

Dr. Megan Springate:

Hi, everyone. Welcome to America250's Community Conversation with Military Families. With these conversations, we're going to engage with communities across the United States and around the world. Panelists and participants have the opportunity to share what the US Semiquincentennial means to them and their communities, and their hopes for the America250 commemoration and celebration. My name is Megan Springate, I'm the director of engagement here at America250. And I'm one of your co-moderators for today. Our other moderator is Dr. Carleen Carey, America250's director of public outreach and inclusion.

Dr. Megan Springate:

I've got a little bit of housekeeping before we get started. This conversation is being recorded and will be available on the america250.org website just shortly after we're done. Please use the Q and A function to ask questions, or to make comments during the panel and the discussion. And a reminder to all that America250 and these conversations are all nonpartisan. I'd like to give a shout out to Marcus, Mari, and Kara for keeping everything running behind the scenes. And thank you to our ASL interpreters, Diana and Jordan, also, for joining us. Before we meet our panelists, I'll give a brief overview of what America250 is, to help set the stage for the conversation. But first, let me introduce Scott Hommel, our acting CEO of the America250 Foundation, to say a few words. Scott, it's all yours.

Scott Hommel:

Okay, well, thank you, Megan. Thank you to everybody who made this possible. Good afternoon. As Megan said, my name is Scott Hommel. First, let me say that I'm a proud Marine veteran. And as Megan indicated, I'm the interim CEO of the America250 Foundation. So as we look towards 2026 and 250 years since the Declaration of Independence, here at America250, we are committed to facilitating the largest and most inclusive commemoration in our nation's history. As part of meeting this goal, we're hosting regular Community Conversations, just like this one. These are opportunities for people across the country and around the world to help us shape the 250th commemoration.

Scott Hommel:

We want to know what America250 can look like, how to connect with and be meaningful to all Americans, and what its legacy can actually be. Military communities play and have played such an important role in our nation's history. And military families have been crucial to supporting those in uniform. Just as serving in uniform brings its own perspectives, challenges, and rewards, so too does being a family member, however you define family. So I'm truly honored to welcome our panelists and all of you attending our Community Conversation with Military Families today. Thank you for your service, thank you for your support, and thank you for engaging with America250. I'd like to turn it now back over to Megan Springate. Thank you.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Great. Thank you, Scott. So a little bit about America250. It's very simple words, but it's a very complicated idea. And our purpose is to catalyze a more perfect union, and that is it embedded in everything that we do. You'll see we've got a mission to commemorate our 250th anniversary. By designing inclusive programs that inspire Americans to renew and strengthen our daring experiment in democracy. And our values, service, diversity, collaboration, respect, integrity, optimism, and imagination. And our themes that you will hear a lot of as we move forward over the next five years,

invite, involve, imagine, and inspire. And we invite you to learn more about America250 and what we're planning, by visiting us on the web at www.america250.org.

Dr. Megan Springate:

As Scott mentioned, the military, the families, their support networks, so important to everything that we're doing, part of everything that we're doing. And here are just some examples of the programming that we have that's begun or will continue, come out and continue over the next five years. We have Community Conversations like this one. Salute250, our initiatives honoring the service and sacrifice of America's veterans, military members, and their communities. The History of Article Series that will include content on military events and military folks. We have a Veteran, Military, and Family Members Advisory Council, and also the November Salute. And the November Salute for 2021 is a crowdsourced art installation. And a digitally-interactive photo mosaic that will highlight veterans, active-duty military, and reservists as part of the America250 Mosaic Series. And submissions for November Salute 2021 will open tomorrow at america250.org/november-salute. Okay.

Dr. Megan Springate:

So we've got our panelists here. I'd like to invite our panelists to introduce themselves, their affiliations, and a few words about military families from their perspectives. Major General Combs, would you care to start?

Major General Peggy Combs:

So yes, really very nice to be with everybody today. I really thank Scott for his opening remarks, very on point and very straight to the heart for our advisory council. For what we're really trying to accomplish as far as giving our America250 Commission some great recommendations as we start in this next year. And so it is quite a task, and I think quite a heavy lift for each of the advisory councils and the commission as a whole, to really reach out and engage Americans at all levels. And we're proud that we are focused on veterans and military families. And so I think we've got a really good challenge ahead of us, and a lot of great tasks ahead of us to do. So we look forward to these Community Conversations, and hearing from folks to advise the advisory council, right. As more of a communication platform, as we look at, "Here's our plan, or here's what we're coming up with recommendations." And then solidifying those based on a lot of great input that we hope to get from these Community Conversations.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Great. Thank you. I am going to go in order that people are on my screen. So Kathy, would you like to introduce yourself, your affiliations in a few words from where you sit as well?

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

Thank you, Megan. And thank you, Scott, and Carleen, and everyone involved with the America250 project. Very exciting for me to be part of this project. I think everyone who serves in the military and their families, we're very patriotic people. We love our country. We wouldn't do this work if we didn't. It doesn't really make sense to do this work if you don't feel that way about it. And so for us to be part of the building of this celebration, and part of the articulation of why it is that we are so moved by this country. That the idea of, in some ways, disadvantaging ourselves and our families by putting what this country needs from us first, why that animates us.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

So it's a privilege to be part of this. Blue Star Families is my organization. For those who may not be aware of it, we serve the currently serving Active Duty Guard, and Reserve wounded and transitioning service members and their families. We have chapters around the country, and our system is to listen, share, partner, and act. So I hope to be bringing in all of our military family members, transitioning family members in all of their beautiful diversity, in part of my role here. And I'm really honored to be serving with my co-council members, and delighted to be with each of them here today. Thank you.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Great. Thank you, Kathy. Jennifer, you are next on the screen.

