



MIND THE GAP: THE CIC TOOLKIT

AN ACCOMPANYING SOLUTION TO **CONNECTEDNESS, INTEGRATION, AND CONTINUITY**: THE KEYS TO UNLOCKING THE MILITARY SPOUSE ADVANTAGE IN YOUR COMMUNITY



This is an accompaniment to “Mind the Gap: Connectedness, Integration, and Continuity,” available online at defensecommunities.org/mindthegap.

It is a livable, breathable document that, just like military spouses, is continually being adapted and growing based on constructive feedback. We present an anchoring of five core, field-tested tools drawn directly from our lived experience, which will give communities a clear starting point and a strong foundation to build on.

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Acknowledgments

We express deep gratitude to the Association of Defense Communities and Liberty Military Housing for convening and investing in the Military Spouse Leadership Initiative. 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.

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LETTER FROM THE 2025-2026 MSLI COHORT

Defense Community Leaders,

Military spouses are connectors. Long before anyone arrives in a new town, someone is already in the local Facebook group tracking down information about schools, employment, childcare, shopping, the best coffee shops, churches, and food banks. The list could go on and on. This is all shared freely – the good and the bad – by families who have been in the community and know what the next family will need. They go first. They build bridges before the foundation feels solid. They create belonging in communities that were unknown yesterday and will need to feel like home tomorrow. That posture, that willingness to choose connection before it is easy, is one of the greatest assets military spouses bring to any community.

Connection alone is not enough. The relationship between military families and their surrounding communities must be intentional on both sides, meaning both sides show up, both sides contribute, and both sides benefit.

We are not asking communities to conform to military culture, and military spouses are not asking to conform to a community's existing structures. What we are asking for is integration, the kind that happens when two entities decide to build something together rather than quietly tolerating each other's presence. Integration means a military spouse can walk into a chamber of commerce meeting and be seen as a peer, not a visitor. It means flexible school enrollment, employers who understand what it means when the spouse says, "the mission comes first," and civic and nonprofit organizations that actively recruit military talent. It is harder than simply accepting things as they are. It is also far more powerful, because integration is what turns goodwill into jobs, access, and the kind of community infrastructure that benefits everyone, not just the families on the other side of the gate.

One of the greatest challenges military families face is continuity, the difficulty of maintaining momentum when military life demands constant change. Frequent moves, deployments, and transitions mean that just as a family plants roots, the process begins again. What communities can offer, and what this guide is built to support, is a system designed to outlast those transitions: consistent points of contact, documented processes that survive leadership changes, and a culture that says, "we knew you were coming, and we are glad you are here." When communities build that kind of infrastructure, they become the kind of place military families choose to return to.

We have called this guide "Mind the Gap" because the gap is real and it runs in both directions. This guide is for the community leader who wants to do more than wave at the gate. It is for the employer who senses untapped talent nearby and needs a clearer path to reach it. It is for the neighbor, the nonprofit director, the school counselor, and the local elected official. And it is for every military spouse who has unpacked boxes in a new community and wondered, quietly, how long it would take to feel at home.

They arrive connected, capable, and ready to contribute. And yet many communities do not know how to find them, how to invite them in, or how to build systems that account for the realities of military life. This guide is designed to close that distance, with practical tools, honest insight, and a shared language for building something better on both sides of the fence line.

The cohort that created this guide is the 2025-2026 class of the Association of Defense Communities' (ADC) Military Spouse Leadership Initiative. We represent the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, and National Guard, stationed from Camp Pendleton to NAS Key West, from Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska to Stuttgart, Germany. We are diverse in background, branch, and experience and united in the belief that military spouses and families deserve to be fully seen, fully supported, and fully included in the communities where they live and serve.

We built this in the margins. For some of us that meant navigating a military move mid-project, caring for sick family members, deployed spouses, and weathering a government shutdown, while managing the isolation of austere environments, mental health, and the hard choices that military life never stops asking us to make.

There is no quiet season. We did not have a window to wait for one. The challenges we face require solutions as unwavering as the demands behind them. This guide was built in those moments. That is not a complaint; it is context. It is the story of what military spouses do every single day in every community across this country and beyond. Military spouses carry a wealth of knowledge that strengthens our defense communities everywhere and this guide is our commitment to capture, share, and amplify it.

We are deeply grateful to ADC for hosting this initiative and to Liberty Military Housing for their sponsorship and belief in this work. To the cohort members: this work is a reflection of everything each of us brings to the table, our honesty, our expertise, and our refusal to let a hard season quiet our voice.

To the defense communities that open their doors a little wider because of these pages, thank you. And to every military spouse who has ever built a home in a town that did not yet know their name: this is for you.

With gratitude and solidarity,

The MSLI 2025/2026 Cohort

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WHERE WE'RE STARTING FROM

Community Readiness Self-Assessment

The CIC Community Readiness Self-Assessment is a structured tool designed for leaders who want to move beyond goodwill gestures and take an honest stock of how well their community is actually supporting military families. This tool gives communities a starting point. It works by walking through 24 research-informed statements across the three pillars, scoring their current practices on a simple scale, and translating those scores into a prioritized, actionable roadmap tied directly to the CIC Toolkit.

Rather than leaving communities to guess where to begin, the Community Readiness Self-Assessment identifies gaps within Connectedness, Integration, or Continuity and then provides suggested templates and quick wins for each. The result is a community that stops treating military family engagement as an occasional event and starts building the kind of durable, system-level infrastructure that makes every military family, regardless of branch, rank, or how long they stay, feel like they arrived somewhere that was already ready for them.

Community Self-Assessment: The Readiness Checklist

This assessment is designed for city leaders, chambers of commerce, school districts, nonprofits, faith communities, and installation partners who want to move beyond goodwill gestures and take an honest look at how well their communities currently support military families. It serves as a practical entry point into the CIC framework by helping communities identify where they are strongest, where friction remains, and which tools in this guide to use next.

Rather than functioning as a stand-alone quiz, The Readiness Checklist is meant to direct action. It helps communities evaluate their current practices across the three CIC pillars-Connectedness, Integration, and Continuity-then links those results to the most relevant sections, tools, and implementation models in the broader toolkit.

How to Use This Tool

Read each statement and mark the box that best describes your community right now. Be honest; this is not a test, but a starting point for clearer action and stronger alignment.

After scoring each section, use the guidance at the end to determine which parts of this guide should come next. If your scores reveal gaps in Connectedness, Integration, or Continuity, the corresponding tools in later sections will help you move from awareness to implementation.

