
The Ecological Context of Chronic School Absenteeism in the Elementary Grades

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Chronic school absenteeism among elementary school-age students is gaining attention from researchers and policymakers because of its relationship to long-term negative educational outcomes. Current literature on effective interventions, however, is limited in terms of the number of studies that have found even marginally effective interventions, the lack of clarity on the interventions being studied, and the connection between the intervention studied and the factors contributing to poor attendance. In response to these gaps in the literature, this study examined the following three research questions: (1) What factors are related to chronic school absenteeism for children in grades K–5 participating in a truancy intervention program? (2) What are the key elements that make up the caseworker intervention component of the program? and (3) How does the caseworker intervention fit with the identified related factors? Interviews were conducted over a two-month period with community agency staff working in the truancy intervention program who were able to provide insight into both the factors related to chronic absenteeism and the interventions that are being used. Results demonstrate that chronic absenteeism is related to a multilevel ecology of factors and suggest that an equally complex ecologically based intervention model is needed.

KEY WORDS: *chronic school absenteeism; community caseworker interventions; ecological framework; school social work*

Chronic absenteeism from school has been defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year (Chang & Romero, 2008). Although chronic absenteeism is frequently discussed as a problem for secondary school students, researchers, policymakers, and educational leaders are beginning to more closely examine the issue among elementary school-age students, defined here as students in kindergarten through fifth grade (grades K–5) (Carroll, 2013; Chang & Romero, 2008; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004; McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004; Rhodes, Thomas, Lemieux, Cain, & Guin, 2010; Romero & Lee, 2008, 2007; Thornton, Darmody, & McCoy, 2013). The National Center for Children in Poverty, using nationwide data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort, found that over 11 percent of children in kindergarten and 9 percent of children in first grade are chronically absent (Chang & Romero, 2008). Research has shown that chronic absenteeism in early grades is associated with lower academic achievement in later grades (Chang & Romero, 2008; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), chronic absenteeism in later grades (Romero & Lee, 2007), and high school dropout (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Current literature on chronic absenteeism in young children has identified multiple contributing factors, including family mobility (Blazer, 2011; Chang & Romero, 2008), living with a single parent (Romero & Lee, 2008), mental health problems (Blazer, 2011; Carroll, 2013, Chang & Romero, 2008; Reid, 2008), parental unemployment (Romero & Lee, 2008), lack of parental understanding about school policies and priorities (Blazer, 2011), and family poverty (Chang & Romero, 2008; Reid, 2012; Romero & Lee, 2008; Thornton et al., 2013; Zhang, 2003). In this study we apply Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological systems theory as a framework for understanding and analyzing the multiple influences on chronic absenteeism in the early grades. Bronfenbrenner's original framework presents levels of environmental context, the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, as a structure for understanding development. The microsystem refers to the contexts and relationships in which the individual directly interacts; the mesosystem contains the relationships among the different microsystems in which the individual participates; the exosystem involves settings in which the individual does not participate but which have an impact on the individual; and the macrosystem refers

to the cultural, political, and economic environment in which the individual lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's original theory, as well as later expansions on the theory, have been applied in current research on the etiology of child maltreatment (MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011), but there has been limited application to chronic school absenteeism, despite the fact that, in many jurisdictions, chronic school absenteeism is considered to be a form of child maltreatment, often referred to as "educational neglect."

In terms of effective interventions for chronic absenteeism in elementary students, the literature is significantly limited (Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012), both in the number of studies that have attempted to evaluate interventions and in the number of studies that have identified even marginally effective interventions. A Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review of interventions for chronic absenteeism found that across the 28 studies reviewed, attendance improved by an average of 4.69 days at posttest, but in the majority of studies the mean rates of attendance at posttest were still below 90 percent, the typical definition for chronic absenteeism (Maynard et al., 2012). The authors noted that "the majority of studies . . . lacked adequate descriptions of the interventions, making replication of the intervention difficult" (Maynard et al., 2012, p. 7). In addition to the lack of clarity on the interventions being studied, much of the current literature on the effectiveness of interventions for school absenteeism neglects to identify any of the factors contributing to the poor attendance of the students in their studies (Lawrence, Lawther, Jennison, & Hightower, 2011; McCluskey et al., 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). If an intervention was only modestly successful, it is often difficult to know whether the intervention itself was problematic or whether it was a poor fit with the underlying causes of the absenteeism, or both.

