



MIND THE GAP: CONNECTEDNESS, INTEGRATION, AND CONTINUITY

THE KEYS TO UNLOCKING THE MILITARY SPOUSE
ADVANTAGE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

MAY 2026



Authors

This white paper was developed by the volunteer-based cohort of the Military Spouse Leadership Initiative (MSLI) with the Association of Defense Communities from August 2025 to April 2026. This framework draws on the 110 years of combined lived experiences and contributions of the following 10 military spouses, representing multiple branches and rank tiers of the U.S. Armed Forces, and defense communities spanning the continental United States and overseas installations.

Brittany Bell, Marine Corps, Camp Pendleton, CA

Paul Butler, Air Force, Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, TX

Ayana Garcia, Army, Fort Carson, CO

Gisselle Hassan Curnutt, Army, Fort Bragg, NC

Stephanie Holets, Air Force, U. S. Army Garrison Stuttgart, Germany

River Lopez, Army, Joint Base Lewis McChord, WA

Merrienne Nissly, Marine Corps, MCAS Beaufort, SC

Lisa Slaba, PMP, Air Force, Eielson Air Force Base, AK

Lauren “Randall” J. White, Mississippi National Guard

Reyna Worthy, Navy, NAS Key West, FL

Editor

Breana Oliver, Military Spouse Leadership Initiative Liaison, ADC

Institutional Affiliation

Association of Defense Communities (ADC), Military Spouse Leadership Institute (MSLI), Liberty Military Housing (LMH)

Acknowledgments

We express deep gratitude to the Association of Defense Communities (ADC) and Liberty Military Housing (LMH) for convening and investing in the Military Spouse Leadership Initiative (MSLI). To our families, who continue to sacrifice and support the many ventures we voluntarily take on. Lastly, to the military spouses across generations who have been building communities, without recognition, without infrastructure, and without ceasing, long before this paper existed to say so. We honor each of you.

This paper’s accompaniment is The CIC Toolkit online at defensecommunities.org/CICtoolkit.

I. THE PROBLEM: THE VISIBILITY AND ENGAGEMENT GAP

Military spouses are among the most educated, adaptable, and civically motivated populations in the United States, yet they remain chronically underutilized by the communities in which they live and serve. Frequent relocations, the lack of available childcare, and licensing portability create structural friction that limits consistent participation in the traditional workforce and true civic integration. These realities are well-documented, including disproportionately high unemployment rates and persistent wage disparities relative to civilian peers (Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics, 2025).

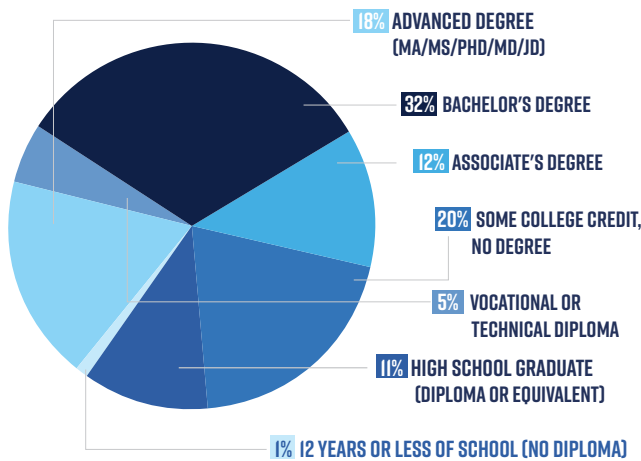
Yet under these conditions and with the added toll of rebuilding an entire life every two to three years, military spouses consistently serve as connective tissue across military installations and their defense communities by engaging with schools, workplaces, faith-based organizations, and local networks. This represents not a gap in capability, but an opportunity

to better align community systems to an already high-capacity population.

This paper highlights the opportunity and outlines what becomes possible when spouses are recognized not as transient residents but as enduring contributors to community resilience and growth. Through the proposed solution-based framework of Connectedness, Integration, and Continuity (CIC), communities can move beyond symbolic support toward intentional, sustained engagement. The accompanying CIC Toolkit provides practical, community-focused solutions to strengthen collaboration, expand access to opportunity, and build trust across military and civilian stakeholders.