Scoring

- Yes, we do this consistently = 2 points
- Sometimes or partially = 1 point
- Not yet or rarely = 0 points

PART I: CONNECTEDNESS ASSESSMENT

Connectedness is the intentional choice to go first. In the CIC framework, it is the relational foundation that helps military spouses and families become visible, welcomed, and meaningfully connected to the people, places, and networks that shape community life. Communities with strong Connectedness do more than host a one-time welcome; they build trust, share information openly, and create repeated opportunities for military spouses to be seen as neighbors, professionals, leaders, and contributors.

| Statement | Yes (2) | Sometimes (1) | Not Yet (0) |
|--|---------|---------------|-------------|
| We know where military spouses and military-connected families are already showing up in our community—schools, workplaces, nonprofits, faith communities, civic organizations, and neighborhood networks. | | | |
| We have intentional ways to connect with spouse groups, family support organizations, installation points of contact, or other trusted connectors. | | | |
| Military spouses are regularly invited into meaningful community roles such as boards, committees, task forces, or advisory groups. | | | |
| We host or support recurring opportunities for military and civilian community members to build relationships, such as tours, welcome gatherings, listening sessions, or networking events. | | | |
| Our communication channels – website, newsletters, social media, and partner communications – actively include and address military families. | | | |
| We have established relationships with installation leadership, family support staff, school liaisons, or other military-connected points of contact. | | | |
| Military spouses are recognized as professional and civic contributors, not only as volunteers or service recipients. | | | |
| We ask military families what they need and use that feedback to shape outreach, rather than assuming we already know. | | | |

Connectedness Score: _____ / 16

PART 2: INTEGRATION ASSESSMENT

Integration is where support becomes structure and where intention becomes access. In the CIC framework, Integration is the civic pillar: the systems, policies, and practices that allow military spouses and families to participate fully without having to start over every two to three years. Communities with strong Integration design schools, hiring practices, licensing pathways, and civic opportunities with military mobility in mind from the outset.

| Statement | Yes (2) | Sometimes (1) | Not Yet (0) |
|---|---------|---------------|-------------|
| Our schools offer flexible enrollment, mid-year transition support, and clear communication for military-connected students and families. | | | |
| Local employers actively recruit military spouses and understand military move-related resume gaps, frequent transitions, and the value of portable talent. | | | |
| Our community has addressed or is actively addressing barriers such as occupational licensing reciprocity, portable credentialing, or reentry into licensed professions. | | | |
| We offer programs, practices, or policies that reduce the cost of starting over, such as waived fees, priority enrollment, or flexible access to activities and services. | | | |
| Housing, childcare, transportation, and other enabling supports are accessible enough to make employment and civic participation realistic for military families. | | | |
| Our policies and programs are reviewed with military mobility and schedules in mind, including PCS cycles, deployment realities, and dual-career pressures. | | | |
| We track whether military families are actually being integrated into employment, education, leadership, and community life-not just whether they were invited. | | | |
| We have reduced unnecessary bureaucratic barriers that penalize frequent moves, such as residency requirements, waiting periods, or excessive documentation demands. | | | |

Integration Score: _____ / 16

PART 3: CONTINUITY ASSESSMENT

Continuity ensures that progress is sustained. In the CIC framework, it is the structural pillar that keeps community effort from resetting with every PCS move, leadership transition, or command rotation. Communities with strong Continuity document what works, create formal handoffs, maintain feedback loops, and build systems durable enough to outlast any one champion.

| Statement | Yes (2) | Sometimes (1) | Not Yet (0) |
|---|---------|---------------|-------------|
| We have documented processes, partnerships, and points of contact for engaging military families, not just informal personal relationships. | | | |
| Information about military family programs, stakeholders, and community contacts is stored centrally and passed forward to new leaders. | | | |
| When installation or community leadership changes, we use a formal handoff or onboarding process to preserve momentum and relationships. | | | |
| We regularly collect feedback from military families through surveys, focus groups, conversations, or advisory structures and track it over time. | | | |
| We report back to military families on what we heard, what action was taken, and what remains in progress. | | | |
| Our programs and initiatives are built to outlast any single volunteer, staff member, liaison, or community champion. | | | |
| We set multi-year goals and measures for military family engagement rather than relying only on appreciation events or short-term efforts. | | | |
| We maintain relationships with military families after they leave and create pathways for them to stay connected, return, or continue contributing. | | | |

Continuity Score: _____ / 16

Scoring

- Total Connectedness Score: _____ / 16
- Total Integration Score: _____ / 16
- Total Continuity Score: _____ / 16
- Overall Readiness Score: _____ / 48

Where to Go Next

Use your scores to move directly into the most relevant sections of this guide. The goal is not just to diagnose readiness, but to point communities toward the next right tool.

If Connectedness Is Your Priority

Start with the sections that help you identify who is already in your ecosystem and how to begin building trust.

- Go next to: Who Can We Learn From? / Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet to identify where military spouses already live, work, worship, volunteer, and lead.
- Then use: What can we learn together? / Focus Group Model to listen directly to military spouses and surface real barriers, opportunities, and priorities.
- Build on it with: the Military Spouse Ecosystem Map, Ten Places to Find Military Spouses Checklist, and welcome or neighborhood templates referenced in the white paper and toolkit.
- Quick win: host a community tour, listening session, or welcome event that includes both military and civilian stakeholders.

If Integration Is Your Priority

Start with the sections that move from invitation to structural inclusion.

- Go next to: What Can We Learn Together? / Community Advisory Model to create formal roles for military spouses in community decision-making.
- Then use: the policy and systems examples in the white paper's Integration section to review school enrollment, hiring practices, licensing barriers, and civic access points.
- Build on it with: focus groups, advisory structures, and implementation discussions tied to workforce integration, quality of life, and local systems alignment.
- Quick win: remove one no-cost or low-cost barrier, such as a documentation hurdle, enrollment delay, or mid-year participation restriction.

If Continuity Is Your Priority

Start with the sections and practices that preserve progress through change.

- Go next to: How Do We Keep It Going? and any continuity-oriented tools, templates, or event structures that help communities document, repeat, and hand off what works.
- Then use: the white paper's Continuity section to align your community around documented processes, central information storage, structured handoffs, and multi-year goals.
- Build on it with: shared folders, recurring feedback loops, formal liaison roles, and standing advisory structures

that do not depend on one individual.

- Quick win: establish one central repository for contacts, meeting notes, recommendations, and annual goals, and decide who owns updating it.

If All Three Pillars Score in the 6-10 Range

Your community has momentum. The next step is to connect informal goodwill to formal structures so the work becomes more durable, visible, and measurable.

- Turn informal relationships into documented partnerships.
- Build multi-year goals and simple success measures.
- Use the Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet, Community Advisory Model, and Focus Group Model in sequence so relationships, systems, and continuity reinforce one another.

If one or more pillars score 11 or higher

Your community may already be operating as a model of military family readiness in that area. The next opportunity is to document your playbook, mentor other communities, and share practices that can be adapted elsewhere.