Jennifer Dane:

Hello, everyone. My name is Jennifer Dane, and I'm the executive director and CEO of the Modern Military Association of America. And our organization is the nation's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer military and veteran nonprofit. Our membership is of about 85,000 members. We know that currently there's about 2.5 million LGBTQ veterans, and about a hundred actively serving. We also, like Blue Star Families, have chapters around the country and around the globe. First of all, thank you, Scott, Megan, and Carleen, and all the other panelists. It's only been about six years since same-sex marriage was even legal. America has been around for over 200 years. And finally being able to recognize families that look like my own, is something that as a kid, that I never imagined would happen.

Jennifer Dane:

I also served as an Air Force veteran under Don't Ask, Don't Tell. And being part of the LGBTQ community myself, I never knew that I would actually be recognized and be able to live my authentic self. So it is in our 250th year that's coming up, that I can say that we proudly serve with open service, and a history that goes all the way back to the revolutionary war. And I'm so excited to share that, and be on here, and really highlight the true strength that diversity does bring to this council. And I'm so honored to be welcomed to the table and have this conversation with you all.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Great. Thank you, Jennifer. Emily, last but not least. You're just down at the bottom of the screen.

Emily Dixon:

It's okay. Thank you. Hello to everybody. I'm very honored to be here, just like everyone else. I am also a former Air Force officer, veteran, and my husband is a active duty Air Force member as well. And between the two of us, we have about 20 years of combined service. So I'm just here representing military families as an active military spouse and family member.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Great, thank you. I'm so glad you all can join us. So I'm going to turn the conversation over to Dr. Carey to start. Carleen, it's all you.

Dr. Carleen Carey:

All right. Thank you, Megan. So let's get started with some really good questions, and let's really get some conversation going. First question, what do you see as the most significant opportunity that

America250 presents for military families? Feel free to unmute your mic, we're not going in any particular order.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

Okay, Carleen, I'll go ahead and jump in. I think it's an enormous opportunity for military families. One of the challenges that we face is that often our civilian neighbors don't know that we're there. Military families do a heavy lift for the country, but we're living in communities, not on installations. And we're often feeling a sense of isolation in those communities where we live. And our families surveys, we see that only 27% of our families feel a sense of belonging in the communities where they live. But we want to feel that belonging. And I think America250 gives us an opportunity to tell not only the story of what we do for the country, but the story of what all of us can do for this country.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

We all built this country, everyone who's ever been part of it. It's a DIY project. And the more we can share that spirit of self-creation, I think the closer that brings us to our neighbors. And by military families telling their stories, and telling how it's a piece of what happened throughout history. Military families did not used to be separate from the larger society. And when we had our bicentennial, military services widely shared across all sectors of society and all families, were likely to have someone who served. Only since the all-volunteer force since the bicentennial has that changed. This gives us an opportunity to tell that story, and to renew, I think, the connection of civilians to the military. And renew the connection of all of us to our country that is in line with the way we still live now. But I think it's an opportunity to expand it for the nation as a whole.

Jennifer Dane:

I completely agree with what Kathy said. And for us, I think it's really reexamining the hidden figures in our history. I mean, for us as the LGBTQ community, not only is it my goal and effort, but it's also to highlight the margins that we don't talk about. The minority representation that isn't always featured. And we talk about these great successes that are very heteronormative, but there are also so many folks that have done incredible things, and just live within the margins. And for us, when we talk about military families, for our community, we had partnerships and spouses that had to live in the shadows. Some of my really good friends, one of them had to be the nanny just to be able to live on base together. They had to be the friend. You had to make sure that you had two beds set up in your house to make sure that you weren't found out. Some of these stories of the marginalization that happens.

Jennifer Dane:

And also the ability to keep on going, and love our country because that is just what we want to do. And it's examining the otherness that is so incredible. And when we look at diversity of our country, it is so reflective within the service. And seeing our families as such a great strength in that is so incredibly important. And we talk about... Or at least I talk about, I hope we all talk about how diversity is just a force multiplier. And when we bring these incredible perspectives together, we know that we are stronger together with those voices. And having America250 focus on the military community and the military family community, we see that there is so much to gain from that. Whether that's our active-duty service members, our veterans, our spouses. Sometimes that they've had to sacrifice so much more than we will ever know for their partners in their military experience, that we never highlight. So it's just hearing those stories, and really recognizing that our military families are at the core of who we are as America. And how much they really mean to the American history and the American experience.

Emily Dixon:

I would agree with both what Kathy and Jennifer said. And add that for military members and families, especially just examining the history of our country during these celebrations, and our place and our service in that. I think we would all agree that we're highly patriotic people, not more than anybody else. But I think it just renews for us motivation, in a sense, for service. And just instills the pride that we already have. And like Jennifer said, willingness to go on, and carry on, and keep serving.

Major General Peggy Combs:

And this is Peggy. I really think there's also another critical lane of opportunity, if you will. And that is to engage both some of our veterans that perhaps don't really identify as proud veterans because of their injuries, and most of the injuries that you cannot see. And I don't know how we put more of a positive highlight on those veterans. And from a community standpoint, to say that we celebrate them that are injured. And a lot of it is the PTSD that has plagued our veterans of late. And veteran suicide rates that are through the roof because of those injuries. And I don't know how we do that yet, but I think there is an opportunity, through this celebration of service and sacrifice, to engage. And perhaps maybe re-pull those veterans in, that might feel like they're outside looking in.

Major General Peggy Combs:

And it's them, and then also engage in the communities. To say, "All veterans are not broken people. They're not broken. They have very positive things. They have hearts of service and sacrifice." And then to even highlight our family members that are their caregivers. And that, I think, is a special opportunity as we look at our veterans with disabilities. That may not be as out there in the public saying, "I'm a veteran and I'm proud of my service." Maybe more so hiding out, because they don't feel like they want to identify as a proud veteran. So I do think there's some opportunity there to maybe engage the larger community as well.

