

COMMUNITIES SUPPORT MILITARY FAMILIES



Many military families need ongoing support to help them get back to normal, peaceful living during and after deployment.



Did you know that National Guard or Reserve Service members and their families live in all of our communities? They are our neighbors, and in most respects they are just like us. They work in regular jobs and their children attend public, private, or parochial schools, or are home schooled. However, during declared states of emergency and natural disasters the governor can activate the National Guard, and in times of national crisis, National Guard and Reserve members can be called to federal active duty by the president as commander-in-chief. In military terms, their reserve status is changed to active duty status if their services are needed by the fulltime active duty force. The announcement of the deployment may be sudden or expected. In each family, the deployed member's departure leaves a large hole in the heart and in the family's daily habits, tasks, and activities. Neighbors may not realize that their friends have gone to serve in the military. The families left behind often feel like nobody around them knows or cares what they are going through.

Families of deployed service members may have a hard time getting used to the absence of their spouse, partner, or parent. They must cope the best they can. They usually feel a

sense of loss. They may also feel sad, depressed, or angry. They may wonder how they are going to manage the family's finances or get children to their sports practices or music lessons. They may not know how to repair something that breaks. They may not be able to help kids with homework. Research shows that as time goes on families usually adapt emotionally to the absence of the family member. Their need for specific help continues, however.

Families also need support after a service member returns. Not all deployments are combat related. However, if deployed family members have been exposed to combat, other problems affecting family well-being may appear when they return. They very often have nightmares. They may overreact to sudden noises or family conflicts. They may have serious physical injuries. Many military families need ongoing support to help them get back to normal, peaceful living during and after deployment.

Caring neighbors and community groups can make a huge positive difference in the lives of families of deployed and returned service members. Friendly, sensitive contact can help the family gain resilience and the ability to adapt to changing situations.



Goal and objectives of this program

The goal of this program is to encourage community members to be caring neighbors in support of the military families in their midst. This publication helps participants:

- ★ Build their knowledge about the structures and cultures of the various branches of the military
- ★ Find information about the presence and needs of military families in their communities
- ★ Reach out individually with empathy to meet specific needs of military families known to them
- ★ Assist the community to meet the needs of military families in practical and appropriate ways

The publication also outlines the emotional cycle of deployment that families generally experience. Finally, it lists actions that you individually, your group, and the community may take to support military families. Two activities are suggested to enhance your learning.

Structure of the military services

The United States Armed Forces consists of five branches: the U.S. Army, the U.S. Marine Corps, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Air Force, and the U.S. Coast Guard. Each branch has an active duty and a reserve component. The reserve forces, as a general rule, make up at least half of the military and are comprised of two components: the National Guard and the Reserves. Two of the branches, the Army and the Air Force, have National Guard components. The National Guard has both a state and a federal mission. Governors command the Guard to help during state natural disasters or civil disturbances. In times of war, the president of the United States, Congress, or both, can call National Guard units to active duty. Military reserve forces train regularly to maintain proficiency but are called to active status only for specific federal missions. (For more information on the branches of the U.S. Armed Forces, see the PowerPoint® presentation for this program.)

The data below reflect a snapshot of the numbers and percentages in the U. S. armed services as of April 2010. The actual numbers change frequently. (State-specific numbers may be found in the Appendix under Distribution of Military Personnel by State and by Selected Locations.)

U. S. Air Force

Active duty = 329,094 (64 percent)

Reserve forces = 178,900 (36 percent)

Sixty-one percent of active duty soldiers are married; 7 percent (23,000) are dual military. There are more than 500,000 family members in these homes.

U.S. Army

Active duty = 483,452 (51 percent)

Reserve forces = 448,500 (48 percent)

National Guard armories are found in many counties, but Army Reserve soldiers may travel a great distance from their families to join their units. Their families live in all 50 states.



U. S. Coast Guard

Active duty = 42,000 (84 percent)

Reserve forces = 8,100 (16 percent)

The mission of the U.S. Coast Guard blends military, humanitarian, and civilian law-enforcement capabilities. Established in 1915, it was moved to the Department of Homeland Security in 2003. Upon the declaration of war or when the president directs, the Coast Guard operates under the authority of the Department of the Navy.

U.S. Navy

Active duty = 332,806 (82 percent)

Reserve forces = 69,000 (18 percent)

Fifty-seven percent of active duty soldiers are married; 6 percent are dual military (both husband and wife are service members). Five percent of active duty soldiers are single parents. Recent studies show the Navy children's population as over 278,000.