We would like you to envision what can be constructed when communities and military spouses no longer work around one another but begin constructing together: not as an exception in one or two progressive cities, but as the expectation in every place where military families are building a home. The system is about integrating and improving the relationships between the community and military families through meaningful collaboration. This partnership, when harmonized, can be a reliable and repeatable benefit to all communities where military families live, work, and create their lives

EDUCATION LEVEL¹

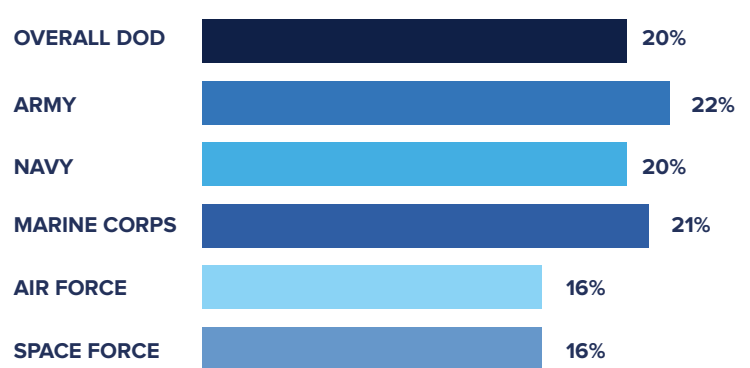


Source: 2023 Demographics Profile of the Military Community

Civilian rates exclude spouses of warrant officers and dual military spouses. The civilian unemployment rate includes the civilian spouses of active military duty members who are not employed but are actively seeking work.

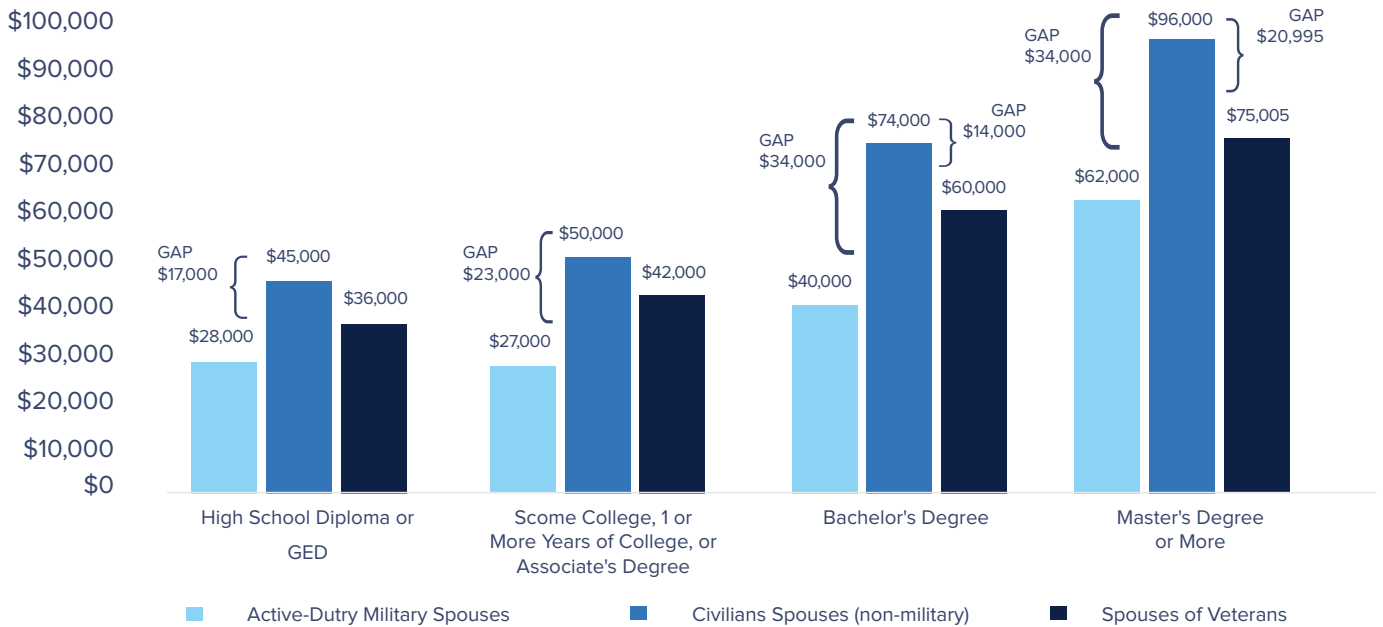
* The 2024 ADSS found that 14% of all active-duty spouses are dual military spouses.

CIVILIAN SPOUSE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE²



2024 rates remained steady compared to 2021 and 2019 for total DoD and the Services.