In response to these gaps in the literature, the current study presents the results of a qualitative study of a county-administered chronic-absenteeism intervention program in a large urban-suburban county in the upper midwestern United States, with the purpose of improving the understanding of the factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism in the elementary grades and, based on the knowledge of these factors, assessing the fit of one stage of the current intervention model, the community caseworker intervention. This program involves a multistage model, with increasing support being provided as the severity of

absenteeism increases. In the first stage, when a student has six unexcused absences, the school makes a referral to the county attorney's office, which then sends a letter to the family, informing them of the compulsory school attendance laws and inviting them to a parent group meeting (PGM). A PGM is a multiple-family meeting in which a social worker or attorney from the county explains attendance laws, consequences of continued absences, and services available to families. Attending a PGM is optional for families. If a child then receives three additional unexcused absences (nine total), the school initiates stage 2: It reports the student to the county again and the county sends a referral to a contracted community-based social services agency, which assigns a caseworker from that agency to attempt to contact the family. If contact with the family is made, the caseworker invites the family to participate in case management services and explains some of the resources and supports that they are eligible to receive. Participation in the case management intervention is also optional for families. If the family agrees to participate, the caseworker has 90 days to work with the family to improve the child's attendance. If a child receives six additional unexcused absences (15 total), the third (nonoptional) stage of intervention is triggered: The school re-refers the family to the county attorney's office and, if the child is under the age of 12, the case is immediately sent to the child protection services intake unit for possible child protection assessment. If the child is over age 12, the case is sent to a truancy attorney at the county for possible court petition.

This study focuses on stage 2 of the intervention, the community caseworker intervention, in which families whose children have received nine unexcused absences are offered community-based case management to address barriers that may be affecting the child's school attendance. Interviews were conducted with community caseworkers and supervisors working in the program to address the following three questions: (1) What factors are related to chronic school absenteeism for children in grades K-5 participating in the county-sponsored truancy intervention program? (2) What are the key supports and services that make up the community agency caseworker intervention for families with children in grades K-5? (3) How do the supports and services provided through the community caseworker intervention fit with the identified contributing factors?

METHOD

A qualitative design using thematic analysis was chosen based on the need to gain a deeper understanding of the complex factors contributing to absenteeism, the specific engagement and intervention strategies used by community-based agencies, and the goodness of fit between the two. Institutional review board approval was sought and granted under exempt status.

Participants

Participants were chosen using purposive sampling and included 15 caseworkers and eight supervisors employed at nine community-based agencies contracted by the county to serve families with students in grades K–5. Four of the agencies were culturally specific, meaning they worked predominantly with families from a specific ethnic community with a significant representation in the population in the county (specifically Latino, Hmong, Somali, and Native American). The remaining five agencies worked with families from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Twelve of the 15 workers were female and three were male; the supervisors were split evenly by gender. Depending on the agency, caseworkers had either an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree, primarily in human services-related fields, and experience with case management or youth work ranging from three to 20 years. Community agency caseworkers and supervisors were chosen as the informants for this study because of their familiarity with both the nature of the problem and the specifics of the intervention.

Data Collection

Thirteen interviews and three focus groups were conducted at each agency during November and December 2014 by the first author, using a semistructured interview format created by the authors. The interviews and focus groups were recorded on a portable recording device and then transcribed by the first author. Focus groups were conducted if an agency employed more than one caseworker. Examples of questions asked include the following: “What do you see as the main reasons for why kids in grades K–5 in the families with whom you work are missing school?” “What are the common interventions and services you provide to families?” and “What services or supports do you think are most and least helpful in improving the attendance of children in grades K–5?”