- Consider hosting site visits, sharing case studies, or mentoring another defense community.
- Capture what works in writing so your process survives leadership turnover and can be replicated.

Before and After

Use this assessment as a baseline. Revisit it in 6 to 12 months after implementing tools from this guide so you can measure where trust has grown, where systems have changed, and whether your community is becoming easier to enter, navigate, and stay connected to over time.

- Assessment Date: _____
- Baseline Scores: Connectedness ____ / 16 | Integration ____ / 16 | Continuity ____ / 16
- Follow-Up Date: _____
- Updated Scores: Connectedness ____ / 16 | Integration ____ / 16 | Continuity ____ / 16

Reflection

- What changed?
- What worked?
- What still needs attention?
- Which section of the guide should we use next?

This assessment is part of The CIC Framework toolkit and is intended to help communities move from appreciation to action by strengthening Connectedness, Integration, and Continuity in ways that are practical, measurable, and durable.

WHO CAN WE LEARN FROM?

Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet

The Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet is a structured tool designed for leaders who want to move beyond vague intentions and gain a clear picture of who is already in their ecosystem and how to reach them. It gives communities an anchor point by prompting leaders to list military spouses, community influencers, and organizational partners by name, role, and contact information across key sectors, aligned with CIC Toolkit next steps.

Instead of guessing who to involve, the worksheet helps surface existing connectors, reveal gaps, and highlight which relationships are most strategic for CIC-aligned engagement. The result is a community that can move quickly from idea to action because leaders already know which trusted partners to call when it is time to co-host an event, launch an initiative, or listen to military families.

Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet

Building the foundation for Connectedness

The Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet is a foundational tool for communities that want to move from general support to intentional relationship-building. It helps leaders identify where military spouses and military-connected families already are, who is already trusted, and which relationships can become the starting point for stronger Connectedness, deeper Integration, and long-term Continuity.

Connectedness is the foundation of the CIC framework because communities cannot integrate or sustain what they have not first learned to see, value, and engage. This worksheet gives communities a practical way to locate the people, spaces, and relationships that already exist so they can build from what is real rather than relying on assumptions.

Purpose

Use this worksheet to identify military spouses, community leaders, and natural connectors by name, role, and organization in your community. Once you know who is already in the ecosystem and how they connect to military families, invitations become more meaningful, listening becomes more informed, and collaboration becomes easier to sustain.

This tool helps you:

- Move from “we should engage military families” to “here is who we can call first.”
- Build the relational foundation for Connectedness before moving into Integration or Continuity work.
- Identify trusted connectors who already have credibility with spouses and families.
- Create a practical contact list for focus groups, advisory councils, welcome efforts, and community partnerships.
- Surface gaps in who is being reached and who may still be missing from the conversation.

How to Use This Tool

Use this worksheet early, and revisit it often. It is most useful at the beginning of your engagement efforts, after leadership transitions, and anytime your community is preparing to host a focus group, advisory process, Homefront Handoff, welcome effort, or community conversation.

Start with the people and organizations you already know. Then use those relationships to discover who else should be included. The goal is not to create a perfect master list in one sitting. The goal is to build a strong starting point that communities can update over time.

Step 1

Who to Think About

Use this checklist to jog your memory about where military spouses and military-connected families may already be showing up in your community. Check the boxes as you identify contacts or organizations in each area.

Installation and Military Resources

- Family readiness or family support staff
- School liaison officers
- Chaplains and family life staff
- Morale, Welfare, and Recreation staff
- Installation public affairs or command team contacts
- Transition assistance or employment support staff
- Key spouse or family readiness group leaders
- Military family support centers

Spouse-Led Groups and Informal Networks

- Formal spouse clubs or associations
- Nonprofit organizations founded or led by military spouses
- Informal social groups
- Online community moderators or group administrators
- Professional networks for military spouses
- Volunteer coordinators
- Spouses who regularly gather people, host events, or share information

Schools and Education

- Principals and assistant principals
- School counselors or social workers
- Military-connected student advocates
- Parent Teacher Organization leaders
- District family engagement staff
- Teachers or coaches who are trusted by military families
- Colleges, technical schools, or adult education leaders

Local Government and Civic Leadership

- Mayor, city manager, or county administrator
- City council or county council members
- Community engagement or outreach staff
- Military affairs or veterans affairs staff
- Parks and recreation leaders
- Library directors or branch managers
- Public safety, housing, or transportation representatives

Business and Economic Development

- Chamber of commerce leadership
- Economic development staff
- Human resources leaders at major employers
- Small business owners who hire military spouses
- Realtors and property managers
- Coworking or entrepreneur support organizations
- Workforce development partners

Faith Communities and Nonprofits

- Pastors, ministry leaders, or chaplains
- Women's ministry or small group leaders
- Family service organizations
- Food, housing, counseling, or childcare providers
- Youth organizations
- Community foundations or grantmakers
- Veteran service organizations with family-facing work

Quick Reflection

Which of these spaces already feel strong in your community, and which are likely underdeveloped? This is often your first clue about where Connectedness is already growing and where it needs to be built more intentionally.

Step 2

Stakeholder Contact Table

Fill in the table below with specific names, roles, and contact information. Prioritize people you already know or people you can reach through a warm introduction first.

| Name | Role | Organization | Military-connected? | How they connect to spouses or families | Priority H, M, L |
|------|------|--------------|---------------------|---|------------------|
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
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| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

Additional contacts can be listed on a separate page if needed.

Tip for Prioritizing

- High priority means this person is trusted, connected, and likely to help open doors quickly.
- Medium priority means this person has useful insight or influence but may need more relationship-building first.
- Low priority means this person may be helpful later or in a more specific initiative.

Step 3

Identify Your Connectors and Bridge-Builders

Circle, highlight, or list five to 10 people from your table who are natural connectors. These are the people who help build the foundation of Connectedness because they already know how to move between military and civilian spaces with trust and credibility.

Look for people who:

- Know military spouses personally and across more than one group or season of life.
- Host or lead existing gatherings, groups, or conversations.
- Are trusted by both military and civilian communities.
- Have formal or informal influence.
- Understand the realities of military life and can help others understand them too.
- Are enthusiastic about helping relationships grow, not just attending one event.

Your Top Connectors

Why These People Matter

Connectors help a community move faster and more thoughtfully. They can introduce leaders to spouses who might otherwise never be invited, help shape events or conversations so they feel relevant, and make early outreach more credible because the invitation comes through trust rather than assumption.

Step 4

Engagement Planning

For each stakeholder group or connector you identified, note how you might engage them and what they may be able to offer. Use this as a planning tool for your next 30 to 90 days.

| Stakeholder or group | Invite them to... | Ask them for... | First step |
|----------------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

Ways to Support Stakeholders Who Partner with You

- Share their events or resources through your communication channels.
- Offer meeting space, refreshments, or logistical support.
- Publicly recognize their contributions.
- Provide childcare, stipends, or other practical support when possible.
- Follow through on what you said you would do.