Dr. Carleen Carey:

Thank you, General. You guys have such great comments. I don't want to ask another question, I just want to ask you guys to go further on these ones. Because Kathy, what you said about belonging, and Jennifer, your family. And Emily, the heart of service. I mean, I look at my own family, my sister is a disabled Air Force vet. So she is actually now an early childhood special education teacher. So you're talking about a heart for service, it goes all the way through her career, right? But I'll move along and stop sharing family stories. All right, guys. So how can America250 bring the most awareness to veterans, active military members, and their supporting communities?

Jennifer Dane:

I suppose I'll start. I think one of the biggest things that we can bring is our narratives, our stories, and our histories. Well, there's a lot of perceptions about what we think the military looks like. A lot of times, whenever I say I'm a... Or identify as a veteran, or am even at the veteran-affairs facility, they ask if my husband was the one that served. Which is you've got to realize that there are so many people that served. And also, we live in a time where there are so many generations that we see as veterans. And really recognizing those experiences are so different. But the differences also make us such a stronger force, and such a stronger community. And really going back and highlighting, and really recognizing the service. Especially for those who served in Vietnam, for example, and really recognizing some of the trials and tribulations that were faced. But looking at what we've done to rectify those

situations, and how much progress we've really done as a country and as a culture to change those experiences.

Jennifer Dane:

And I think all that is creating this beautiful imagery. Sometimes of our stories, that are sometimes not as happy as we would like. But that show how much perseverance we've done. So much about how communities come together to support one another. Because there is such a great, great history of experiences that we don't ever get to hear, and we need to hear those. Because there are wonderful things that especially boost our families, all the work they've done for years. There's stories that need to be heard, and so much progress that's came out of just listening. Sitting down and simply listening to what families have experienced and what this looks like for the future. So that we don't have to go back and repeat some of the stuff we've done before, but we forward to the next 250 years. And say, "Wow. Next time we have this around for 500, what does that really look like?" Because we've got such an amazing path forward.

Emily Dixon:

I would agree in, of course, telling our stories. But further in that question, there's some more supporting communities. Highlight the community stories. A lot of times our military housing on the installation doesn't service the entire installation. And I would say that probably about 75% of us live off-base in our communities. And we go to public schools, we go to church, we work in the communities. And a lot of them will care for us greatly anytime a family member is deployed, make sure they care for you. But I would just also try to look for those good relationships between a military installation and the cities and towns that support them. Because we're oftentimes out in the middle of the country. We don't put a lot of airplanes right over top of large cities. So we're small-town America, and these communities around us, they're very supportive. And I think most of us would like to thank them for that support.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

I'm also really excited about the emphasis that the America250 team is putting on outreach, engagement, and inclusion. I think we have an opportunity with the technology that exists now, with the social media. By you reaching out to organizations, such as mine, and Jennifer, and others. To give the military-connected families themselves a chance to weigh in, this photo project you're doing, but I think so many other things. And we, I think, all can partner with you to let people use their own voice. And tell their own story, so that they have the chance to shape this thing, to feel that they are reflected in it. There's no kind of equity like sweat equity. When you put your own work into something, you feel like you own it. And I think we have that opportunity, over the next several years, to provide that for people.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

And one thing I'd like to mention is that I think the military-connected community, like every community, is very flawed and is full of flawed people, because that's how we were made. But because of the way we're structured, we do a better job than the community as a whole of caring about each other, and supporting each other through our differences. We are as diverse, if not more diverse than the larger society, in terms of race, religion, political ideology, gender expression. Even when you can include family members, ability and disability. And yet we don't hate each other. We can work with each other, we can support each other.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

Because what's more important to us than any piece of identity, is this idea that we're working together for a cause greater than self. And I think it's an opportunity for people to view our model. One of the examples I'd like to use is the Soldier of the Year identified two years ago was an urban, African-American liberal, who was nominated by his best friend, a rural white conservative. And the guy, when he nominated him, he said, "Everything about this guy drives me crazy, but there's not a better person I know." And I think that's the spirit that I would love us to be able to share better with this country.

Dr. Carleen Carey:

Well said indeed. General Combs, did you want to comment before we move on to the next question?

Major General Peggy Combs:

Yeah. I think as far as this awareness, if we go back to, "How do you make this awareness?" It's going to take definitely a campaign on the national level to bring awareness, and I'm not sure how we unite around that. And that will be something that the advisory council talks about. Whether it's historical events that we unite around and then there's some national articles, press, that thing to do this national awareness. And then it's got to go down, it's almost got to be a cascading effect through the states, and the tribes, and the territories. It's got to cascade all the way down to the communities. Wherein, "Okay. How are the communities doing that?" And I think through the council, and the diversity that's on the council, diversity as in the different organizations that are represented. We're going to have to ask all of them, "Hey, how do we best reach? How do we reach down into the communities?"

Major General Peggy Combs:

Because as you all talk about, your organizations, and the different chapters that you have throughout this great nation. How do we outreach to all of them? How do we do this as a very kind of a centralized theme, but very much a decentralized execution? So that the awareness is out there to say, "Hey, we are promoting this. We are looking to how we do share that spirit. How do we share that spirit? And how do we get even those that are in the remotest part of our nation to say, 'Hey we're celebrating service. We're celebrating service of the veteran. We're celebrating service of the families who support the service, and who are very much in the service without being paid. How do we do that?'"

Major General Peggy Combs:

And so I think all of you, definitely, as we start to really come together and make some recommendations. We really got to think about, "How do we unite with a specific kind of theme that then is decentralized for the various and diverse organizations that we have represented out there doing?" Because I think that's the only really real way to reach everyone, is to have all of those communities come together. And having maybe their different celebrations or different platforms by which everybody is reached. But it's definitely going to take an effort to do it, but I think it's a worthy undertaking, for sure. And it's going to be challenging as we all work through it. But it is definitely something we're going to have to really put a lot of skull work into. As we think about, "Gosh, how do we make sure every corner is reached?"

