

The Next Generation of Community Leaders

Last Modified on 01/02/2020 1:50 pm EST

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It started with a simple question: What if we invested in the new leaders who are investing their energy in defense community across the nation?

ADC, its Military Families & Veterans Council, and Blue Star Families—a nonprofit founded by military spouses in 2009—wanted to provide more resources for these emerging leaders. In fall 2017, they launched the Defense Community Leadership Academy, a one-day training event to help up-and-coming community leaders better nurture local networks of military family supporters and connect with their peers across the country.

The Academy marked the first time ADC and BSF have formally partnered, so the event had the added bonus of introducing the groups' members to the resources offered by the other. Each organization selected one-half of the Academy's 40-plus participants, with BSF choosing students from among their local chapters and communities. For ADC, candidates needed to have a connection to a defense community, region or state through their job or a volunteer role. Most of the ADC participants do not belong to the association or had recently joined.

One of the strengths of the Academy, first held in March 2018 in Washington, D.C., was it brought together participants from diverse backgrounds, including active-duty military personnel, military spouses and civilian leaders, said Katie Lopez, government relations manager for the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce. It helped bridge the longstanding gap between the two sectors, according to Lopez, who previously was the director of military affairs for the Christian County (Ky.) Chamber of Commerce.

The Academy's workshops and networking sessions allowed participants to begin the kind of conversations needed for the two sectors to work more closely together.

"It was great to see the Blue Star Family participants interacting with ADC participants, so when everyone goes back to their community, they can leverage that network for collaboration," Lopez said.

Brittany Boccher, who attended the Academy as a community leader supporting service

members at Little Rock Air Force Base, said the event exceeded her expectations.

“I definitely made a lot of networking connections, and it allowed me to work with people in different regions to help them work with military families,” said Boccher, who was president of the installation’s Spouses Club until recently and the Armed Forces Insurance Military Spouse of the Year for 2017-2018.

Lopez was an Academy faculty member, along with leading service member and military family support practitioners and other experts. Discussions covered the role the military plays in the surrounding community, identifying local issues to support, measuring progress in addressing quality-of-life issues, building support at the local level and defining the community leader’s role.

But more so than the tools and resources the Academy provided, its most valuable contribution almost certainly was the lesson it offered the participants of the need to connect with other military family support organizations in their regions. Too often, leaders singularly focus on their organization’s mission and lose sight of the potential to collaborate, Lopez said.

“DCLA was a great environment to open up that line of communication,” she said.

ADC offered the Academy through a special grant from its sponsor, the Defense Credit Union Council. BSF’s sponsor, USAA, provided similar support.