Step 5

Foundation Check

Before moving on to more formal engagement tools, pause and ask whether you have built enough Connectedness to proceed well. Connectedness is the foundation, which means the quality of your later work will depend on the strength and trust of these early relationships.

Foundation Check Questions

- Do we know who our most trusted military-connected connectors are?
- Do we have relationships in more than one sector, not just one familiar circle?
- Have we identified both formal leaders and informal leaders?
- Do we know where military spouses are already participating in community life?
- Have we noticed who may still be missing from our map?
- Do we have enough relationship trust to invite people into a focus group, advisory role, or welcome effort?

If the answer to several of these is “not yet,” stay here a little longer. Build more relationships before jumping too quickly into formal structures.

Step 6

Quick Reflection and Next Steps

Before you finish, commit to a few concrete actions.

Three stakeholders we will contact in the next 30 days:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

One existing gathering where we can begin listening (e.g., a spouse gathering, PTO meeting, faith community event, professional networking group, or neighborhood gathering):

One way we will thank and support people who partner with us:

One gap we noticed in our current map:

One tool we should use next based on this worksheet:

- Focus Group Model
- Community Advisory Model
- Homefront Handoff / Community Immersion
- Continuous Engagement Playbook
- Revisit the Readiness Checklist first

Tips for Success

- Start small and local. You do not need to map every person in your first pass.
- Build from warm introductions whenever possible.
- Reach beyond the most visible people. Some of the most valuable voices are not already sitting at public tables.
- Be consistent. Trust is built through repeated contact, not one invitation.
- Honor people's time. Be clear about what you are asking and why it matters.
- Close the loop. Report back on what you heard and what happened next.

Closing Note

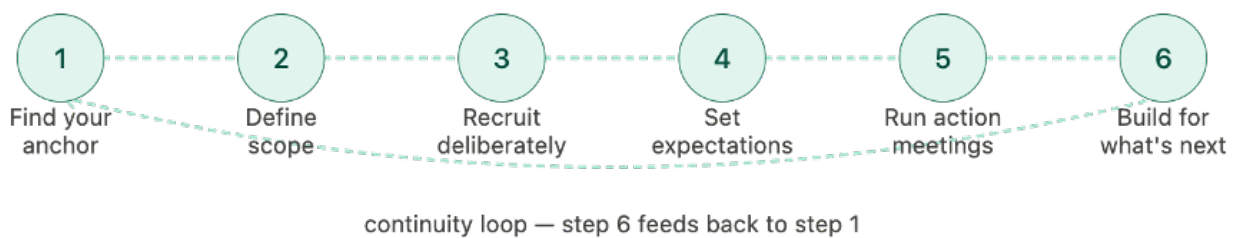
This worksheet is part of The CIC Framework is meant to help communities build the foundation for stronger Connectedness, more practical Integration, and more durable Continuity. When communities know who is already present, already contributing, and already trusted, they are much more prepared to build something that lasts.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN TOGETHER?

Bridging the Gap: From Participation to Partnership

Building a truly integrated military-connected community requires moving beyond symbolic gestures and toward structural inclusion. For decades, military spouses and families have been invited to the table as guests, yet they often lack the formal authority or institutional support to enact lasting change. The following frameworks the Community Advisory Model and the Focus Group Model provide a blueprint for local governments and organizations to transform passive feedback into active, high-impact governance.

These frameworks shift the narrative from seeing military families as “service recipients” to recognizing them as vital “civic stakeholders.” By anchoring engagement within permanent institutions, communities can ensure that insights survive the inevitable transitions of military life.



Whether through formal advisory councils or structured collaborative hubs that evolve into monthly series, these models are designed to create a professionalized, consistent environment where military-connected expertise drives economic and civic infrastructure.

The Community Advisory Model

Institutionalizing Authority and Continuity

This model is built on the premise that “community-sponsored legitimacy” is the key to changing outcomes. It moves away from ad-hoc advocacy and toward a formally constituted advisory council with a specific scope such as workforce integration or quality of life. By focusing on institutional anchoring and deliberate recruitment across branches, ranks, and life stages, this model ensures that the council remains a durable governing body rather than a temporary gathering.

The Focus Group: Community-Military Collaboration Model

A Practical Framework for Local Government Partnership

Initially developed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, this model offers a structured, three-phase approach to building trust and alignment. It begins with a targeted focus group series to identify lived-experience barriers, moves into a community presentation to align leadership, and sustains momentum through a monthly “Lunch and Learn” series. This structure allows local governments to act with accuracy rather than assumption, creating a recurring space where information and resources flow in both directions.

Community Advisory Model

A seat at the table is only meaningful if the table is making real decisions.

Military spouses have been invited into community spaces for decades as speakers, volunteers, focus group participants, and token representatives. What most communities have not done is give them actual authority, institutional standing, and the kind of consistent access that produces lasting change. This model is designed to do exactly that.

The Community Advisory Model is built on one premise: community-sponsored legitimacy changes outcomes. A military spouse invited by the municipal leader's office to serve on a formally constituted advisory council carries different weight in every room they enter than one who self-appointed to advocate. The invitation is itself an act of integration. It signals to the entire community that military spouse expertise is valued, not just tolerated.

This is not a diversity initiative. It is an economic and civic infrastructure decision.

What Makes this Model Different:

Most community committees that include military spouses fail for one of three reasons: they are one-time listening sessions with no follow-through, they rely on the same two or three visible spouses until those spouses PCS and the whole thing collapses, or they treat spouses as consultants rather than decision-makers. This model addresses all three directly through institutional anchoring, diverse recruitment, and continuity structures that outlast any individual.

Step 1: Find the Right Anchor

The council needs a formal institutional home, not a person, not a program, but an office or organization with staying power. The anchor convenes meetings, holds the calendar, manages communications, and ensures the council survives leadership transitions.

The strongest anchors are:

- The mayor's or city manager's office: signals the highest level of civic commitment and gives the council authority that no nonprofit or chamber can replicate
- The chamber of commerce or economic development office: frames military spouse engagement as a workforce and economic development priority, which is the framing that moves budgets
- A regional nonprofit with multi-installation reach, which is useful when no municipal anchor is available or willing

The anchor does not lead every meeting or own every decision but without one, the council becomes a gathering rather than a governing body.