Major General Peggy Combs:

Because that's a great point about it just can't be the post camps, and stations, and bases. It has to be communities, there has to be huge community involvement. There has to be states, territories, tribes

behind it, and then maybe united under a national kind of campaign. So it's going to be definitely a great campaign plan to think about, and sorry to use the military term, but that's my history. So I just try to default to what we know, and it is what we know, is how to plan. And so hopefully with all the diverse voices that we have, and all of the organizations that we have, we're going to come up with, I think, some really great recommendations moving forward. To make sure that awareness is out there, and all of the opportunities we talked about can be folded into the larger plan and recommendations.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Great, thank you. Carleen, I'm going to jump in with some comments and questions from the audience.

Dr. Carleen Carey:

Please do.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Sure. So Kathy, we've got a shout-out in the chat to Blue Star Families. So I wanted to let you know that. A comment also, "Such a great opportunity to refresh and reinvigorate the narrative about military families. And invite the nation to better understand the role, contributions, and vision of the military family community. There is greatness in service at all levels." Which I think should just become a tagline somewhere. So that follows from the conversation that we've just had. And also following from that, we've got a question from our audience. And the question is, "How are you planning on including American Legion units and veterans in a retired community in the commemoration?" So if you're speaking from an advisory council position, if you want to speak to that, or the importance of those communities in this space, that would be great.

Major General Peggy Combs:

Yeah. I can absolutely speak to that from the advisory council. The National American Legion is represented on our advisory council. We do have a retired kind of organization as well, and I can't remember exactly the name of it. But I will tell you that. And so is our national VFW is on there, our VA is on there. I believe we have AMVETS as well, who have joined us. And just the diversity that's on the council through of those national organizations is how we're going to solicit the ideas of, "Okay, American Legion, for instance. What is the best way to engage? To ensure all of our veterans that are parts of your organization, or veterans in the communities where your organizations lie, and their families, how do we engage those folks?" Right?

Major General Peggy Combs:

And we're going to gather, I think, some great input from our folks that are on our council to tell us. Because each organization may be a little bit different. It may not be the same for all. I don't think there's any cookie cutter solution, as we say. I think that it's all about, "Hey, what works best for your organization? How do we do this? How do we promote it, and make aware of those opportunities within your own organization?" Because all of those VSOs, the veteran service organizations, all those, and all military-affiliated organizations have their own way to reach their membership. And what we would love to do, is for each and every one of those organizations to leverage their platforms to best engage their membership. And even those that may not be a member of the American Legion because they chose not to join. But maybe they're a veteran that is in that particular community that a post is at.

Major General Peggy Combs:

So how do we engage all veterans and their family members, not just the folks that are in the American Legion? And when I go back to there are still some family members, for instance, when we start really looking back in history. That somebody may say, "Hey, my great-great-great grandfather served in this particular conflict. And how do I get his story, because we've had it handed down through time?" How do we do that? And so I think that there are family members out there that are military affiliated, veteran affiliated, that may not belong to an organization. And so how do we particularly get them, and get their stories as we look towards really establishing the lead behind the residuals from America250? Which is, how do we capture all of that service and honor it moving forward? I hope that answered the question.

Dr. Carleen Carey:

It did. Well said, General Combs.

Emily Dixon:

I was just thinking, as Megan knows, I'm a budding, aspiring archivist. So I'm sitting here thinking of this, and the whole time reaching out. That there could be a potential for some sort of oral-history project. Or something you can put on your website, where people could submit an electronic form, where they could tell their stories. And then we could find some way to save them all, share them all, highlight them all. Not just from the military community, but every community that you're reaching out to. Just a way for them to tell their story.

Jennifer Dane:

And I also think, obviously we have what they call the big six for veteran service organizations. And also when you look at those organizations, they're wonderful and they really represent a lot of the force. But also, their organizations look like the population they served. So we need to make sure that we reach the margins. And we say, "Look, we could have this..." For lack of a better word, "This dominant narrative of the white experience." We have to look beyond that and say, "Service members don't always have to look like that. They don't always have to be the men that serve. They're the women, they're the LGBTQ, they're the African Americans, they're the Indigenous population. There's Alaskan Native." There's so many other things that when we talk about, we've got to reach not only those organizations, but into the depths of what other experiences look like. Because they're just as important and don't get talked about as much.

Jennifer Dane:

And also the spouses. I mean, I think we leave them off every time. Well, not every time, but a lot of times we leave them off, and we don't talk about how they're under employed. Why? Because they cared so much for this nation. They put their careers on hold, they put their lives on hold. And we really need to talk about those things, too. And talk about how much service does happen on the other side of the fence as well. And the children, what was their experience? And especially for me, as a person that doesn't have any family experience, I was a first-generation service member. For me, I just had a calling, and we need to talk about and incorporate those. So not only are we reaching these big organizations, but we really need to go on the ground and say like, "Let's talk about these experiences that don't always get recorded in history. Talk about the ones that aren't in the archives."

Jennifer Dane:

Whether that's because in the 1960s, women became historians for the first time, really. And they professionalized into historians. But we really have to go back and talk about those experiences. Because especially with the LGBTQ community, we still know that 148,000 of those were discharged dishonorably that haven't had their stories recorded. And we need to talk about that, and how they still don't have access to some of the things that they deserve. And there are more communities, there are things that happened that we need to recognize. Not only the good history, but sometimes the bad history that we don't need to forget.

