

More Than A Duty Station, It's Home

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Frequent moves can leave military families feeling disconnected, isolated and stressed. Innovative programs in three of this year's Great American Defense Communities serve as examples of how communities can provide resources and support to ensure mission readiness and make every member of the family feel at home.

Displayed on a wall in many military families' homes is a sign that reads: "Home is where the military sends us." Yet moving to a new duty station does not mean a community instantly will feel like home. The stresses of introducing children to new school systems, rebuilding support networks or replacing a military spouse's job can make an inspirational slogan ring hollow for months after the last moving box has been discarded.

Finding ways to make a military family feel connected to a new place can be a challenge for every community with a military installation near its borders, especially since the average military family will relocate every two to three years, moving 10 times more often than civilian families.

Results from the 2016 Military Family Lifestyle Survey conducted by Blue Star Families, a Washington, D.C.- based advocacy group, help to highlight the impact that military service has on families, but it also raises broader challenges facing communities.

Of the nearly 8,400 respondents, 72 percent felt that the current operations tempo "exerts an unacceptable level of stress for a healthy work/family life." Three of the top five issues reported by service members and military spouses who took the survey are related to quality of life, including the impact of deployment on children, family stability and operational tempo.

Amy Jerome, senior director of community development and programs for Blue Star Families, said that one of the statistics from the survey that stands out the most is that 88 percent of those surveyed feel the general public does not understand the sacrifices made by service members and their families on a daily basis. For Jerome, that statistic represents an opportunity for defense communities.

"That's a powerful number," she said. "Communities need to find ways to build greater awareness. It's not that our civilian counterparts don't want to support their military-family neighbors; it's more likely that they don't know how. We need to help break

through the feeling of isolation that can happen when families move from duty station to duty station.”

Jerome, who also is a military spouse, speaks from experience.

“We have three kids, and I have endured a series of deployments over the last 20 years,” Jerome said. “So I know what it’s like to start from scratch someplace new, and I know that sometimes the hardest thing for my civilian neighbors to do was to just knock on the door and say hello because they’re afraid they might not have anything in common or maybe they assumed that we already have a network. In the end, that’s seldom the case. We’re trying to encourage more interactions where we’re bringing military families together with the greater community.”

Three of this year’s Great American Defense Communities are doing just that—finding ways to make military families feel connected.

In Christian County, Ky., the Chamber of Commerce’s Military Spouse Leadership Program is breaking the bubble of isolation and connecting spouses and families to the place they call home. Southeastern Connecticut’s Military Superintendent Liaison Committee serves as a model for how a longstanding partnership between a base and community can address challenges facing military-connected children and their families, while school districts within the Hampton Roads area of Virginia are using a host of programs and strategies at all levels to help military-connected students transition into new schools.

Breaking Out of the Bubble

“I always had one foot out the door ready to leave.”

Like many military spouses, Angela Cantrell was always prepared, somewhere in the back of her mind, to make the move to the next post, fully understanding that transience is part of the job description for most active-duty military and their families.

As a service member and a military spouse, Cantrell said she viewed duty stations as temporary addresses, convinced she wouldn’t be in one place long enough to make a difference.

As her husband approached his 10th year at Fort Campbell, Cantrell realized that after nearly a decade of living in a town near the fifth-largest Army base in the United States, she knew little about the defense community she called home—Hopkinsville, Ky. When she arrived in the community in 2007, Cantrell quickly slipped into a routine first defined

by toddler-friendly activities and then by her own job with the Kentucky Department of Juvenile Justice, always assuming another move was around the corner. It was the “bubble”—the day-in, day-out routine and the continual expectation that her time in this duty station was fleeting.

The bubble began to break in 2016 when she found herself part of a unique program—the Christian County Chamber of Commerce’s Military Spouse Leadership Program (MSLP). While only three days long, it was an experience that gave her and many other families who shared that feeling of isolation a “new sense of community” that helped her get beyond the daily routine.