Data Analysis

A literature review was conducted prior to data collection on factors associated with and interventions aimed at chronic absenteeism in the elementary grades. Information from the literature review was used to develop a preliminary code book for the qualitative data (Creswell, 2013). After all interviews were completed, transcripts were uploaded into NVivo and a thematic analysis was conducted by the first author (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). During the first round of coding, attention was paid to repetition of topics (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) and additional codes were added as needed to capture ideas and themes that were not in the a priori code list (Saldaña, 2012). During the second round of coding, also conducted by the first author, some codes were collapsed or expanded, and broader themes and categories were established (Saldaña, 2012). After the second round of coding, the second author reviewed all of the transcripts and checked the coding (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). No changes to the coding were made after the second author's review.

RESULTS

The Ecology of School Absenteeism

As previously mentioned, this study examined an intervention model conducted by a suburban–urban county (population 1.199 million) of a major metropolitan area in the upper midwestern United States. Of the students who were referred to the intervention program during the 2013–2014 school year, 61.2 percent identified as African American, 15.7 percent as American Indian, 13.2 percent as Caucasian, 7.5 percent as Hispanic, and 2.4 percent as Asian. The contributing factors to chronic absenteeism identified here must be understood in the context of this setting and population.

Microsystem-Level Factors. For elementary school-age children, the most prominent microsystems are the family and home environment and the school. Community agency workers spoke at length about elements of the family microsystem that impeded a child's ability to get to school. Factors cited included lack of stable housing:

Homelessness is a big piece. A lot of times families are at one residence and then a week later they're somewhere else. There are other things they place at a higher importance level than school, like finding a home, providing food and shelter for their family, versus the truancy part.

There is also a lack of access to consistent and feasible transportation:

Parents have such limited resources . . . no car, smaller siblings. . . . How are they going to take the kid to school [if the child misses the school bus or the school bus never arrives] with, like, three other little kids.

Other stressors in the family microsystem that caseworkers saw affecting the child's school attendance included parental substance abuse, large family size, and parental or child mental health problems. On substance abuse:

A lot of times parents are out drinking or using drugs and they don't come home and the kids are up all night and they don't get up for school. I feel like I've run into that with a lot of them.

On large family size:

Some of the harder cases we've talked about . . . have a lot of kids . . . seven, eight kids. Part of it is, in those situations parents are having some issues holding kids accountable, getting them up, getting them to school.

On parental or child mental health problems: "I bet 90 percent of the cases are mental health—either both the parent and child, or just the child, or just the parent." Workers viewed mental health problems of parents as impeding a child's school attendance primarily by limiting the parent's ability to establish and enforce routines and provide the structure, support, and consistency needed for kids to attend school regularly. Children's mental health issues were viewed as impeding a child's ability to follow morning routines necessary to get to school regularly and contributing to negative feelings about school, increasing the likelihood of school refusal behavior.

In terms of the *school microsystem*, workers identified the relationship between the child and his or her teacher, specifically in terms of how the child feels the teacher treats or feels about him or her, as being a factor that influenced a child not coming to school. Workers said that when they ask children why they aren't going to school, they will say, "I don't like my teacher. She doesn't listen to me." Or, "My brother used to go here last year [and he had

behavior issues at the school], and I feel like my teacher is treating me the same way."

Mesosystem-Level Factors. Problems in the mesosystem between the school and home have been found to contribute to poor attendance (Chang & Romero, 2008; Thornton et al., 2013). Community caseworkers identified the most problematic mesosystem factor as the communication difficulties between school staff and families, which result in parents' lack of understanding of critical school attendance policies and procedures and contribute to parents' negative feelings regarding the school system. Workers reported that some families do not understand compulsory attendance laws, particularly if they are new to the U.S. school system and lack an understanding of the rules and procedures around attendance when a child is ill. One worker explained, "When is a child considered sick? A fever? A lot of families don't know that."

In addition to a lack of communication between the school and families regarding important school policies and procedures, workers also reported families who "have a bad taste in their mouth around school." Workers discussed families in which the parents have negative associations with schools based on their experiences as students, in general, or families who feel as if "the teacher is talking over them or [has] some type of vendetta against their child." Research on parent involvement in education has shown that feeling respected and valued by school staff is a prerequisite to parents' involvement in their child's educational experience (Mapp, 2003), suggesting that the strained tenor of some of the family-school relationships described by the workers in this study contributes to parents not prioritizing their child's regular attendance at school.