Jennifer Dane:

Like also somebody asking a question, during World War II, there was Japanese internment camps. And we need to talk about that. We need to talk about how some of the harms that happened, because we have to learn. We have to learn how great our nation is because of the past we've learned from. So those are some of the things that I think that we really need to dig deep in, and make sure that we're encompassing the diversity and the inclusion of every single person. And not just the majority of those, the majority of the voices that we see represented in these large organizations.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

I'd love to pick that up and follow up after you, Jennifer. And I really appreciate the comments. Blue Star Families is in the middle of a major racial equity and inclusion initiative, that we launched last year to look at the experiences of military families of color. And in fact, no one has ever looked at the experiences of military families of color, or even asked questions about it. So we find that that's a very exciting opportunity, not only for us within the service, but I think for the nation as a whole. 20, 30 years ago, our military was really not very diverse. It was vast majority was white, and vast majority was heterosexual, and vast majority was male. Our military, especially when you include military families, is extraordinarily diverse today. About 45% are not white. But if you look at mixed-race families, and Blue Star Families for the first time has asked about mixed-race families. The DOD does not ask the question and it hasn't been asked otherwise.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

In our most recent survey, 23% of military families describe themselves as being mixed race, in that they had an immediate family member who was a different race than they were. So if you look at service members themselves who are from diverse backgrounds, and then you add people who have family members, immediate family members who are diverse background, we're a majority-diverse military. We're in the middle of a military families of color needs assessment. In fact, today is the last day of that research study, that we'll be releasing findings from later this year and into early next year.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

So I'm very excited that we can bring those findings to this study. We also have hired 11 fellows who are from military families of color, to provide outreach and representation in the field. Because our work has also showed that military families of color are disproportionately unlikely to be aware of resources and support that's available to them. And that goes back to what Jennifer was talking about, about the disproportionate staffs and leadership of many military and veteran support organizations being white. So I think bringing this lens to this, our population, it is really important, and-

Dr. Carleen Carey:

Indeed. I think a couple of the things that you highlighted, oh my gosh, I would like to talk to all of you personally now. But I can't, I have to move on to the next question. But you guys have given me a really wonderful segue into our next question. Which is, are there any historical moments or stories that we should highlight as America250? Again, recognizing that history can be both triumphant and traumatic at the same time to different communities.

Jennifer Dane:

Well, I guess I'm going to jump in again. I think because of my organization, because of who I support, obviously for me, it's really highlighting the experiences of LGBTQ military families and family members. In our history that has been somewhat archived, but most of the time unfounded for a lot of our history. And for me, I always believe that, especially with social justice, if there are still people that aren't free, then none of us are free. So it's also talking about all the other marginalized communities. And I think we need to hear those, and all the stories that don't get mainstream headlines on the media. I mean, so many things that we've seen in the military, the military is such a great incubator of wonderful ideas.

Jennifer Dane:

I mean, even for same-sex marriage, I don't know if you all know. But the Department of Defense was the first to actually allow all couples to go and get married before it was legal actually across the United States. So they actually gave like two weeks lead for folks to go get married if you weren't living in that. So, I mean, great progress. Although the institution of the military is very conservative, the ideas of progress are revolutionary. I mean, look at the integration of service interestingly, fact is they were the first to also implement seatbelt laws. I mean, so interesting little tidbits everywhere, that we actually need to look at the military and say, "Wow, you're doing a wonderful job." Especially with our families, and in different communities, the military is the leader.

Jennifer Dane:

And before I jump off, I just also want to say that because my community does support the transgender community, it is important to note that the Department of Defense is the number one employer for transgender individuals out of anybody in the United States. So with that, you also say that they're two-and-a-half times more likely to serve than their cisgender counterparts. So we need to really talk about those, and say, "Wow, these are amazing things, amazing milestones, and amazing history that we have to talk about, that we have to recognize." And I'm so excited about this, about the progress that we have, and how much we're seeing come to fruition. And also about America's 250th birthday.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

And to jump onto what Jennifer was saying, we were the first place to have paid childcare in the workplace. The child development centers were the first place that happened in American society. So I think there are some really interesting things there. I think another thing that would be very interesting to highlight, is we have so many families who have deep generational military service. And those are really beautiful and moving stories to tell, because they can tell the story of America, and their military engagements, and their global engagements, through the lens of human beings' experiences from generation to generation. And this is true across races and across regions. So I think that that would be a really, I think, moving way for us to tell the country's story.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

And I think that some other landmark things would certainly be the first time women were allowed to serve in combat. It's really transformed our military, I think, in ways that few people outside the military can understand. And the Naval Academy, I think, is 30% female in their entering class. It's hard to explain what a difference that makes. So some of these other, I think, firsts are worth highlighting.

Emily Dixon:

I think that, I mean, obviously when we're talking about the military community, I think most of our major moments are America's historic moments. The wars that we have fought in, and the ways that we have been there for our country. But I was thinking of how military service, like members and their families, how they have been a part of world events. Thinking of families that are stationed overseas. We were stationed in Germany for a couple of years. And one of our friends there, talking about generational families, she had lived there as a child when her parents served. And her mother talking about German Marks and the fall of the wall. And so just where were we when not necessarily American events happened, but global events happened? And how that might have impacted our families and our times while we were serving overseas.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

Yeah, and just to throw in. An interesting thing is that the American that most people across the globe is most likely to have met is a service member.

Dr. Carleen Carey:

That is awesome, and a true testament to the power of our service members, right? That that American GI shows up in a lot of foreign films, because that's the way a lot of people encounter Americans. General Combs, did you want to comment?

Major General Peggy Combs:

Yeah. As far as all of the history and the things that we were looking at, "Hey, how do we honor service through history and sacrifice through history?" We are putting together, for a discussion with our advisory council in September, the... And I did not realize till we started doing some research on how many actual commemorative events there are throughout history, and celebrating diverse groups of folks. I mean we always have had our EO kind of events that go on with each month that honors different diversity, and race, and genders that are in the service. But it goes beyond that. Things like, okay, there is an anniversary, for instance, for the code talkers that helped throughout World War I, World War II. Our Native Americans that helped do that communication that was so critical to winning.