MEDIAN TOTAL PERSONAL INCOME BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, 2023



Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2025)

II. THE SOLUTION: THE CIC FRAMEWORK

Behind the CIC Framework is a combined 110 years of military spouse experience spanning multiple branches, regions, and seasons of military life, bringing forward a collection of solution-focused best practices. These solutions come from firsthand experience of those who have lived, experienced, and witnessed what has and has not worked across multiple communities.

At the **Connectedness** level, the framework equips communities with practical tools to identify and engage military spouses by building relationships that extend beyond initial welcome events and positioning spouses as visible neighbors, professionals, and civic contributors and leaders.

At the **Integration** level, the framework addresses a fundamental structural mismatch: many local systems were originally designed for static populations rather than the realities of frequent relocation of military families. By partnering with communities to modernize

school enrollment policies, hiring practices, and licensing structures, the framework helps bridge these systemic gaps. This shift moves the focus from families navigating hurdles toward institutional alignment, empowering local leaders to resolve regulatory roadblocks that often hinder their best efforts to serve.

At the **Continuity** level, the framework ensures these efforts are sustained, measured, and embedded into how communities operate, so that progress survives beyond individual leaders, initiatives, and military rotations.

Together, these components provide a scalable approach for communities to move from intention to implementation. They help create environments where military spouses are not only welcomed but also truly integrated. This, in turn, enables local leaders to leverage the advantages of having military spouses in their communities.

III. CONNECTEDNESS: THE SOCIAL PILLAR

Connectedness is the intentional choice to go first. Within the CIC framework, it serves as the foundation for establishing the relationships, visibility, and trust required for meaningful integration and long-term continuity. It is built through consistent engagement, open information sharing, and a sustained presence that allows a community to evolve from a temporary assignment into a place of belonging. Military spouses instinctively build community while navigating their own transitions, proactively weaving together social and professional connections before they are ever formally introduced to the community. They act as natural conduits for others, bridging the gaps that traditional community structures do not yet reach.

Yet even for the most experienced spouse, rebuilding connectedness with each move remains one of the most demanding realities of military life. Each transition requires re-establishing healthcare teams, navigating unfamiliar school systems, rebuilding social networks, and re-entering the workforce while navigating real barriers: resume gaps, employer assumptions about long-term commitment, and licensing requirements. All of this happens while simultaneously exploring a new neighborhood, finding a faith or cultural community, the grocery store, and the gym with the hope that it will eventually feel like somewhere worth staying.

What military spouses seek, beneath all of this, is not simply access, but intentional inclusion. Not a single point of welcome, but a sustained commitment to engagement. Communities that are most effective in this space move beyond one-time events and instead build systems that support the realities of military life, demonstrate consistency, and create meaningful opportunities for contribution.

Connectedness at its best is not something military spouses manufacture alone in a new town. It is the mutual decision of a community and military spouses to build something together and keep building it even when it seems inconvenient.

IV. INTEGRATION: THE CIVIC PILLAR

Integration, the civic pillar of the CIC framework, is where a community's intent is reflected in practice; defining the systems, policies, and structures that enable military families to participate fully without starting over every two to three years.

Within the CIC framework, integration is not an aspirational concept; it is an operational standard. It moves beyond working alongside military families to ensure that community systems are designed with their realities in mind from the outset. This requires alignment across schools, employers, licensing boards, nonprofits, local and state governments, ensuring that processes and policies account for the mobility that is military life. When systems incorporate flexible enrollment, hiring practices that account for military move-related transitions, licensing reciprocity, and formal pathways for spouse participation in advisory councils and boards, the community is not simply offering support; it is enabling immediate and meaningful engagement.

This approach delivers value to communities and to military spouses who consistently arrive ready to lead, serve, and connect. However, their contributions are often underutilized due to structural barriers or unclear points of entry. Purposeful integration removes these hurdles by establishing intentional, visible pathways into civic and economic participation. By defining specific roles within committees and task forces, classrooms and workplaces, communities can leverage military spouses' full expertise from day one. This localized effort is reinforced at the federal level by the Defense State Liaison Office (DSLO), which prioritizes military family integration as a core pillar of mission readiness, offering communities a direct federal partner in sustaining these pathways.

For military spouses, integration reduces the time and effort required to reestablish their personal and professional networks with each move. For communities, it creates an enduring model for engagement that builds strength over time making it easier to welcome each new arrival with confidence and consistency.



Integration is where support becomes structure and where intention becomes access.”

V. CONTINUITY: THE STRUCTURAL PILLAR

Continuity ensures that progress is sustained. It is achieved through defined best practices, clear documentation, and structured handoffs that prevent efforts from resetting with each military move or leadership transition. Rather than relying on individual initiatives or institutional memory, continuity embeds successful approaches into how communities operate.