“Looking back, if I would have jumped in with both feet, I would have appreciated prior duty stations more and could have been more involved,” said Cantrell, an Army veteran. “The MSLP opened so many doors that I didn’t know existed. It highlighted so many local businesses and community activities.”

Katie Lopez, director of military affairs for the Christian County Chamber, recognized the challenge of the bubble and created the MSLP in 2015 as a way to provide spouses with a military lifestyle-friendly version of the chamber’s civilian leadership course, which meant condensing a nine-month commitment into an action-packed three-day event and eliminating enrollment fees.

Lopez, an Army spouse herself, knows firsthand the importance of connecting military spouses to the civilian community. After moving to Christian County in 2013, Lopez spent 473 days unemployed, a stretch she blames, in part, on having to start from scratch to build a professional network.

“We wanted to develop this program so spouses could start building connections,” Lopez said.

MSLP participants gain insights on how Christian County functions as a community—politically, socially, economically and culturally. Spouses eat lunch with the mayor and other city officials, tour local nonprofit organizations, learn about school programs that support military children, and visit landmark local and veteran-owned businesses. The course culminates with a recognition ceremony at the Military Affairs Committee’s gala Eagle Ambassador Breakfast.

Since graduating from the MSLP, Cantrell and her family have participated in community service projects, supported veteran-owned businesses and found other ways to bond with Hopkinsville. Cantrell also took part in Citizens for Fort Campbell’s annual Chamber of

Commerce-sponsored lobbying trip to Washington, D.C., and she recently completed the Christian County Sheriff's Office Citizens Academy.

Cantrell said the spouses in the leadership program "all wanted to be involved. We just didn't know how and where to go."

Her newly ignited enthusiasm for the area has rubbed off on her entire family, who now are united in their plan to remain in Hopkinsville when her husband, Phillip, retires from active duty.

She said that for military families to get the most out of their time in communities—whether they're there for 10 months or 10 years—they need to approach each posting proactively, with open and eager minds.

"You have to be open to opportunities and be looking for them," Cantrell said. "You have to be willing to get invested. If you are going to stay in Hopkinsville/Christian County permanently, you want to be invested. But even if you don't plan on staying, find a way to get invested in your community and make it better. If you don't like it, make it better. If you like it, sustain it."

Always the New Kid

The first day of school can be a nerve-racking experience. Getting used to teachers, meeting classmates, trying to make friends, and understanding the ins and outs of a new school's routine and culture can be fraught with as many obstacles as opportunities. This is made even more challenging when you're new to an area. And what happens when you go through the process every few years between elementary school and high school?

As the child of military parents and having moved eight times during her childhood, Odyssey Switakowski understands the perils of being the new kid in school. She again experienced the new-school blues at the start of her freshman year when she moved from New Jersey to Green Run High School in Virginia Beach, Va.

"It definitely makes a difference academically if you don't have a lot of friends, because you feel like the oddball out," the 17-year-old explained. "You are more stressed about finding friends and trying to fit in, so you don't necessarily focus on your grades."

Children in military families know this scenario all too well. In addition to coping with a new socially charged school environment, they frequently are doing so with a parent deployed, which can leave support at home more strained. According to the Blue Star Families' survey, 51 percent of respondents said that U.S. Department of Defense services

are inadequate to support military children in coping with deployments. That's where support from actively engaged community organizations makes the difference.

Communities across the Hampton Roads region have recognized that to be successful, this support has to be built at various levels—from peer interactions to specially trained staff like guidance counselors and an entire school system focused on making sure every “new kid” succeeds.

When Switakowski arrived at Green Run, she turned her experience into action. Having heard about a program called Student 2 Student (S2S) at previous deployments, she approached school officials about starting a local chapter of S2S, ensuring that future students at Green Run would more quickly feel at home. S2S is an initiative of the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), a Harker Heights, Texas-based nonprofit founded in 1998 that works at the national level to ensure quality educational opportunities for military-connected children.

