

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES Through Congregational Care Teams

Regardless of one's position on the geo-political issues surrounding US military incursions, there is agreement that the people who are directly affected – the military personnel and their families, should be supported. The military personnel who are deployed, and their families, face separation, isolation, uncertainty and sometimes, loss.

If your congregation has already organized congregational care teams, dedicating teams to support families of deployed military personnel is a great way to encourage care teams in compassionate support and care. If your congregation is looking for a time and place to begin Care Team Ministry, this is a wonderful opportunity.

Congregational Care Teams can provide important support to military families during these difficult times.

Care Team support is particularly important in communities that have deployed reserve and guard units and that may be miles away from military bases and the services provided through the bases.

Today's military personnel can be broken down into two types, full time and reserve/guard families. Full time military personnel primarily live and work at or near a base or military installation. Reservists and guards tend to live farther away from bases and military installations in neighborhoods and towns throughout the country.

Families of Deployed Military Personnel

Though there are variances between officers and enlists, different branches of service and full and reserve military, taken as a group almost half are married and 1/3 have children. Just under 8% are single parents with children. The average age of enlisted reserve/guard personnel is 37 and officer personnel average age 42. Full-time military are younger, with the average age for enlisted personnel being 27 compared to officer personnel who re on average, age 35.

Among reservist and guard units, 18% are female, almost three times as many (6.6%) as full-time military. Among guard/reserve groups 28% belong to a racial or ethnic groups while among full-time military, almost 36% are members of racial/ethnic groups.

The best way to locate military families in your community is to contact your state's National Guard Head Quarters, ask to speak to the Family Readiness Group Coordinator and ask them how you as an individual volunteer or as a congregation can be reach families of deployed military personnel. These offices will put you in contact with



counselors and groups that meet regularly with local military families and give you or your congregation time to go and learn what type of support might be needed. It will also offer an opportunity for you to introduce what you as an individual or congregation can offer military families. Often before deployment guard or reserve “units” host community resource fairs for family. Watch the local media and be certain your congregation has an opportunity to participate.

Critical Times

The process of deployment includes different transitions best described as stages. The needs of families are likely to change, depending upon where in this process they find themselves.

The 5 stages are

- **Pre-deployment.** This is the time between deployment orders and actual deployment to a military installation. Issues that surface are most likely about change – getting ready for change, separation and trust.
- **Deployment.** (1st month from time leaving base, through the first month of actual deployment.) Issues for families are abandonment, isolation, need for new coping skill development.
- **Sustainment.** (2nd- 5th month) This is a period of settling in – the family becomes somewhat accustomed to the absence of the deployed person and forms a new routine.
- **Re-deployment.** At the end of deployment this is a time of anticipation and the stress of reuniting a family.
- **Post- Deployment 3-6 after deployment.)** - Like pre-deployment post-deployment is a time period of 1 to 6 months for readjustment and building a new equilibrium with the family.

Children and Deployment

Children can feel abandoned by a parent who is deployed and will respond differently according to their age and level of understanding. It is not atypical for children to become angry and resentful all while they are afraid the deployed parent will not return. After the deployed person returns there may be a period of time during which children and the parent need to re-establish trust.

First Steps

1. **Recognize a need for outreach to military families living in the civilian community and assess that need via a survey of community and military organizations currently serving them.**
2. **Include the military via relationships with the Commanders and NCOs, Chaplains and other military helping professionals, and the Spouses Clubs, yet do so as a ‘community-based’ program.**
3. **Focus on the needs of all active duty military families, including Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, Reserves, Coast or National Guard and provide programming at no cost to them.**

- 4. Develop the program as an important community outreach and partnership opportunity with established civilian ecumenical organizations or coalitions of churches and civic groups to enhance credibility, visibility and not-for-profit status;**
- 5. Hire a director-program builder with specific qualifications proven to ensure its successful development: cultural awareness and skill, social adaptiveness, resourcefulness, ingenuity, candor, compassion, humorous, equally self-determining and a team player. This individual must have a solid history in fundraising, program development, public speaking, group process and staff leadership, interaction with military and civilian organizations and be highly collaborative.**
- 6. Funding and in-kind support for this program can be generated from national and local civilian sources (associations, denominations, churches, foundations, business and corporations) and from caring individuals. Community churches can be approached to donate meeting and nursery space for the weekly spouses' groups. Skilled individuals may be recruited to assist in volunteer projects by providing time and materials.**

General Suggestions:

The following suggestions are helpful as your team begin to identify folks in your community who could benefit from the support of Congregation Care Teams. Gather your team members together and look at the following suggestions. Your team will likely find that certain members will gravitate toward particular activities. Use these gifts!