Major General Peggy Combs:

And so some of those kinds of events that we are uncovering, along with what you all have just said here, those are things we're trying to capture. So when we start back up with the advisory council, we'll send out what we have researched and found as far as those anniversaries, and foundings of, and those kinds of contributions. So that everybody can fill in. Everyone can fill in, "Hey, well, let's add this one, let's add that one." And then let's really take a look at it and say, "All right." When we start talking about a national campaign of maybe public-service announcements or public service. How do we get those out there to say, "Hey this is..." And some of these anniversaries that we're uncovering are things that we've never really dug into before.

Major General Peggy Combs:

Not that we haven't recognized the contributions, but we really haven't dug into and recognized that there is an anniversary and there is actually a date associated with that in history. And so we are looking at that now, and starting to get this calendar of those on there. So it'll be wonderful once we can get that as a skeleton out to everyone, and then everyone can start filling in those other things. Some of those that you all just mentioned, that may or may not be on the calendar because they're just not on there yet. And so I think it's going to be great to get all of those together and then to say, "Okay, how do we honor each and every one of those?" Because it is a testament to the diversity of service. And that is something that is definitely worthy of highlighting and saying, "Hey, look at, again, diverse people with all hearts of service and sacrifice. And so how do we get that out as a public-service kind of thing?"

Major General Peggy Combs:

So that's what we were looking at initially to go as a basis for this question of, "What historical events do we want to honor?" And in my opinion, it's all of them. It's all of them, and just our challenge is capturing them all. And so that's why it'll be a great exercise to get a whole advisory council to go, "Okay, let's fill this in. This is a skeleton, fill it in. Put in what you think, and then let's categorize. And how do we get those out there? How do we get the stories out?" That's going to be the challenge, is getting those stories out. And filling in with stories, as Emily said, fill in with some of those stories.

Major General Peggy Combs:

And I think that that would just be awesome to put a face to the name, put a face to the history. Tell those stories that are relevant today and of yesterday. Maybe it's a great-granddaughter of somebody who served that tells a story. And how do you fill all that in to not only just say, "Hey, today was the anniversary of the..." I don't know, "First female in combat, or first female that graduated from West Point," or whatever? But how do we fill that in and really make it relevant to honor that service?

Dr. Megan Springate:

Thank you. I've got a comment coming in from our audience, just noting, Kathy, to follow up on what you were talking about with doing the diversity and inclusion, right? Even asking those questions of families, military families. We have a comment, "This is the Sons of the American Revolution, is now beginning to dig into the histories of individuals, family histories, of African, Muslim, and Asian family stories that were part of the revolution." So it looks like the work is going on in many different organizations, and that is excellent news. I have a question, also, that follows up from the stories that we want to tell, and how do we... Right? The question you just asked.

Dr. Megan Springate:

What do we need to be aware of? What do we need to do? How do we talk about and share these stories, while also being aware that they might be traumatic, right? Particularly underrepresented stories. The question is specific about underrepresented stories, but I think anybody who served may have some traumatic... Right? That that is just a traumatic thing for them to think about. So the question is, "How do we be cautious that these stories might be traumatic for members of the communities for whom those stories belong to? For example, sharing impacts of Don't Ask, Don't Tell on service members, veterans, and family members." But I think it's also a larger question of, what do we need to be aware of when we're telling these stories? Jennifer, I'm looking at you.

Jennifer Dane:

Okay. So for me, I think having the stories told by individuals that experienced that is number one. I think a lot of it is it comes with healing. Like I shared, I served under Don't Ask, Don't Tell. I actually was investigated under Don't Ask, Don't Tell as well. And it's actually just showing that we look just like you. And there is, I mean, obviously trauma will likely come from some of these stories. And there's going to be times whenever we should focus on mental health and wellness, because that is part of the story. And just being there and being accessible. Because I mean, there are so many other... Even like women veterans, or spouse and children. I mean, we all have different areas where we may have experienced trauma or marginalization in any facet.

Jennifer Dane:

But I think that when we talk about these, we have to be ready for almost like this reckoning of our souls. And one of the things our organization is trying to do, where we're working with Congress folks to make sure that, for our community, an apology is made at least. To basically just say like, "Look, this did happen, but this is how we move forward. We can't we can't go back and change the past, unfortunately, but we can make sure that this doesn't happen again." And highlighting those that had done such critical work to... For me, as an executive director, I get to be here whenever amazing progress is made for our community. But that doesn't mean that I was the leader our the organization. There are many other folks that need to be recognized for all their hard work on the back end. Because it is only because of their advocacy and support, especially those that were allies in the fight for equality and justice, that actually laid the groundwork for me to be here today.

Jennifer Dane:

And I'm sure that can be said of many other communities of the margins that we're recognizing. But to say is there is going to be some, really some things that are traumatic that will come up. But it's also being open, and ready, and just willing to listen to that. Because there is healing, and justice, and peace that comes out of listening and understanding. And just being there to hear what happened.

Emily Dixon:

I think you tell the hard stories with the typical disclaimers that these are traumatic, they may be. But couple them with the positive stories, couple them with the progress. Say, "This is what happened. Service members coming home from World War I and having shell shock." But then finally putting a name to PTSD and service, and treatment of that. With Jennifer, and all those that identify with her, the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. So, "This is what happened. This is how we've remedied that, or how we're working to fix these things, how we're going forward." And how we've talked about the military community being a model for the greater society. Say, "We're doing these things, we can all do these things. Not to cover over the trauma, but to provide hope, and progress, and a way forward."