U.S. Marine Corps

Active duty = 203,472 (68 percent)

Reserve forces = 92,000 (32 percent)

Marine Corps families are younger than those of the other branches. Twenty-five percent of marines are not old enough to consume alcohol. The average age of marines at the birth of their first child is 23.3 years. The average age of marine spouses is 28.2 years. Marines are located in all 50 states, away from military installations.

**Total Active Duty Armed
Forces = 2,179,224**

**Total National Guard and
Reserves = 717,000
(33.5 percent)**



No matter what the day-to-day numbers are, the large percentage of reserve forces tells us that military families very likely live in our communities. Many of them can use our support.

Military culture

Culture can be defined as “the knowledge, experience, values, ideas, attitudes, skills, tastes, and techniques that are passed on from more experienced members of a community to new members.” Culture may be the rules we have for living with others, our ways of looking after health, the gender roles we assume are correct, the hand and body gestures we make, the ways we dress and groom ourselves, the kinds of recreation we choose, how we build relationships with others, and the rewards and privileges we offer for successful behavior.

ACTIVITY 1.

Compare your Culture

How would you describe your particular culture? Based on the description above, write a description of your culture and share it with your group. How similar and how different are the cultures within the group?

How does the military culture differ from your own? A common mission statement summarized by the Department of Defense states that the mission of the military services is “to provide the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of the country.” The common values listed by the military services that are integral to successfully fulfilling that mission are integrity, service before self, personal courage, and honor. In addition, loyalty, duty, respect, and commitment to excellence are highly valued.

Symbols of military culture include uniforms, the rules associated with the military salute and the service flags, utmost respect for the flag of the United States of America, the ranks that personnel may attain, and branch-specific symbols and signals. Each branch has a unique subculture based on their mission and history.

Do families of National Guard and Reserve members identify with the military culture? They may have a strong connection to the branches of the military to which their family members belong, but they may not. They may or may not think of themselves as a military family until their family member deploys, and perhaps not even then. They may have deep ties to extended family members living nearby and to their community, or they may not. Despite their diversity, very often they need

our support to cope with difficult emotional and economic transitions as deployments reshape their lives.

Emotional cycle of deployment

Families facing deployment vary so greatly that no description is true for all of them. However, most of them experience some or all of the stages in the deployment cycle. It is helpful for community members to recognize the stages of deployment their neighbors may be facing and to know appropriate assistance to offer.

According to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder of the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, there are seven stages in the emotional cycle of deployment.

★ **Anticipation of departure.** The time when the service member has received orders and the

family begins preparing for the soldier's departure. The adults focus on completing the family pre-deployment activity checklist. Family members may feel more emotional, and their stress levels may rise at times. They may try to pretend that nothing is happening. On the other hand, they may feel grief and loss before the soldier actually leaves.

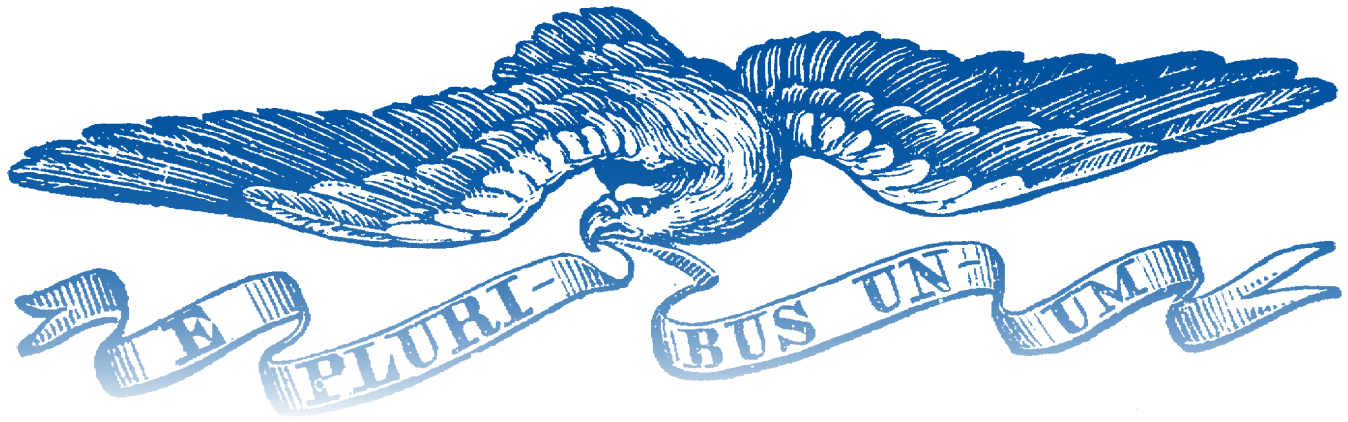
★ **Detachment and withdrawal.**

The last week before the service member leaves home. The soldier is focused on preparing for the mission and may act detached from the family. Family members may try to protect themselves from the hurt of the separation by arguing, acting angry, or behaving as though the soldier is already gone. The whole family may be out of sorts and unable to talk to each other easily.