Step 2: Define Scope Before You Recruit

The biggest mistake communities make is launching a council before deciding what it is actually empowered to do. A vague mandate produces vague results. Choose one focus area at launch and expand once you have a track record:

- Workforce and economic integration: spouse employment, credentialing, employer partnerships, entrepreneurship support. This is the strongest starting point for most communities, because it has a clear economic case, natural chamber and business stakeholders, and measurable outcomes
- Quality of life: education, childcare, healthcare access, housing, transportation. Start here if your community has identified specific service gaps and school districts ready to engage
- Full spectrum: workforce, quality of life, civic engagement, and advocacy. Reserve this for communities with

existing military family infrastructure and strong cross-sector buy-in. Trying to do everything at once usually produces nothing

A focused council that delivers two or three real policy changes in its first year builds more credibility than a broad council that produces a report.

Step 3: Recruit Deliberately (the most important step)

Who you put in the room determines everything. A council that reflects only the most visible, most connected, or most senior spouses will produce solutions that work for the most visible, most connected, most senior spouses. Recruit across:

- Military branch: Army, Navy, Air Force/Space Force, Marine Corps, National Guard, Reserve
- Rank tier: Junior enlisted spouses, mid-grade, senior intentionally and equally
- Career stage: Early career, established professional, entrepreneur, student, career-paused, re-entering the workforce
- Lived experience: Foreign-born spouse, EFMP family member, OCONUS returnee, single-income household, dual-military couple
- Community sector: Education, healthcare, nonprofit, business, faith, local government
- Tenure: Newly arrived (under 6 months), mid-tour (1–2 years), long-term or retirement-eligible

Do not rely on formal spouse club leadership as your primary pipeline. Reach into professional networks, nonprofit boards, PTAs, and informal community groups. The spouse who has never been asked to be in a room like this is often the one with the most valuable perspective.

A note on ethical engagement: Military spouses have historically been recruited as free labor by well-meaning organizations. If your council involves significant time commitments, advocate for compensation such as stipends, honoraria, or at minimum, childcare coverage and meals at meetings. Recognize contributions publicly. Treat council service as professional experience, because it is.

Step 4: Set Clear Expectations Before the First Meeting

Ambiguity is how advisory councils lose members. Before anyone is formally recruited, be explicit about:

- Time commitment: meetings per year, estimated prep hours per month
- Term length: one to two years recommended, with optional renewal
- Decision-making authority: Are members advising, recommending, or voting? Be honest about this
- What the council will produce: policy recommendations, community reports, public convenings, or specific program changes
- What support is provided: childcare, virtual attendance options, stipends, public recognition

If the honest answer to any of these is “we haven’t decided yet,” decide before you recruit. Asking someone to commit their time to a structure that hasn’t been defined is a fast way to lose the trust you need.

Step 5: Run Meetings that Produce Decisions, not Just Conversation

Every meeting should answer three questions before it ends:

1. What did we commit to last time, and what happened?
2. What is the one decision or recommendation we are making today?
3. What are we each committing to before the next meeting, and who owns it?

Publish a one-page summary within 48 hours of every meeting shared with members, the anchor institution, installation partners, and any stakeholders affected by decisions made. This creates a paper trail that survives leadership transitions and demonstrates to military spouses that their input is being acted on.

Step 6: Build for the Person Who Comes after You

The council should be more durable than any of its founding members. From day one:

- Maintain a shared digital folder: meeting notes, member contacts, active recommendations, decisions made and outcomes tracked
- Write an onboarding document for incoming members so context is never lost
- Build a formal handoff process: outgoing members brief incoming members before departing, not after
- Connect the council's work to a multi-year community plan so it survives a change in mayor, garrison commander, or chamber leadership

What Success Looks Like:

- **At 6 months:** The council has met at least twice, produced one concrete recommendation, and has a functioning contact list and shared folder
- **At 1 year:** At least one policy or program change has been made as a direct result of council input. Members feel their time is being respected and their input is being acted on
- **In 2 years:** The council has survived at least one leadership transition: a new mayor, a new garrison commander, or multiple member PCS moves without losing momentum. New members onboard within 30 days of a departure

Quick-Start Worksheet

Before your first public recruitment, answer these:

- Anchor institution and primary point of contact:
- Scope focus at launch:
- Number of seats and target representation:
- Term length and renewal process:
- Meeting frequency and format (in-person/virtual/hybrid):
- Decision-making authority:
- Support provided to members:
- First deliverable and target date:
- How will you onboard new members when someone has a PCS?:
- How will you document and track recommendations?:

Focus Group Model

FOCUS GROUP: COMMUNITY-MILITARY COLLABORATION MODEL

Overview

Strong military communities are not built in isolation. They are built through consistent, intentional collaboration between local governments and the people living the experience day to day.

This model offers a structured but flexible approach for local governments to engage military members, spouses, and families in a way that produces real insight and forward progress. It is designed to be replicable across any installation-adjacent community, regardless of size or branch composition.

At its core, this is about creating a shared table. Not a one-time listening session, but an ongoing exchange where both sides bring knowledge, identify gaps, and work toward solutions together.

Model Structure

- Phase 1: Targeted Focus Group Series (3–5 Sessions)
- Phase 2: Community Presentation and Alignment
- Phase 3: Ongoing Monthly “Lunch and Learn” Series

Phase 1: Focus Group Series

This phase establishes the foundation. It gathers lived experience, identifies barriers, and begins shaping realistic solutions.

Participants

- 15 to 25 individuals representing a cross-section of the military-connected population:
- Active duty across branches
- Spouses and adult dependents
- Mixed ranks and leadership levels
- On-installation and off-installation residents

Diversity in experience is essential. The goal is not volume; it is range.

Purpose

- Identify quality of life barriers across housing, healthcare, childcare, employment, education, and community integration
- Define what “ideal” outcomes look like from the perspective of those directly impacted
- Build a collaborative working group that will carry insights forward

Structure

- Three to five sessions over a 6-10-week period
- 60 to 90 minutes per session

- Facilitated in a way that encourages equal participation and psychological safety

Sample Facilitation Approach

- Begin with small group discussions organized by shared identity or experience (for example, branch affiliation or housing status)
- Each group identifies:
 - Top three current challenges
 - Top three ideal outcomes
- Groups are then intentionally mixed to compare perspectives and identify patterns
- Facilitators document both overlap and divergence in responses
- Participants transition into working groups to begin shaping recommendations

This structure allows themes to emerge naturally while still guiding the group toward actionable outcomes.

Phase 2: Community Presentation

The final session of the focus group series culminates in a collaborative presentation.

Audience

- Local government representatives
- Installation leadership or liaisons
- Community organizations and service providers

Purpose

- Share findings grounded in lived experience
- Highlight gaps and opportunities
- Present community-informed recommendations

This is not a top-down briefing. It is a translation of community voice into actionable insight.

Phase 3: Monthly “Lunch and Learn”

This is where momentum is sustained. The focus group is not the end point. It evolves into a recurring, structured space for continued collaboration.