Exosystem-Level Factors. In terms of chronic school absenteeism, workers cited parents' employment schedules and responsibilities as having a significant impact on the child's ability to get to school. Specifically, workers described parents who worked shifts that led them to be either asleep or out of the house when the children needed to get up and get ready for school. One worker said, "A lot of parents . . . work during the night, come home early, and the kid is in first or second grade and they're not going to wake up and go to school by themselves . . . and there's nobody there to help them."

Macrosystem-Level Factors. Many of the factors identified by workers at the microsystem and exosystem levels are related to the larger macrosystem.

Issues like housing, lack of transportation, and limited parental employment options all relate to the economic and political system in which the families operate. As one supervisor said, “We can give referrals and help, but it’s kind of a bigger picture . . . more of a poverty issue and policy issue.”

An additional macrosystem-level issue for some children involves conflicts between the cultural contexts of their ethnic communities and that of the dominant majoritarian U.S. society. For example, a supervisor who works with, and is a member of, the Native American community explained that the historical trauma of American Indian boarding schools affects how members of the community today perceive and interact with educational institutions:

Our history with institutionalized education is not good. Native people have a love of learning but a distrust of institutions. . . . When we have relatives in our families that have been subjected to that, there are effects through the generations. There is that general distrust.

The Community Caseworker Intervention

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) original ecological systems theory can also be used as a framework by which to organize and analyze the supports and services that community agency caseworkers provide to families, aiding in the examination of potential connections between the factors identified by the workers and the interventions that they provide to address those factors. In addition to using the ecological systems framework, the process of coding the interview data highlighted three main categories of supports and services that workers provide to families: resource-based supports, relationship-based supports, and information-based supports. *Resource-based* supports are supports and services that involve more concrete resources and referrals (for example, food, clothing, mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, health care), *relationship-based* supports and services include those that address relationships (for example, among school and family, between child and teacher, between child and parent), and *information-based* supports are those that address information deficits (for example, lack of information about school policies on attendance).

Microsystem Supports and Services. At the microsystem level, resource-based supports reported by caseworkers included assistance with concrete items (such as winter clothing, backpacks and school

supplies, food, bus tokens, and alarm clocks) and referrals to other programs within and outside of their agencies, including housing assistance programs, immigration attorneys, mental health services, food shelves, tutoring, or low-cost medical clinics. Relationship-based supports included providing assistance in setting up home routines that would facilitate getting children to school; behavioral-based incentive programs, both for children and parents; and weekly check-ins with the child and parents. One worker said,

The parents really appreciate that I go to the school and I meet with the child. A lot of kids really look forward to it. Those parents want to make sure their kids go to school because the kids are saying, “Ms. So-and-So is coming today, I’ve got to get to school.”

In the school microsystem, caseworkers focus on fostering relationships between the student and school staff. One worker explained that she first talks with the student about what problems he or she is having at school and then sets up a meeting with the school social worker, the student, herself, and possibly the parent. The community agency worker facilitates connecting the student with an advocate who is already in the building and can be turned to throughout the school year.

Mesosystem Supports and Services. At the meso-system level, caseworkers provide relationship-based supports to help improve the relationships between families and schools as well as information-based supports to increase parents’ awareness and understanding of school policies and processes. When working with parents, workers encourage and facilitate regular phone calls with the school and face-to-face meetings between school staff and parents. As with the students, workers try to get parents to have at least one connection at the school to whom they can turn to if they need help, often the school social worker, or whoever in the building is in charge of attendance. One worker explained that “the goal always when you close a case is to find [parents] one solid contact at the school that you can pass them on to. Getting them communicating with the school is probably the number-one goal.”