“School administrators definitely fell in love with the idea, and they wanted to start it up as soon as possible,” Switakowski said. “We went to my guidance counselor and she helped us start it.”

Because the community is home to so many military installations and the military families that support them, similar groups have taken root in a number of schools throughout the Hampton Roads area. At all grade levels, the program encourages students to take leadership roles in welcoming newcomers and helping them learn their new school's academic, social and cultural norms.

MCEC Student Programs Manager Debra Longley said civilian and military students come together to play an important part in a club's success.

“The military kids can empathize,” Longley said. “They know what it is like to move and unpack everything in a new room. They know how it feels to leave your best friend behind. The civilian kids know where the best hamburger place is, what movie theaters to avoid, what makes you fit in and what makes you stand out like a sore thumb. They know the local culture.”

S2S is just one of the programs offered by schools in Hampton Roads to help military-connected kids feel at home. While many programs focus on peer connections, many provide counseling and support for students and families, special training for military parents and teachers with military-connected students, and academic programs and projects designed to meet the unique needs of children in military households.

Guidance counselors attuned to military students' needs are a staple at many area schools. They not only provide an understanding of issues brought about by frequent moves and deployments, but also an in-depth knowledge of resources such as the Military Interstate Compact on Education, which ensures military children transferring between school districts and states are not stymied by different enrollment, eligibility and graduation requirements.

Navy veteran Amanda Yoder knew she had found her dream job when she was hired as a military-connected school counselor for Virginia Beach Public Schools (VBPS), a position focused on the "social and emotional needs" of military students.

"There could not be a job description more fitting for what I love," said Yoder, who has been with VBPS since 2013. While her position originally was funded by a federal grant, it now is locally funded, Yoder pointed out.

Yoder said some of her most important work is with high school students who often need their records "pieced together" to make certain they are on track for graduation after transferring from schools with different standards.

The special challenges military children face is one reason Norfolk Public Schools created the Department of Interagency Collaboration and Wraparound Services, according to Executive Director Sharon Byrdsong, who credits the new superintendent, Melinda Boone, with prioritizing the needs of military families. The department strives to develop strong working relationships with families and community partners to support students' academic progress, as well as their social, emotional and health needs.

Byrdsong said the district is discussing ways to expand its partnerships with local military bases. One possibility is a mentorship program with military spouses.

"We are extremely privileged and proud to serve the children whose parents serve our country every day," Byrdsong said. "We also recognize that these children have very unique needs that we are obligated to address as a school division."

While Hampton Roads is home to the largest naval base in the world and one of the largest concentrations of military families in the country, it doesn't always mean there is a big budget for educational programs. This is echoed by Monica Esqueda, an education professor at nearby Old Dominion University.

"Part of what is going to be successful comes with knowing your community and knowing what the families are looking for," Esqueda said. "'High-quality and impactful' doesn't always mean it costs a lot of money."

From students, staff and the entire education system across the Hampton Roads region, there is a commitment to make sure students don't always feel like the "new kid," and that's what makes this one of the great places for our military to call home.

A Strong Foundation of Support

When a fourth-grader entered his classroom visibly sad at the start of the year, Mary Morrisson Elementary School teacher Brett Merrill knew better than to chalk up the little girl's demeanor to the after-effects of a squabble with a friend or sibling.

The 10-year-old was missing her father, a Navy sailor who was deployed.

As a new teacher in Groton, Conn., Merrill said he might not have come to the right determination had he not been through the Groton School District's "Navy 101" training. The information boot camp, presented annually by Naval Submarine Base (NSB) New London's executive officer during teacher orientation explains the deployment cycle, command structure, lingo and other facets of military life to new staff.

"It gives you the feeling of being more prepared," said Merrill, who previously taught on Manhattan's Upper East Side. "The more information you have about your student population, the more success you will have with them."