1. Look for ways to identify the families of deployed military personnel in your community. Remember them daily in prayer. Ask those your team knows if they have friends or family for whom they want your team to pray. This is a time of renewing relationships and of praying for each other and our world. According to family members, a simple statement like – “We are holding (name) in our thoughts and prayers” means a great deal.
2. Many military families may be away from their home of origin and may not have established a faith group affiliation in your community. During times of deep stress and concern for the lives of loved ones, people often seek spiritual comfort and may not have yet made the step because of shyness. Invite them to visit your place of worship with your team.
3. Consider organizing and holding a prayer service as an interfaith community event with other congregations in your area; publicize it through your bulletins, newspapers and other networks. Provide childcare for the little ones as part of the evening.
4. Discover how many members of your congregation are military members or have families or friends in the military. Let them know that your team are concerned for the welfare of their deployed family member or friend. Ask them to obtain a photo of the individual or the military family, and then – on a sheet of colored 8” x 11” paper – list their names, mailing address and email address. Include information about their branch of service and any personal information they may want to share, such as hobbies, favorite movies or books, favorite things to do. Use this information to create a bulletin board display.

Suggestions for Spouse/Partner Support

5. Begin a Time-Out Group for your neighborhood military spouses. Establish a weekly two-hour block of time to meet at your church. During deployments, many spouses often have no place to go for personal support and a break from caring for their children. Groups that allow open discussion of feelings, issues, concerns and the military life are essential. The ability to meet together in a safe, warm environment – without an agenda – is vitally important to many spouses' well being in maintaining their courage and energy during times of separation. At least two rooms are necessary, depending on the number attending, one for adults and one for childcare. Provide coffee, tea and munchies and free childcare.

6. Encourage everyone to write to the military members your team has identified. They want and need to receive mail, so encourage everyone to correspond with them, your team members, children as well as teens and adults. Adopt their entire unit and send cards, letters or email to all of them. Get to know them; thank them for their service to the country and let them know that your team thinks of them, and pray for their safety. Ask them for pictures of them at work to add to your bulletin board. Post the letters, emails and cards your team receives for everyone to read.

7. Host a potluck and invite your local military families to be your guests; include childcare for the little ones as part of the evening. Consider holding the potluck as a community event with other congregations and publicize it through various networks as an evening of appreciation. Perhaps include music, singing and skits as entertainment from the different age groups of the congregation.

8. Adopt a military family, service member or unit. A couple families within a congregation might commit to befriending and nurturing a military family of a deployed member for a year, providing friendship and encouragement. Long separations are very painful and with a war, are upsetting and frightening for the entire family, especially little ones. Share holiday events, meals and family outings with them.

9. Create Keep-In-Touch Baskets. Purchase a simple basket and fill it with phone cards, stationery, and kids' supplies (markers, glitter pens, colored paper) for keeping in touch with the deployed member.

10. Set up a photo shoot. If any of your team members have a camera and a gift for photography, set aside an hour and a roll of film to take some photos of the family in their home or at a nearby park. The deployed member will love to have a recent family photo.

11. Assist with Communications. If your team are skilled in computers, consider helping a military family set up an e-mail account or website. There are numerous free web-hosting companies that don't require software, but allow people to share photos and news. Or if your

I desperately look forward to each group to get me out of the house and give my son some structured and wonderful playtime. He is blossoming socially and my "Mommy Break" leaves me refreshed to deal with him the rest of the day- he's happy and I'm happy. Each morning he wakes up he asks if we're going to "playgroup" and he starts naming his little friends and all of the childcare providers. As we're driving there he starts talking about "Miss Mely", he wants to show them whatever new trick he can do and when we're driving home he wants me to sing the songs they just learned (Miss Mely has had to teach me some of them). The childcare providers are wonderful beyond words and the structure of the childcare time is building a foundation for preschool- and best of all it's FREE- thanks to generous donations and grants. Beth W.

team members own a scanner, offer to scan photos, drawings or even that A+ test score so the family can share them through the Internet.

12. Let the family know that your team is supporting them with signs of appreciation. These are also great projects that your family can do together. Bake cookies. Make dinner. Create an encouragement card. Treat them to a movie night at you house. Give them a family gift certificate to putt-putt golf.

13. Lend an Ear. Many spouses struggle during this time and face strong emotions including loneliness, fear, anxiety and frustration. Just being a good listener and faithful friend will make a big difference.