In terms of information-based supports, workers provide parents information about policies and procedures related to attendance at their child’s school, including compulsory education laws and the school

calendar, how to call an absence in and have it excused if the child is sick, and the importance of early education in setting a foundation for a child's educational future. One worker reported providing information to parents about special education supports that their child may be eligible for at school and then following up with the school to make sure the parents' concerns are addressed. She said,

If the kid is struggling academically, I'll ask the parent if the child is on an IEP or getting special help. A lot of time the parents don't know. The school social worker will say, "No, he's not on an IEP, but if you are interested in that, we can test him." I follow through on that and make sure that does happen.

Exosystem and Macrosystem Supports and Services.

The workers did not discuss providing any exosystem-level supports or services. As previously discussed, the only exosystem-level issues that were identified as being barriers involved parents' work schedules. No workers reported providing any services specifically related to parents' employment or issues parents were having in other microsystems in which their child did not participate. The focus of the supports and services appears to be on the two microsystems of family and school, and the mesosystem that exists between them.

One exception was an agency that works primarily with members of the Native American community that is involved in a communitywide education campaign, in partnership with a few other Native American community organizations, to increase the school attendance of their students. This campaign was being undertaken outside of the county's program but supports the same goals as this program. The supervisor said the campaign was based in an understanding of historical distrust of education among Native communities and aimed at improving school attendance and education for Native American students.

Goodness of Fit between the Problem and Intervention

As previously mentioned, published evaluations of interventions for chronic school absenteeism neglect to identify whether the specific interventions provided fit with the underlying factors contributing to the absenteeism of the students in the programs (Lawrence et al., 2011; McCluskey et al., 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). An intervention can be incredibly well-designed and executed, but if it does not address the factors contributing to the problem, it is not the appropriate intervention. Table 1 presents a comparison of the contributing factors to chronic absenteeism and the supports and services provided.

Table 1: Comparison of Factors Contributing to Chronic Absenteeism in the Elementary Grades and the Supports and Services Provided by Community Agency Caseworkers

Ecological Level	Category	Contributing Factor	Support or Service
Microsystem	Resource-based	Housing	Referrals
		Transportation	Concrete items
		Mental health	Referrals
		Substance abuse	Referrals
	Relationship-based	Family size	Support with routines
Family conflict		Supportive problem solving, referral if needed, trust building, weekly check-ins with child and parents, incentive programs	
Child-teacher relationship		Facilitation of relationship and connection, trust building	
Mesosystem	Information-based	Lack of understanding of school policies and procedures	Providing education to parents on school policies and procedures
	Relationship-based	History of negative school experiences	Facilitating and increasing communication between parents and school staff
Exosystem	Resource-based	Parent employment	None
Macrosystem	Resource-based	Poverty	None
	Relationship-based	Cultural conflicts	Addressing cultural trauma regarding the education system in the Native American community

Based on a visual inspection of Table 1, the services and supports provided by community caseworkers fit well with the identified factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism in the microsystems and mesosystems, but not in the exosystems and macrosystems. However, information learned through interviews with community agency staff suggests that the match between the factors and services provided are not as clean as they appear in Table 1. For example, in terms of addressing housing problems, one worker explained with exasperation,

I have trouble referring families to anyone for housing. It's really hard to find housing. I refer them for housing, and then they get back to me and say, "No one called me back. I'm on the wait list." What do you do?

Similar stories were told about transportation needs, as one worker explained: "Transportation is a major problem, but there are limited resources."

A poor relationship between the family and the school was identified as a key contributing factor to school absenteeism, and strengthening that relationship was reported to be a significant focus of the community caseworker intervention. However, workers reported varying levels of cooperation from school staff in executing this intervention. Although some workers reported excellent working relationships with school staff, others said that staff at some schools refuse to share information and will not let caseworkers meet with students at the school.

The biggest disconnect between the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism for young children in the county and community caseworkers' supports and services is time. The county allows a community caseworker to work with a family for up to 90 days. However, most of the factors that the caseworkers identify as contributing to the child's chronic absenteeism (such as homelessness, lack of transportation, mental health problems, poor relationships with the school) are not short-term or newly developed problems. Instead, they are long-term, chronic issues that are not easily resolved within a three-month period. One caseworker stated,

I think the timeline we have to work with the family is ridiculous. These are not quick fixes. We can't walk into a family and say, "OK, here's what you need to do." Bam. Done. We're gone. It's more of a long-term deal. It's not a

quick fix. There are so many issues involved with the families.