When the girl told Merrill she would like to talk to a counselor, he was able to map out times for the pair to meet throughout the school year.

"Without the training, the outcome might have been different," Merrill said.

Navy 101 arms teachers with the right training so they can help students overcome challenges related to the military lifestyle. The program's roots can be traced to Southeastern Connecticut's Military Superintendent Liaison Committee (MSLC), a nationally recognized partnership of regional school districts and military installations that call the area home, including NSB New London, U.S. Coast Guard Academy, Coast Guard Station New London and the Connecticut National Guard.

"What immediately became clear to me is when military families get orders to this area, there is an instant connection that has been fostered through the MSLC," said Groton Public Schools Superintendent Michael Graner, who taught at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London while serving in the Coast Guard and led Ledyard Public Schools prior to taking Groton's top post.

The MSLC offers a seat at the table to superintendents in all eight districts in Southeastern Connecticut as well as Navy, Coast Guard and National Guard leadership, high school principals, community members and a representative of the MCEC. While not all superintendents attend every monthly meeting during the school year, a core group participates regularly. An annual breakfast meeting at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy's Officers' Club honors military volunteers and military spouses for work in the local schools.

Because there is a direct tie between a military family's happiness and a service member's ability to successfully perform his or her duties, the MSLC plays a vital role in the military community.

"People cannot focus on the mission if they are concerned about how their kids are doing at home, whether they're fitting in at school, whether they're getting an adequate education. If they are a special-needs family, are they getting the services they need?" NSB New London School Liaison Officer Miranda Chapman said. "Having that welcoming, supportive school is very important because the service member needs not to be distracted from what they need to do."

Former Charles Barnum Elementary School Principal Valerie Nelson, a longtime MSLC participant, said the committee highlighted the importance of having programs in place to ease the transition process for military families.

"As a community, we realized there needed to be some consistency for students transferring in to help them not only make the academic transition but the social transition, too," Nelson said. "We do a lot to make sure the student feels comfortable, feels welcome and feels a part of the school community from day one. This is true for parents, too."

Graner said his own military experience taught him that a school district often is "90 percent of the connection" a military family has to a community.

"Many committee members are former military, as are many of the educators, so it has been a foundation for making sure the schools are relevant to the families and meeting their needs," he said.

The MSLC was formed in 1995 in an effort to reverse state policies that did not allow school districts to accept school physical record forms from military health care providers. But Mystic, Conn., resident Kathleen O'Beirne, member emeritus of the MCEC and longtime MSLC member, traces the committee's origins to an "awakening" in the

community at the start of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. As then-deputy director of the Navy Family Services Center, O'Beirne joined forces with the school superintendent and base officials to provide parents with assurances that students would be safe from wartime threats.

"That was really the impetus for formation, as time went on, of the MSLC," she recalls.

O'Beirne said the MSLC's local legacy is a record of "wise decision-making" by educators and the military. In addition to planting the seed for the Navy 101 program, the MSLC has fostered partnerships between military installations and individual schools, spearheaded changes to the magnet school lottery system to ensure transitioning military students could apply, helped ensure students displaced by Navy housing privatization remained at their original schools while continuing to provide a blueprint for best practices when serving a mobile military student population.

"The MSLC has been a great venue for disseminating accurate information," Chapman said. "It starts with the superintendents, but then information is able to get to the people working one-on-one with our military families."

While the MSLC has laid the groundwork for strengthening the partnership between Southeastern Connecticut's military installations and its school districts, it creates an environment where everyone is focused on making military students feel at home in their classrooms.

"Our teachers do a phenomenal job," said Mary Morrisson Elementary School Principal Monica Franzone, noting that staff members recognize the personal sacrifice service members and their families make on behalf of their country. "It is not new to our teachers to have students coming and going frequently. They will find them a buddy, somebody to show them the ropes. New students are welcomed and assimilated rather quickly because of the [always-changing population] we live with here."