In a continuity-minded community, knowledge is captured, shared, and made accessible, allowing the next leader, liaison, or family to build forward rather than starting over with each transition. By treating military family engagement as a shared, long-term responsibility rather than a champion-dependent initiative, communities can sustain momentum, deepen trust, and ensure that what works for military spouses is preserved, refined, and passed on rather than lost with each transition.

The impact extends far beyond immediate engagement. Communities that consistently integrate military families are more likely to retain them beyond their term of service, thus contributing to long-term population stability, workforce participation, and economic growth. What starts as a transient population becomes, over time, a source of enduring civic and economic strength. This potential is underscored by the economic footprint of the military-connected community; veteran-owned businesses alone represent 5.3 percent of all employer firms, and \$922 billion in annual revenue (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024), illustrating the long-term economic value that military-connected families bring when they put down roots in the local community.

VETERAN OWNERSHIP STATISTICS 2024

In 2021, there were 1,621,823 Veteran-owned firms in the United States. Veteran-owned businesses employed 3,251,345 workers, paid \$179.9 billion in payroll and generated \$983.9 billion in sales.



Source: Nonemployer Statistics by Demographic (Census) <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/abs/data/nesd.html>. Totals include only majority veteran-owned firms.



VI. THE ASK: WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO NOW

Adopting the CIC framework offers communities a practical path to translate support for military families into measurable impact. It moves beyond intention, establishing approaches that strengthen both family outcomes and local economic resilience.

Connectedness ensures military spouses and families are visible, engaged, and meaningfully connected to local networks. **Integration** then aligns local systems—from school policies and hiring practices to licensing rules and civic structures—allowing spouses to step in and contribute their talents fully. **Continuity** embeds these efforts into reinforced processes ensuring progress endures through leadership changes or transitions.

The opportunity is not to start from scratch but to build on what already exists. The CIC Framework Toolkit provides community self-assessments, templates, and ready-to-use models that communities can integrate directly into existing efforts. This toolkit translates the framework into practical checklists, advisory models, welcome efforts, and continuity practices that are immediately usable and adaptable to local context. By leveraging these tools, communities can establish clear pathways for engaging military families, strengthen coordination among stakeholders, document and share best practices, build intentional points of entry for spouses into civic and economic life, and track outcomes over time. When implemented with consistency, these efforts shift military families from a transient or invisible presence at the margins to essential stakeholders who are invested in community life.

VII. CONCLUSION: THE ENDURING INVITATION

Military spouses are already contributing. They bring leadership, adaptability, and a deep commitment to service in each community they enter. The opportunity for communities is to meet the contribution with systems and structures that allow it to take root and grow. Communities do not need a new bureaucracy

or a significant budget; rather, it requires clear ways to engage military spouses in meaningful roles that invite them into decision-making, and in simple structures that preserve what works.

Adopting the CIC framework through the CIC Toolkit gives communities a direct path to do this in a focused, results-oriented way. It converts “support” from slogans and appreciation events into policies, practices, and partnerships that strengthen schools, businesses, and civic life. Communities that choose this approach do more than just support military families; they expand their local talent, resilience, and leadership. In doing so, they position themselves as places where service-connected families want to invest, return, and build for the long term.

CIC is not a program; it is a posture. By putting the 2025-2026 MSLI Cohort’s CIC Toolkit to work, every community can start leading from that posture.

The invitation is simple: foster connectedness with the spouses already leading in your community, intentionally integrate them, and establish the continuity necessary for those contributions to endure.



VIII. APPENDIX: DATA REFERENCES, GLOSSARY, TOOLS INDEX

Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics. (2025). Active duty spouse employment and education: 2024 DoD survey of active duty spouses [Infographic]. Military OneSource. <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Infographic/2024-active-duty-spouse-employment-and-education.pdf>

Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2025, March). Military spouse employment landscape: Trends, barriers, and opportunities (Research Brief). Syracuse University. <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/IVMF-Military-Spouse-Employment-Landscape-March-2025-v2.pdf>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2024, November 6). A profile of the nation's veteran-owned businesses. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2024/11/veteran-owned-businesses.html>

U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy. (2024, November). Facts about small business: Veteran ownership statistics 2024 [Infographic]. https://advocacy.sba.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Veteran-Ownership-Infographic-Series-2024_FINAL.pdf
advocacy.sba.gov



1300 Connecticut Ave NW
Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036