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★ **Emotional disorganization.** The time beginning the day the service member leaves through the first month of deployment. Routines change, and responsibilities are added. Family members may feel very emotional or distracted as they try to adjust to the absence. Communication from the service member that he or she has arrived safely at the assigned location can be tremendously reassuring.

★ **Recovery and stabilization.** The time usually beginning three to five weeks after deployment. The family starts settling into the new routine without the service member. If children are resilient, they may find that coping with changes can be positive as well as challenging. They may enjoy their new responsibilities and more independence. If they have not developed resilience, they may find change hard. They may feel stressed, depressed, and worried about how they will cope until their parent returns. Kids—and adults, too—usually feel both ways.

★ **Anticipation of return.** The time beginning about six weeks before the service member returns. Homecoming is coming! The family may feel happiness, excitement, conflicting emotions, and perhaps some anxiety. Will the service

member be the same? Will he or she find them changed? Everyone tries to make everything perfect for the return.

★ **Return adjustment and renegotiation.** The period occurring about six weeks after the service member returns. There may have been a brief, joyful “honeymoon” time right after the homecoming, but everyone now understands that during the separation all family members have changed. The changes may hold pleasant surprises or may cause conflict. The service member may try too hard to get to know everyone again. Everyone needs space and time to readjust. The entire family must plan how housework will work now that everyone is together again.

★ **Reintegration and stabilization.** This period typically lasts three to six months but may go on longer. The family continues to adjust to having the service member home. A “new normal” is established regarding routines and expectations. Family members may begin to feel secure and relaxed with each other again. Most families manage these transitions quite well. However, if challenges appear or persist, it is okay to ask for help.

Repeated deployments of service members may cause families to experience more severe stress over longer periods of time. If the next deployment occurs before the previous cycle can be completed, family members may feel a need to repeatedly create distance, to feel “numb,” and to avoid emotional connection. They may feel that it would be too painful to bond again and then re-experience the separation.

Ways to support military families

One way to support military families in your community is simply to befriend them. If you decide to get involved as a friend, be prepared to keep up your friendship during the entire deployment cycle and beyond. Be aware that deployments may last several months or more, up to a year. Families also need support during second or third deployments, perhaps even more.

Suggestions for developing a friendship

- ★ Try to put yourself in their situation. Do not offer judgment or solutions to their problems.
- ★ Send the children birthday and holiday cards, or give small gifts if appropriate.



- ★ Call them to check in now and then. Send holiday greeting cards.
- ★ Give the family tickets to a performance that they might not otherwise be able to afford.
- ★ Attend and cheer on the children at sports events, musical performances, or school plays.

Specific support suggestions

- ★ Offer to assist with household and family tasks.
- ★ Watch the children once a week or month, clean the house, mow the lawn, rake leaves, remove snow, or change the oil in the family's vehicle.
- ★ Send a care package or letter to the deployed military member. The children might like to help.
- ★ Offer to go on a school field trip in place of the parent, or to go along to be an extra set of hands for the children on an outing such as a trip to the zoo or a visit to a nearby park.
- ★ As the family readjusts to the returned family member, continue to make regular contact as you feel appropriate. Be sensitive to family members' ongoing needs and interests.

Action suggestions for community groups and individuals

- ★ Work with the local Family Resource Center or Youth Services Center to recognize and celebrate children whose family members are deployed (if children seem receptive to recognition).
- ★ Plan a Military Recognition Day at your county fair or other community event.

- ★ Military kids are “Everyday Heroes.” Work with Operation: Military Kids (refer to list of references for contact information) to provide or assemble items for Hero Packs for children of deployed military members. Information on the Hero Pack project is online at <http://www.4hmilitarypartnerships.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=130>.



- ★ Form a community support network to find help for military families who have members with disabilities who may need legal assistance but cannot afford it or who have other needs.

ACTIVITY 2. My Action Plan to Support Military Families

Keep a record of your activities to support military families, use the Action Plan handout or devise a chart of your own. In addition to the ideas above, there are many others listed in the handout “Ways to Support Military Families.”

You may wish to share your activities with your group members and with groups in other counties or areas to get an idea of the positive impact you are having on the lives of military families in Kentucky.

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