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

I think it's a very profound question. And in many ways, these are spiritual questions. When you agree to serve in the military, you agree to expose yourself to trauma. I was not from a military family. I married my husband before 9/11. And when my husband invaded Iraq, when he walked from a place of safety in Kuwait wearing a biological-chemical weapon suit, because we thought that Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons then. Into a place where he very well might not come home to me and our small children, I couldn't believe we were doing it. I mean I'm a lawyer, we don't have to do that. But we were doing it, and why? And it's because we think that there are things that matter even more than that risk of harm that we are exposing ourselves and our families to.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

Harm comes and trauma comes, it's part of the human experience because that's the kind of animal we are. It happens in all of our families, this happens in all of our situations. So we have to be able to experience that with compassion, both for ourselves and for the people who share those stories. But not think of it as something that reduces our cup, it's just part of the meal. And I think that's a challenge sometimes for those of us who do this work. That the goal isn't to create a world where no one is ever cruel to anyone else again. We would love that to be the fantasy, but the reality is, is that we're just trying to do our best. So we have to accept the trauma, and that people will feel it, people will express it. And we have to receive that experience, or give the ability to express our own. But do it, I think, with compassion for ourselves and others as part of the whole.

Major General Peggy Combs:

Yeah, I think I echo everybody's thoughts in that stories are tough, history is tough, but we have to tell the stories. And for some, as like Jennifer said, that might actually bring healing. It might be hurtful at first, but it might bring healing as it's thought through, as it's done. So I just think we just have to tell the stories, and a lot might not be all sugar and honey. But they need to be told because it is part of history, and you can't rewrite history to only the good stuff. It has to be the history is the history. And I do agree that as you look at the history of DOD with the groundbreaking integration, diversity, recognition of diversity. And it is because of the hearts of service. I mean it's because it's an inclusive... And there's a bond there that just says, "Hey, this is about service."

Major General Peggy Combs:

And so I think if the stories are told in that way, although there were challenges along the way. And there are challenges associated with each and every group as our great military came to be this melting pot of diversity for the nation. And to show how every group can contribute to the defense of the nation. I just think it is going to be hard, but history is what history is. And I think if it's told through the stories of those who lived it, I just think that can't you sugarcoat it, it just has to be told. So I agree with all of you in saying, "Let's tell the story."

Major General Peggy Combs:

And the positive thing about it is, as even, I think Jennifer, you highlighted earlier, it's perseverance, it's resilience. Because of love of country, because of wanting to be something bigger than yourself. Wanting to contribute to this great nation and the protection of freedom and liberty for everybody. And so I just think we can tell it in that way without offending anyone. So I really do think it's not spinning a story at all, but it's the art of how in context we tell the story.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Great, thank you. So we've got some comments and questions in the chats and the Q and A functions here, and there are some that follow up on this. And so I'm going to present them as a group, and then ask if anyone has any contributions or just conversation they want to have around those. So one from the chat says, "If anything, there is resilience in facing the hard things. If I had to say anything, I just don't want to forget those we've lost, no matter how that manifests."

Dr. Megan Springate:

Another comment is around raising public awareness for veteran support and recovery. And also a question about educating the public how much is sacrificed by those that serve. "Even if there is no physical or emotional damage, just giving up the rights to their own lives for the terms of service is a huge sacrifice." So I think it's very similar to the question we just had, but these questions also speak to the everyday lives. Not just what we think of as history, but the everyday lives of folks. And maybe you can speak to ways that those stories can also be amplified and told through America250.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

I occasionally teach a course at the graduate level called *The US Military, What Civilian Leaders Need to Know*, for public policy students. And people really don't know very basic things about the military, and they need to. Because not only do they elect our officials who choose our budgets, and our wars, and our engagements. But they also have military-serving people and veterans in their communities, and they need to serve them through their schools, and through their housing programs, and through all those other ways. People do not realize that there's a different legal system for people in the military than there are for other Americans. That you give up many freedoms. The freedom to express your personal opinion, the freedom to express certain political opinions, some freedom of gathering, in order to serve. You certainly give up the right to choose where you live, and to choose whether or not you put yourself into harm's way.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

Many civilians are actually unaware of that. So if there is an opportunity through America250 for us to help people actually understand what the basics are, what the sacrifice is about military service. Their orders, if you don't follow them, you go to jail. People often will say, "Well, why did you agree to do X?" Because you have an order and to not agree to do X means you go to jail. But not that you wouldn't agree to do it, that because that's the whole deal. You're saying, "I'm not going to make choices for myself and my family, I'm going to do what the mission requires." So I think that would be a beautiful thing if America250 gave us a venue for teaching Americans what our military is and does. Most people aren't aware that we do stability operations. That only one out of eight people are combat trained, and that the other missions are this enormous variety of missions. They don't know where we are in the world. So there's a real opportunity there to teach.

Jennifer Dane:

Yeah, and I totally agree with what Kathy just said. I mean, there's so much knowledge that needs to be gained about what the military looks like, what that really stands for. And I think one of the things about the military is we go into communities, and it's seen as like this ripple effect that we are everywhere. Whether we're stationed there at the time, or whether we stay there as veterans, or stay there as families, there's a common experience that is shared in most all communities, that we're there. And as a veteran, sometimes for me, whenever people say, "Thank you for your service." To me, that's, at least as a veteran, it's awkward. So just saying like recognizing that it's a fact. Like, "I just served my country. I did my job. I put on the uniform and I served."

Jennifer Dane:

And also just sitting in that feeling of, "America thanks me for my service, but for me, it was just a duty. It was ingrained in me to serve the country." And just recognizing that there are so many folks that have served and so many families that are there. And just really what that looks like as we raise our kids and as we go into communities. And I can tell you, there are so many laws and policies that are made that

are from the minds of military members who have either left the service, and I like to call it my second service. Because in nonprofit worlds, I mean, it's all heart, and soul, and dedication for sometimes working those hours. But a lot of things that do come from our military members, and like Kathy said, a lot of our missions.

Jennifer Dane:

One of my missions that I really loved was we did humanitarian and disaster-aid relief. That was probably the most near and dear to my heart, that we actually... We're not always going into boots-on-the-ground, but we're also going to do aid, and go in and help community, but have community building. And we even trained some of the greatest services in the world, too. And our partner nations are so important, and also engaging across different service branches that we support. Especially, for example, like the UK. In our organization, we've been working really closely with them because they also had a gay ban on service.