Finally, the community caseworker intervention does not address the macrosystem-level issue of poverty that workers identified as being a significant overarching factor for the majority of families on their caseloads. A potential concern regarding this lack of intervention on the macrosystem level is that the services provided by caseworkers will function as short-term solutions but will not lead to long-term change. One worker expressed this concern when explaining her belief that families repeatedly show up in the system because "many Band-Aids went on one owie and the problem never really was addressed."

DISCUSSION

Conclusions drawn from this study are limited by the fact that participants included only community agency staff. Although the agency staff have a wealth of knowledge about the barriers impeding school attendance, the specifics of the interventions they provide, and the current challenges and weaknesses in the intervention model, they represent only one stakeholder group in the model, limiting the completeness of the information presented in this study. In addition, this study was conducted in the context of one specific program in one county in a metropolitan area in the upper Midwest, so external validity and applicability to other settings and programs are limited.

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study make positive contributions to expanding knowledge about research and practice around chronic school absenteeism. First, this study offers a model for evaluating goodness of fit between problem and intervention that could be used by researchers, policymakers, and program managers working in similar contexts. Second, the findings from this study expand on the existing literature on chronic absenteeism and offer information critical for the continued improvement of chronic absenteeism interventions for elementary school-age children. Information on the multitude of factors affecting chronic absenteeism in young children echoes the theme of complexity found in the literature (Carroll, 2013; Chang & Romero, 2008; Reid, 2008, 2012; Romero & Lee, 2008; Thornton et al., 2013; Zhang, 2003). It is perhaps most notable that every single worker and supervisor cited an economic need issue as a primary

factor contributing to children's school absenteeism, and this assessment is supported by the published literature, which consistently reports strong relationships between family poverty and chronic absenteeism (Chang & Romero, 2008; Reid, 2012; Romero & Lee, 2008; Thornton et al., 2013; Zhang, 2003), suggesting that chronic absenteeism reflects a larger socioeconomic issue rather than a problem specific to an individual family.

The nature of the complexity of chronic absenteeism poses significant challenges for policymakers and practitioners who often operate with limited resources to design and implement interventions that address all significant aspects of the problem. Many of the issues that are relevant within the family and school microsystems relate to larger issues within the macrosystem. Despite workers acknowledging that larger issues such as poverty were underlying most of the reasons that their students were not successfully attending school, overall there were very limited macrosystem-level supports or services provided. Reasons for this may be that working in larger political, economic, and advocacy realms is beyond the scope of practice for many workers. More broadly, the model examined in this study is not structured to provide a way for agencies to work on the larger political and cultural issues that may underlie the issue of chronic absenteeism.

The results of this study suggest that an intervention program for chronic school absenteeism that uses a case management model may not be sufficient to address the multisystem factors involved in this problem. Practitioners and policymakers attempting to address chronic absenteeism would benefit from applying an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and developing intervention models that attempt to address issues in multiple ecological levels by combining direct services to individual families with macro practice activities, such as community organizing, capacity building, and policy advocacy (see Austin, Coombs, & Barr, 2005). 

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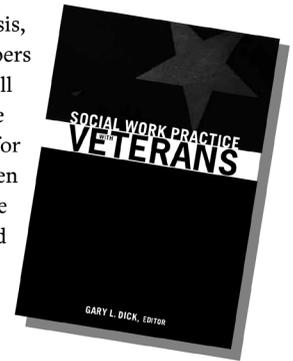
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SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH VETERANS

GARY L. DICK, EDITOR

In times of crisis, service members answer the call of duty, making the ultimate sacrifice for their country. When our military service members are called to defend our nation, the entire family system is affected. The families of deployed service members are also called on to serve and sacrifice for their country as they continually accept, adapt, and adjust to the changes that accompany the various stages of the deployment cycle. *Social Work Practice with Veterans* is a comprehensive, evidence-based social work book that addresses the multiple issues related to working with service members, veterans, and their families.



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