we need to overcome and the panel, I think it was Chief Bass and Chief Towberman had talked about overcoming the stigmas of barriers to get help. It's just we need to set expectations, especially for those of you in uniform. As I travel and I talk with organizations and resources on base like the chaplain's office, the Military and Family Readiness Center, the Influx, outdoor rack is a resource for you.

Kristen Christy:

It doesn't have to be mental health. We've got financial resources for you. We've got military peer to peer, each of these organizations up here. Military One Source. I was surprised to find Military One

Source can, if you have a family member, English is not their first language, they can translate their resume into English. They have 150 different languages that they can translate to just so many resources but I think setting the expectations, especially on the mental health side because that's really where FFIT comes in. FFIT is looking at the resilience and the mental health side and if we get initiatives or questions, then we take it to FLAG and Sword Athena and F2. It's like a Venn diagram and we intersect, all of our organizations intersect, but setting those expectations. You may have two people in the same squadron that have, that you know of, the same issue and one is still on the job and one is not.

Kristen Christy:

Just understand you don't know what is in that file, what's in their background, and please have faith that the leadership wants what's best for each Airman and Guardian and their families and what's best for the unit. But there are resources out there. It's not just up to you when you're in crisis, financial crisis, relationship crisis, whatever that crisis may be, deployment, crisis, childcare crisis, whatever that crisis may be to seek help. But I want to challenge you all that when you're in a good place, use your intuition when your head and your heart and your stomach is telling you something's not right with someone in your family, friends and family. Reach out to them because when we're in crisis, a lot of times we are not capable of asking for help. We don't even know what to ask for so I want to challenge you all to be that battle buddy that comes in armored with resilience to help use those resources. There are just so many to try and get into this small time but really when you're in a good place, when you move to an installation, find out what your resources are on-base and off-base. There's Cohen Veteran network and there's so many off-base, just even localized resources available to you and share those resources with your unit, with your families and all.

Melissa Shaw:

Kristen, can you share with us how folks can find out more about the Fortify the Force initiative if they're interested in doing so?

Kristen Christy:

Yes. Thank you. It's fortifytheforces.org online. We take initiatives and one of the initiatives that we're working on now to bring up to DAF to get funding, we have an SBIR for it is Project Enigma and it's a 40-hour course training and it's teaching our military members skillful communication within their unit and also with the families. So if you have an initiative that you want the senior leaders in the military or in the department of the Air Force to know about, please go to our website, take a look at the initiatives. We work with LGBTQ families, we work on policy and law, single Airmen, we've got single parents. We take it all. And then again, if we can't do anything with it, we find another organization to level that up.

Melissa Shaw:

Thank you Kristen.

Kristen Christy:

Thanks.

Melissa Shaw:

Major Pantaleon, you're here today representing the FLAG program and we have not yet shared with the audience and those watching remotely this week how they can learn more about that program. Would you like to share contact information for it, please?

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

Yes. Man, it's super simple. It's www.dafflag.com, D-A-F-F-L-A-G dot com and from there you can get to all our social media, see what we're doing nowadays and if you're interested, I'll be down here at the front of the stage if you guys want more information. My pockets are filled with business cards, so got lots of QR codes for you.

Melissa Shaw:

The Air Force Association, as we mentioned earlier, has recently launched the F2 taskforce designed to help unify, sorry, unite forces and families. You can learn more about it by going to www.afa.org/F2. There are also a few of us here in the room today who represent that taskforce.

Melissa Shaw:

One thing that we haven't talked about on our Quality Life panel today is caregiving. Kristen, you referenced it briefly, but I'd like to share with this group and for anyone watching that that is represented on the F2 task force. We have representation from both Guard and Reserve families, active duty Air Force, active duty, Space Force, and caregiver families. And many of those overlap as is pretty common in our world. Not all of us fit into a nice neat box and that's the case with our task force members. If you have any questions about what AFA is doing, I'm here.

Melissa Shaw:

Kari Voliva from AFA is sitting in the front row and I'm sure she'd also be happy to answer some questions after our panel is done today. I think that it is pretty incredible that AFA is taking a leading stance and bringing quality of life issues to the front, not just of the conversations that are happening off camera, but the conversations that are happening here on these stages at these national conferences that are being recorded and that are being shared after the fact. With that in mind, before I pose our last opportunity to answer a question here, I do want to give a shoutout to Vance. The Vance Spouse Space Crew who are going to be watching together from the brand new Vance Spouse Space, a co-working space that's welcome to children and spouses and other loved ones on their base in their installation.