Format

- Monthly sessions hosted by local government or community partners
- Open to both military-connected participants and civilian stakeholders
- Each session centers on a specific topic (for example: childcare access, employment pathways, special education navigation, healthcare coordination)

Purpose

- Maintain open lines of communication
- Share resources in real time
- Provide education on systems that impact military families

- Track progress on previously identified issues
- Build relationships that make future collaboration easier and faster

Over time, this becomes a trusted space where information flows both ways. Local governments gain clarity. Military families gain access and understanding. Both sides move forward with better alignment.

Why this Model Works

- It prioritizes lived experience without losing structure
- It creates consistency instead of one-time engagement
- It builds relationships, not just reports
- It allows local governments to respond with accuracy instead of assumption

Most importantly, it recognizes that military families are not passive recipients of services. They are informed stakeholders with valuable insight into how systems succeed or fail in real time.

Implementation Considerations

- Partner with existing military spouse or community-led organizations to support outreach and trust-building
- Use simple tools to streamline participation:
- Interest forms (Google Forms)
- Shareable graphics with QR codes
- Be intentional about reaching voices that are often underrepresented
- Provide participation verification if needed for employment or duty-related absences
- Ensure accessibility in both format and location

Note on Origin

This model was initially developed through a structured focus group concept created by River Lopez at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. It was designed to bring together a diverse cross-section of military-connected participants and translate their input into community-facing action. The framework has since been adapted to support broader application across installation-adjacent communities.

WHAT ACTION CAN WE TAKE NOW?

Traditional military integration is often siloed, focusing heavily on the service member while leaving families to navigate local communities in isolation. This strategy proposes a shift from passive “on-base briefings” to an active, community-led welcome. By treating spouse integration as a mission-readiness priority, installations and civic leaders can drive local economic impact, reduce family stress, and foster long-term community retention.

A successful welcome is not a single event; it is a structured, inclusive, and parallel process. When a community intentionally removes barriers for all military family members especially those navigating complex OCONUS or foreign-born transitions it creates a “network effect” of advocacy and resilience that benefits the installation and the local economy alike. This ensures that military families are not merely stationed in a zip code but are professionally valued and feel at home.

Homefront Handoff

The transition of a military family into a new community is often treated as a logistical checkbox, a move of household goods and a change of physical address. The “Homefront Handoff” concept reimagines this transition as a strategic handoff between a military installation and its surrounding civilian community. At its core, this is about transforming a transient population into an integrated one by focusing on two parallel outcomes: Confidence and Connection.

- **The Foundations of Capability (Connectedness)**

True integration begins with the mastery of the local environment. When a family is equipped with “insider knowledge” the specific technical and logistical skills required to navigate a new geography safely their anxiety is replaced by a sense of capability. This is the first step of Connectedness: making the family visible and valued by building an information bridge before they even arrive. By providing families with the tools to manage their new infrastructure and local systems, we secure the home so the service member can focus on the mission. This capability allows a family to stop merely surviving their relocation and start truly staying in their new home.

- **The Architecture of Connection (Integration)**

Once a family feels capable, the focus shifts to creating a sense of belonging that extends past the installation gates. This is Integration in action the functional “Neighborhood Handshake” where a community moves beyond social networking and into systemic change. Implementation happens through a model where local businesses, government leaders, and established residents take an active stake in the success of the military family. It moves beyond social networking and into functional community immersion ensuring that military families aren’t just living near a city, but are woven into the fabric of the community.

- **Professional Stewardship and Advocacy (Continuity)**

For this culture of welcome to be sustainable, it must be supported by Continuity. This is the Advocacy Engine that ensures the “Neighborhood” remains open regardless of leadership changes or command rotations. It requires a dedicated architect an executive leader who can speak the language of both the military command and the local government. This leadership ensures that the “Neighborhood” is not just a friendly idea, but a reliable infrastructure supported by local policy, unified housing standards, and a committed board of community influencers.

Activating the Neighborhood

To move this philosophy from a conceptual framework into a living part of a community, the implementation follows a logical progression of building a coalition, defining knowledge, and establishing a professional backbone.

1. Identify the “Founding Architects” (Connectedness)

Assemble a small, high-leverage group of local influencers who bridge the civilian-military divide. This strategic board (ideally 3–5 people) should include local government representatives, business leaders, and established advocates to provide the institutional weight needed for funding and policy access.

2. Map the “Local Knowledge” Gaps (Connectedness)

Identify the specific logistical hurdles the “secret language” that cause the most stress for new arrivals. Pinpointing the top “capability killers” (such as complex school lotteries or unique utility systems) allows the organization to build a curriculum that earns immediate trust through practical problem-solving.

3. Establish Professional Leadership & Advocacy (Continuity)

To ensure a reliable community infrastructure, the model requires a dedicated, salaried Executive Lead. This professional manages high-level relationships and ensures the organization has a voice in local housing and policy decisions, aligning community standards with the requirements necessary for military family resilience.

4. Launch the “Digital Entryway” (Connectedness)

Initiate “virtual integration” before the family physically arrives. By delivering high-value, insider intelligence through digital briefings or webinars, the organization builds Confidence before the move begins, establishing itself as a primary trusted resource.

5. Execute the Community Immersion Model (Integration)

This is a structured, early-entry engagement strategy designed to bridge the gap between the military installation and the surrounding civilian community. By facilitating a transition from passive appreciation to active readiness, the program reduces the “culture shock” of relocation and drives local economic impact.

- a. **The Triad Partnership:** Success is driven by the Installation (logistics and access), Government/Civic Leadership (program design), and the Private Sector (incentives and sponsorship).
- b. **The Guided Welcome Tour:** Replaces static on-base briefings with recurring off-base excursions that bring newcomers directly into the community to learn about services and opportunities.
- c. **Cultural & Educational Anchors:** Utilizes 2–3 “Must-See” local stops (Museums, Universities, etc.) as official hosts for off-post briefings, grounding families in the history and pride of their new home.

6. Formalize the “Neighborhood Handshake” (Integration)

Create a tangible link between families and the local economy. Partnering with local businesses to provide essential “Welcome Services” rather than just generic discounts incentivizes families to leave the installation bubble and begin their Connection to the community on day one.

The “Homefront Handoff” framework moves a community from the role of a passive host to an active partner in military family resilience. This model allows installation leadership to outsource required in-processing to local experts, while the local community captures “leaked” revenue. By intentionally weaving Connectedness, Integration, and Continuity into the fabric of local operations, we replace the uncertainty of relocation with a professional standard of readiness. When we equip families with the Confidence to master their environment and the Connection to access local networks, we ensure they are not merely stationed in a ZIP code, but are deeply rooted, professionally valued, and truly home.