Jennifer Dane:

So what does that look like for the cooperation of other military services that make us stronger? Because our communities in the United States are wonderful, but whenever we go and we work with partner nations, then we get to see the best come out in the community. And whenever we're supporting one another, it's just so magical. And talking about those experiences, too. Talking about what we see overseas, and how much culture we bring back with us that we get to learn, that otherwise we wouldn't. So there's so much opportunities for cross collaboration that looks like an international space. That looks like crossing these divides that we put up for ourselves, and just seeing the goodness in all of us. Because we may be US-centric, especially for America250, but our experience ripples across the globe into every area. And I think that's really important, that we reach out and encompass everyone in this idea of celebrating the great history of our nation.

Emily Dixon:

Kind of related, and not just thinking back of other things to celebrate. Thinking about technological and scientific achievements that come out of the military. My background is in weather, and the Air Force was the first one to issue a tornado warning anywhere, before the National Weather Service did. And our Mercury 7 astronauts were service members, they weren't the civilian astronauts that we have today. Creating the internet, the basis of that comes out of the military. So just all the ways that we've given back, not just physical fighting, presence overseas, serving in battles and wars. Just the things that we do every day for our country.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

The internet, GPS. Yeah.

Dr. Megan Springate:

General, any thoughts before I turn it back over to Carleen for our next question and last question?

Major General Peggy Combs:

Yeah. I would just say those were great comments from our audience that is listening. And absolutely thank you for saying, "Hey, a lot of folks don't understand what service is and what those families sacrifice, and we need to highlight that." And that is something, definitely as we look at again, how do

we do this in our national campaign? How do we talk about that? How do we highlight it? And it's definitely, I've got a huge note on that.

Major General Peggy Combs:

And I think, was it you, Emily? It's because I can't see any of you, so I wasn't sure if Emily talked about the significant contributions of the military to technology and other things that everyone takes for granted now. And so those are things that we're definitely trying to capture on this timeline, too. So things like that, that do highlight and educate, I think the venue for education. And I think Kathy, you talked about... I think it was you, Kathy, because like I said, I can't see. So I think this notion of, how do we, through our campaign, use stories, use history to educate and really raise awareness for service and sacrifice of veterans and their families?

Dr. Carleen Carey:

Wonderful question, General Combs. I love it. I'm looking forward to the work that you guys are going to do on advisory council. And some of the recommendations you're going to provide us to really get at the heart of that question. And make sure that all Americans understand that military services is its own distinct and special experience, it's not like anything else. Just as a final wrap-up question, I wanted to ask, what do you hope to see for America's future in 2026 and beyond? And you can feel free to unmute your mic as you will.

Emily Dixon:

Based on a lot of the things that we've highlighted today, I think I would just like to see, I don't want to say more, but continued cooperation if we're working together to solve our problems. We're having this Community Conversation now to have conversations in our greater community. Open doors to our neighbors and lament that nobody sits out in the front yard anymore, they're all in the backyard. I think I would just like to see a greater sense of togetherness. And that is one thing that is very great about the military community. We are small, we are a tight knit. There are some people that are going to be left out and feel on the sidelines. But I think as a whole, just very tight-knit. And so I think just cooperation, getting out there, meeting people, learning the stories of our fellow citizens.

Kathy Roth-Douquet:

I think that's really well said, Emily, and I would certainly echo it. I love the mission here of this effort to create a more perfect union. And I think that it is that idea that America doesn't exist out of the ether, it didn't rise from the dew, it took people working on it. And each generation gets called to do that again. And for us to feel that we have to do this, and we have to do this by listening to each other, and caring about each other. And realizing that we're all in the same little lifeboat together, we can't all row in different directions. We have to try to pull together for that better future. And so I hope that this effort can help take us there.

Jennifer Dane:

And for me, when looking at the future, especially in our community, there's still so many uphill battles for the LGBTQ community. And for one of those examples is there's still a barrier to enter service if you are intersex or if you are a person living with HIV. And even if it's not detectable, you cannot serve. Or if you're nonbinary or gender nonconforming, there's no regulations, there's no uniforms for you. So where does that put you whenever you really have a commitment to service, and you are capable, and you are qualified, but you fit in the margins? I would like to see that expanded, and see what that looks

like whenever we have a commitment to including everyone in this voluntary service that wants to serve. Because at the end of the day, if you are capable and qualified, there should be no barrier that remains in place for you to be able to serve your country and have a calling.

Jennifer Dane:

And that also expands into making sure that the military, and actually I would like to see the whole country form together and make sure that we are on the forefront of equity, inclusion, and justice. That whenever we see that there's a gap in learning and understanding, like the wonderful work of Blue Star Families on this racial equality. Making sure that we talk about that, and we highlight it, and there is people that are supporting this. Because those folks are simply left out, not for any other reason but not asking those questions and making sure that there's a voice that's heard.

Jennifer Dane:

And just making sure that that in 2026, whenever we hit the 250th, that we're including more voices, more experiences. And highlighting the great progress that not only have we achieved, but whatever is ahead. Because those stories are so magical and so amazing. And it's what makes our country how great it is today, is because we are all stronger whenever we support each other, we come together, and we all have a seat or a voice at the table. Or if that table isn't big enough, we just forget about the table. And we just make a space where all of us can be seen, and all of us can be heard, and nobody is left in the margins. So that's what I hope as we move into the 250th, that we look at.

Dr. Megan Springate:

Thank you all. And it looks like General Combs has lost her connection, but I just want to put up a screen here. We want to continue the conversation with our panelists, and with our folks who are in attendance and attending. Thank you so much for taking the time, and speaking to us and to our communities about military families. I look forward to continuing the conversation with you all. And again, many, many thank yous. And yeah, enjoy the rest of your week. Thank you so much, everyone.