Melissa Shaw:

Those folks will be watching live on Friday and a viewing party and so thank you all for your support and AFA, thank you for your support of the Vance spouse space.

Melissa Shaw:

So we're down to just our last maybe two to three minutes here. Would you like to go down the line and just very briefly, if there's anything that you would hope that the folks who are watching from afar, the folks who are sitting in the room today from our Airmen and our Guardians up to our most senior leaders, is there anything that you would like to make sure that you say today that you want them to take home and remember as they move forward considering quality of life?

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

Of course, ma'am. I've always got something to say. So I have three groups of people that I really quickly want to talk to in the room today. I hope we have industry partners in this room today and to reiterate some of what Melissa said, all of your time here at AFA has been focused on your services and on your

products and how you can link that in to the DOD. I challenge you to look internal. I challenge you to look at the way that you hire, look at the way that you do your business practices and ask yourself, are you set up in a way that promotes military family employment for the senior leaders that we have here in the room? We know how much you love our Airmen and Guardians. We know the value you put into quality of life. What I would, from my very humble perspective, I would like to share, to take a look at the way that we take care of our families and view it like a weapon system. Our families are the bedrock for our operations so do we approach the way that we take care of our families and our quality of life with the same vigor that we do in terms of looking at weapon systems.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

And then for our Airmen, our Guardians and our loved ones in the room, oh my gosh, I love you all so much. Our heart is with you. I know that every day it is a challenge to go to work and to be lethal and I'm so proud of everything that you are doing and if at some point you are called to volunteer, there are so many options here on the stage for you guys to volunteer with but I am biased and if you want to join the FLAG, you come and you talk to me and I will give you a business card.

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

That's all I got, ma'am.

Kristen Christy:

She should have gone last. Where do I sign up?

Maj. Bridget Pantaleon:

You can do both.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

We have stickers.

Kristen Christy:

Oh, I love your energy. It's amazing. Action creates traction so I hope that you all leave this room today and find a resource, find a new resource to have in your back pocket, not just for you but for someone in your family, whether that's born into or created yourself. We're all family is what I consider it. Find a new resource, have that in your back pocket because you never know when you're going to come across someone, just like Chief Towberman said, "Tell your story and people are going to gravitate to you and they're going to come to you and ask questions and they are going to realize they are not alone." We are not alone. We've got to verbalize those stories and get those resources in our back pockets to have at the ready to be that battle buddy on life's emotional battlefield.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

Awesome. Thanks again to ladies up here and for the opportunity. Chief Bass said it earlier, our Airmen and Guardians are a competitive advantage. I can't prove it, I don't think our adversaries have organizations like the ones on this stage or senior leaders that allow the newest Airmen or Guardian in the force to provide input directly to them on how to make quality of life or readiness better for members and their families. And so I would just ask wherever you sit in your organization, you're a leader and I would just ask you to ask your teams to answer the question, what would make us more

ready? What would make our families more ready or ask people to complete the sentence, I could be more ready if. I don't have to tell everyone in this room that the ideas that Airmen across our force have are brilliance and if you cannot action those ideas at your levels and your organizations, please bring them to us to see if we can help.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Blakeman:

Thank you.

Melissa Shaw:

Thank you each of you for being up here today.

Melissa Shaw:

My final message for all of you in the room and for anyone who's watching from home is you are empowered. You have leaders who care, whether they're senior enlisted leaders, your first sure, your commander, folks above you leading you. They want to help, they want to make change. Family members want to help as well, but we won't know how we can help if you don't take advantage of your empowerment and share with us what those challenges are. As a former army spouse, I certainly never thought that a year into being a Space Force spouse, I'd be sitting on my second AFA stage in less than a year. I certainly feel empowered, and I hope that you do too.

Melissa Shaw:

When our Airmen and our Guardians embrace families as united together in our fight for airspace and cyber dominance, our entire air and space community does grow stronger.

Melissa Shaw:

My hope this afternoon, this morning, depending on where you are in the world watching, my hope is that each of you walk out of the room today or turn off your computer today, and you're asking yourself how you can contribute as a leader, as a loved one, as a member of our industry partners and that larger space and air community. How can you contribute to a culture where stronger families build stronger forces?

Melissa Shaw:

Thank you sincerely for being here today. Thank you ladies for joining me on the panel today. AFA, thank you for making this happen for us.