7. Host Some Events: 15 Simplified Event Ideas

1. **Welcome Coffee & Conversation:** Host a monthly drop-in coffee at a library, church hall, or chamber office where newcomers and long-timers can meet, using a simple sign-in sheet and two or three conversation prompts.
2. **Guided Neighborhood Welcome Tour:** Run a recurring, 90-minute van or car-caravan tour of key community spots such as schools, parks, grocery stores, and city offices using the same route and handout each time so any volunteer can lead it.

3. **Military Spouse Roundtable:** Convene a small, facilitated discussion every quarter around one topic such as childcare, employment, or schools in a free room, with five to 10 guiding questions and someone assigned to take notes.
4. **Community Resource Speed Meet:** Set up tables for local organizations such as schools, employers, nonprofits, and faith groups and rotate small groups of spouses between them every 10-15 minutes using a simple bell and printed table map.
5. **Family Game Night at a Community Space:** Reserve a low-cost venue such as a school cafeteria, rec center, or church hall, ask families to bring board games and snacks, and provide name tags and a brief welcome so people mix beyond who they came with.
6. **Local Landmarks Walk or History Stroll:** Partner with a local historian, teacher, or tourism office to lead a short walking tour downtown or near base using the same route each time, with a one-page script that can be reused.
7. **Career & Skills Huddle for Spouses:** Hold a one-hour gathering in a coworking space or library where spouses share job leads, LinkedIn tips, and local training options, using a recurring agenda and a shared opportunity board.
8. **Ask the School Team Night:** Invite school counselors, principals, and a district liaison to a simple Q&A evening for military families in a school library, collecting questions in advance and using a standard slide deck each year.
9. **Community Service Micro-Project:** Organize a two-to-three-hour project like a park cleanup, food drive sorting, or neighborhood spruce-up by partnering with one nonprofit, setting a clear start and end time, and providing all supplies on site.
10. **Meet Your City Open House:** Co-host an evening at city hall or a civic building where departments have small tables and handouts, with a short welcome from the mayor and a simple passport card that families get stamped as they visit.
11. **Local Business Welcome Night:** Invite a handful of spouse-friendly employers and small businesses to a mixer at the chamber or a coffee shop, with each partner offering one tangible newcomer perk and a contact card.
12. **Seasonal Potluck & Story Swap:** Schedule a fall, winter, spring, and summer potluck at a park pavilion or community room, using an online sign-up for dishes and a light prompt like sharing a favorite duty station story.
13. **Kids' Community Explorer Day:** Plan a simple scavenger hunt or passport activity around a park, museum, or campus where kids collect stickers or stamps, using the same printed clues and map for every iteration.
14. **Virtual Check-In / Lunch & Learn:** Host a short Zoom or Teams session over lunch once a quarter with one local expert such as a school liaison, employer, or provider and a standard format with 15 minutes of content and 30 minutes of Q&A.
15. **Faith & Community Partner Breakfast:** Invite pastors, chaplains, nonprofit leaders, and school representatives to a simple breakfast once or twice a year with a printed one-pager of current military family priorities and two to three discussion questions to gather ideas.

HOW DO WE KEEP IT GOING?: CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT PLAYBOOK

A Simple Rhythm for Staying Connected

This tool is designed to help communities build on the work already introduced in the CIC Toolkit. It does not add a new framework. Instead, it gives communities a simple, repeatable way to keep using the Readiness Checklist, Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet, Focus Group Model, Community Advisory Model, and Homefront Handoff over time.

The goal is straightforward: do not let good intentions, strong relationships, or useful ideas disappear when leadership changes, spouses PCS, or momentum slows. This playbook helps communities create a rhythm that is easy to follow, easy to repeat, and easy to hand off.

How This Tool Works

The goal is to repeat three simple moves that build on one another: Check In, Connect, and Follow Through.

| Move | When to Use It | Main Purpose | Tools It Builds On |
|----------------|------------------------|---|--|
| Check In | Once a year | Establish shared priorities and a baseline | Community Readiness Self-Assessment / Readiness Checklist |
| Connect | Once a quarter | Stay in relationship with real people and real issues | Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet, Focus Group Model, Community Advisory Model |
| Follow Through | After every engagement | Capture what happened and make the next step clear | Homefront Handoff, Community Immersion, Advisory and Focus Group follow-up |

Annual Planning Snapshot

Use this section at the start of each year or planning cycle.

| Item | Community Notes |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Assessment date | |
| Team completing this review | |
| Connectedness score | |
| Integration score | |
| Continuity score | |
| Top Connectedness priority this year | |
| Top Integration priority this year | |
| Top Continuity priority this year | |
| Lead point of contact | |
| Shared folder or record location | |

Move 1: Check In

Purpose

Use this step to get your leadership team on the same page about how well your community is currently supporting military families and where attention is needed most.

Use This Tool

- Community Readiness Self-Assessment / Readiness Checklist

Checklist

- Gather a small group of leaders, such as local government, chamber, school district, installation liaison, and key nonprofit partners.
- Complete the Readiness Checklist together.
- Review where scores are strongest and where gaps are most visible.
- Choose one priority for Connectedness, one for Integration, and one for Continuity.
- Write those priorities down in one shared place.
- Name one person who will keep the process moving.

This Step Produces

| Output | Completed? | Notes |
|-----------------------------|------------|-------|
| Annual readiness scores | | |
| Three community priorities | | |
| Named lead point of contact | | |
| Shared record of results | | |

Move 2: Connect

Purpose

Use this step to stay connected to military spouses, families, and community partners in a way that is active and current, not assumed or outdated.

Use These Tools

- Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet
- Focus Group: Community-Military Collaboration Model
- Community Advisory Model

Quarterly Options

Communities should do at least one of the following each quarter.

| Quarterly Action | What It Looks Like | Completed? | Notes |
|----------------------------|---|------------|-------|
| Update the stakeholder map | Add new names, remove outdated contacts, identify new connectors | | |
| Host a focus conversation | Ask military spouses and families what is working and what still feels hard | | |
| Convene the advisory group | Review what has been heard and identify one practical next step | | |

Checklist

- Review the Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet and update key contacts.
- Add newly arrived spouses, leaders, or community connectors.
- Note any key departures, PCS moves, or leadership transitions.
- Hold a focus group, listening session, or small conversation tied to current priorities.
- Bring what was heard into an advisory meeting or leadership check-in.
- Identify one practical action to carry forward before the next quarter.

Quarterly Notes Tracker

| Quarter | Who did we hear from? | What did we learn? | One action we agreed to try |
|---------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Q1 | | | |
| Q2 | | | |
| Q3 | | | |
| Q4 | | | |

Move 3: Follow Through

Purpose

Use this step after every meaningful engagement so the work leaves a trail, progress is visible, and the next leader does not have to start from zero.