14. Remember Blue Holidays. Holidays are the toughest times when a family member is deployed. Remember that most military families don't live near their relatives and may not be able to travel this holiday season. So, invite a military family over for a holiday meal, buy them a small gift (or make a craft) or offer to baby-sit while the parent does shopping.

15. Hire a Military Spouse. Many military spouses face discrimination in the workplace because of their transient lifestyle. Post job opportunities with the Family Support Center at your local military base.

16. Military Discounts. If your any of your team manages a store, provide discounts for military members and dependents. This will not only help them financially, but will show your support. [Remember that families living on an enlisted person's salary must stretch their pay.]

Suggestions for Activities for Military Children

17. Elementary school children and youth in middle or high school could also host events for similar aged military kids in their area: parties, picnics, sleepovers, crafts or movie-nights, etc. They may need support from adults, yet they could provide ideas, contacts and leadership.

18. Elementary school children and youth in middle or high school could adopt a family of home-schooled military kids and correspond with them by email, phone or regular mail. This is especially important because these young people are often distant from military support systems and may have no one nearby who is in the military. They would appreciated the encouragement and friendship offered in this manner. Contact your local National Guard or Reserve office for assistance in locating families.

19. Organize a movie and game night with popcorn and other refreshments; include childcare for the little ones as part of the evening. Your team could have separate rooms set aside for the various ages or events with volunteers to lead the festivities.



Support for Families

I am new to the area, and with the exception of my husband, I arrived having no family or friends nearby. Attending time-out groups has helped me make friends and talk with people who have been under similar circumstances. I feel that I am stronger since I began attending, and that socializing with other adults has kept my sanity. The groups are fun and very relaxing. Every week I look forward to Chex Mix, instant coffee, and interacting with new friends. I don't know what I would do without this support. Sirena C

20. Yard Day. Your entire family can be involved and help with yard work – mow the grass, pull the weeds, hedge the bushes.

21. Fix-It. Can your team fix a leaky faucet or at least recommend someone who can? If the family is new in town they may not have a good list of mechanics, plumbers or roofers.

22. When your team locates military families, provide a childcare break and offer to watch the children, so the parent can have time to go shopping without the kids, go to a gym or even go to a movie. Or take the kids to a movie, sporting event or park, so that the parent can sleep for a couple hours without interruption, read a book or do some house work. Parents of both genders need the break.

You team may offer to deliver dinner to their homes, so they can have a break. Ask if they have dietary restrictions. If they protest, because they do not want to inconvenience your team, let them know your team is bringing the food to them, and ask what type of food they prefer. Explain that it is important for your team to do this to support them.

23. Most military families have their babies away from their homes of origin and their support systems. They would be overwhelmed to receive layettes for their newborns. Whether your team knits, sews, crochets or purchases items for a layette, it would be a gift gratefully received and always remembered.

24. Invite retired military congregants to create a Military Affairs Committee so they could use the wonderful skills they learned from their military experience. Perhaps they could teach various skills classes such as car maintenance, sewing, knitting, cooking, budgeting, home repair and invite the military families in your area to attend. Consider holding the classes as community events with other congregations and publicize it through various networks. Include childcare for the little ones as part of the classes.

25. If your team are near a military installation, contact the Family Services; let them know that your congregation is available to assist them in any voluntary needs they may have. The best Internet links can be found at <http://www.militarymoms.net/links.html>

26. Consider volunteering at your local American Red Cross or USO. These organizations each provide opportunities to assist military families. Your team can find a location near your team by checking their websites on the Internet: www.redcross.org/ and www.uso.org/

27. Invite professionals who work with the military to a breakfast or lunch to share their information with others in your community who might be interested in learning more about how they might support their local military.

28. Contact the Chaplains' Office at the local installation and ask them to visit your team. Invite them to share in a service at your place of worship or to speak with your ministerial association. They are terrific people whose ministry brings tremendous emotional and spiritual aid to our single and married military.



National Health Ministries

**National Health Ministries - Presbyterian Church (USA) - 100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202 1.888.728.7228 EX 5550 e-mail - health@ctr.pcusa.org
www.pcusa.org/health/national**

The many of the suggestions listed here were developed with assistance of the Chaplaincy Group and military spouses at Hurlburt Field in Northwest Florida. Others have been adapted from a variety of sources, including the National Military Family Association - <http://www.nmfa.org/> and Community Connection For Military Families (Ccmf), A Program Of The Associated Ministries Of Tacoma-Pierce County.