Use These Concepts

- Homefront handoff
- Community immersion or guided welcome tour
- Follow-up practices from the Focus Group and Community Advisory models

After Every Engagement Checklist

- Record the date and type of engagement.
- Record who participated.
- Write down the top three things heard or learned.
- Identify any commitments, recommendations, or next steps.
- Assign one person responsible for follow-up.
- Set a date to report back.
- Store notes in the shared folder or binder.

One-Page Debrief Template

| Item | Notes |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| Date | |
| Type of engagement | |
| Hosted by | |
| Who participated | |
| Top 3 things we heard | |
| Decisions or commitments made | |
| Follow-up owner | |
| Report-back date | |
| Where notes are stored | |

Homefront Handoff Follow-Up

Use this quick section after a welcome event, guided tour, digital briefing, or community immersion activity.

| Question | Notes |
|--|-------|
| What seemed most helpful to newcomers? | |
| What was confusing or missing? | |
| Which local partner added the most value? | |
| What should be repeated next time? | |
| What should be improved before the next event? | |

Quick Checklist

- Collect simple participant feedback.
- Thank partners and participants.
- Update welcome materials or tour content based on what was learned.
- Save feedback where future organizers can find it.

Year-End Review

At the end of the year, or before a new planning cycle begins, use this page to look back before starting again.

| Review Question | Community Notes |
|---|-----------------|
| What improved most this year? | |
| Where did momentum stall? | |
| Which tool was used most effectively? | |
| Which relationships became stronger? | |
| What needs to be handed off to the next leader or team? | |
| What should be our top three priorities next year? | |

Year-End Checklist

- Revisit the Readiness Checklist.
- Compare this year's scores to the last baseline.
- Review quarterly notes and debriefs.
- Identify what should continue, stop, or change.
- Confirm who will carry the work into the next cycle.
- Save this review in the shared record.

Keep It Simple

This playbook is meant to be practical, not burdensome. If a community only starts with one annual check-in, one quarterly connection point, and one consistent debrief format, that is still progress. What matters most is that the work becomes visible, repeatable, and easier for the next person to continue.

MORE TO COME!

- Foreign-Born Military Spouses: From Overlooked to Essential
- The OCONUS Spouse Experience
- Special Considerations
 - National Guard and Reserve Spouses
 - Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) Families
- Social Engagement
- Ways to Attract Longterm Military Community Members
- Noted Gaps

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal & Department of War (DOW)

- Instructional Overhaul: Revise family readiness center instructions to mandate pointed engagement with off-base helping agencies.
- Operational Staffing: Mandate 100% staffing for wing/garrison/community partnership offices to ensure continuity.
- National Pipeline Integration: Explicitly link community hubs to the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) and Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO).
- DSLO Coordination: Require installation command to work directly with the Defense State Liaison Office on regional policy barriers.
- Communication: Utilize the DEER system to generate opt-out structured communication chains at each installation for weekly updates on community/family engagement events.

State & Regional Government

- Professional Reciprocity: Streamline licensure for spouse-owned businesses and portable professions.
- The “Spouse-Ready” State Badge: Create a formal designation for businesses meeting criteria: flexible scheduling, remote options, and PCS support.
- Evidence-Based Family Support: Fund programs like Strong Military Families that focus on stress reduction and social connection for caregivers and children.

Local Government

- The Paid Liaison Position: A dedicated role (City Manager’s office/Chamber/Nonprofit) to build relationships, coordinate communication, and funnel family feedback to leadership.
- Civic Leadership & Inclusion:
 - Seats at the Table: Priority consideration for spouses on citizen advisory panels and special project teams (Housing, Education, Public Safety).
 - Support for Service: Micro-stipends or childcare support for spouses serving in time-intensive civic roles.
- Housing & Homesteading:
 - Financial Incentives: Partner with banks on first-time homebuyer grants.
 - Tax Relief: Explore property tax relief for military families who homestead and commit to staying beyond active service.
- Education: “Welcome Home” workshops on VA benefits and local credit-building.

Local School Districts

- Enrollment Equity: Transparent school choice lotteries that accommodate mid-year arrivals.
 - Reserved “lottery seats” specifically for military students moving in after standard deadlines.
- The Military Family School Portal: A centralized digital hub for:
 - Plain-language guidance on 504/IEP transfers and gifted programs.
 - Contact info for Military School Liaisons and Purple Star points of contact.
- Peer Connection: Support student-led military-connected clubs at the middle and high school levels.

Chamber of Commerce & Private Sector

- Economic On-Ramps:
 - The Leadership Gift: Gift seats in civic leadership programs to military spouses annually.
 - Spouse Business Fellows: Establish dedicated cohorts for military spouse professional development.
- Spouse-Friendly Employer Ecosystem:
 - Hiring Commitments: Formalized “Preferred Partnership” for businesses that value remote work and PCS realities.
 - Career Nights: Recurring networking events with employers who understand the military lifestyle.
- Entrepreneurship Support:
 - Reduced Friction: Simplified permitting and no-cost licenses for home-based businesses.
 - Infrastructure: Coworking “open desk” passes for portable workers.
 - Specialized Training: Small business workshops focusing on “branding that travels” and online sales.

Refining the Framework

While this project is built on data and personal experience, its foundation is individual stewardship. The members of the 2025/2026 MSLI cohort have invested hundreds of hours of emotional labor and professional expertise into this work. This isn't just a collection of insights; it is a deliberate act of care by spouses who are navigating the same systems they seek to improve. This dedication ensures that every recommendation is backed by a commitment to the long-term thriving of military families.

To maintain professional integrity, the following limitations in representation are noted:

- Household Composition: The cohort primarily reflects opposite-sex structures and does not currently include veteran-spouses. The lived experiences of same-sex households, dual-military couples, and veteran-spouse families remain vital areas for future study.
- Systemic Access: Participants are largely established in leadership roles, which may introduce a bias toward those with existing advocacy networks over those who are socially isolated or underemployed.
- Career & Financial Stage: Representation is concentrated among mid-to-senior career stages. The specific resource vulnerabilities of junior-ranking families (E1-E4 and O1-O3) may not be fully captured.
- Geographic Variance: Insights primarily reflect experiences at larger installations; unique stressors for National Guard, Reserve, and remote-stationed families are noted as areas for further validation.

The Foundation: Great American Defense Communities

The insights within this project do not exist in a vacuum. They are made possible by the ongoing excellence in ADC communities. These regions serve as the frontline of support, turning policy into practice. Their work provides the essential “presence to partnership” bridge that allows leadership initiatives to take root. We recognize and build upon their tireless efforts to create inclusive, resilient environments where military families can truly integrate and flourish.

These findings reflect a highly engaged subset of the military spouse population. By combining the rigorous care of our cohort with the proven infrastructure of our defense community partners, we provide a model for growth. Future efforts will focus on validating these frameworks against even broader household configurations to ensure community readiness remains equitable and inclusive of all who serve.



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