



# How to Help Military & Veteran Families

FOR FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES

Military members' service to the country can create challenges for their families on many levels, presenting spiritual, physical, social and emotional issues. Across the Department of Defense, Active Duty, National Guard and Selected Reserve population, there are more than 2.25 million military personnel and more than 3.13 million family members, including spouses, children, and adult dependents, who know what it's like to have a loved one serve in the military.<sup>1</sup> Faith communities often reach out to the spouses, parents and children of service members, and as they seek opportunities for outreach and ministry these faith communities may serve as pillars of strength and support for them.

Faith can be an important factor in determining how a family deals with military service. Some families will turn their experiences into a positive experience for growth and learning, while others might struggle with their faith. Community and faith-based organizations can offer prayer, encouragement and spiritual optimism that will help families process their feelings and spiritual growth.



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## Did you know?

- » The White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, established in 2001, is committed to helping Americans improve their communities, regardless of their religious or political beliefs.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, it was refined and its name changed to the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.
- » On July 29, 1775, the Continental Congress established the military chaplaincy. Today, the Army, Navy and Air Force each have a separate Chaplain Corps. The Marine Corps and the Coast Guard are served by Navy chaplains. There are nearly 3,000 chaplains in the Army, Navy and Air Force, representing more than 130 different religious faiths and denominations.
- » As many as 700 chaplains and chaplain assistants are mobilized or deployed in support of contingency operations throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> No matter their own specific religious denomination, chaplains minister to military members of all faiths, and to those members' families.
- » Multiple deployments and the expanded role of the National Guard and Reserve can have significant, far-reaching effects on families and communities.<sup>4</sup>
- » Military chaplains themselves need support. Chaplains who deploy are not only separated from their spouses and children, but their spiritual families as well.

# Practical Applications

## IF YOU PROVIDE FAITH-BASED SUPPORT

- Contact local unit chaplains or other military personnel to offer assistance and learn about the needs of service members from your community. You may be able to “adopt” single service members or units and send care packages, connecting them with the community even though they are thousands of miles away.
- Learn about local military families in your faith community—who they are and what they need. Create a system to check in on these families during deployments and other family separations.
- Work with local military-sponsored family readiness or support groups to offer childcare activities or space for meetings.
- Plan activities specifically for children of service members. These activities can give a parent a much-needed break, but also can give them peace of mind knowing their child is in a safe place.
- Network with other faith-based organizations in your community to learn how they support military members and their families; perhaps you can work together.
- Start support groups for military spouses, parents of military members, children and teens.
- When welcoming families into your faith community, be sensitive to the ways that feelings and beliefs are expressed regarding armed conflicts; work to separate perceptions of war as a concept and the service members who are very personally involved. Military members and their families make tremendous sacrifices on behalf of the entire country, regardless of religious affiliation or the political landscape.



- Identify members within your faith community who are veterans. Create a mentoring or buddy program to connect them with those who are currently serving or invite a returned service member to assume a position of leadership in your congregation.
- Extend support and mentoring services to help homeless and nearly-homeless veterans return to self-sufficiency.

## Additional Resources

Working with and supporting military and veteran families carries a unique set of challenges and provides countless opportunities to demonstrate the strength of one's faith. Military culture promotes independence and a "can do" attitude, and some military members and their families may find it difficult to ask for help. Providing sensitive and compassionate care helps military families cope with the daily stress that comes with deployment. As you minister to military families, remember that for many families, few things are as meaningful as a listening ear or knowing that someone is praying for their loved one. Demonstrate those prayers with a note that simply says, "We prayed for [deployed service member's name] today." It can be the one piece of communication that gets a family member through another day.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » *Association for Clinical Pastoral Education*, [www.acpe.edu](http://www.acpe.edu)
- » *Deployment Health & Family Readiness Library*, [deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil](http://deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil)
- » *Faith Deployed-Daily Encouragement for Military Wives*, [www.faithdeployed.com](http://www.faithdeployed.com)
- » *Military Chaplains Association*, [www.mca-usa.org](http://www.mca-usa.org)
- » *Military Ministry*, [www.militaryministry.org](http://www.militaryministry.org)
- » *Ministering to Families Affected by Deployment: Deployment Resources for America's Clergy*, [www.chapnet.army.mil/pdf/resources.pdf](http://www.chapnet.army.mil/pdf/resources.pdf)
- » *National Association of Faith Based Initiatives*, [www.nafbi.com](http://www.nafbi.com)
- » *National Guard Office of the Chaplain*, [www.nationalguard.mil/jointstaff/ss/hc](http://www.nationalguard.mil/jointstaff/ss/hc)
- » *National Military Family Association*, [www.militaryfamily.org](http://www.militaryfamily.org)
- » *U.S. Air Force Chaplain Corps*, [www.chaplaincorps.af.mil](http://www.chaplaincorps.af.mil)
- » *U.S. Army Chaplaincy*, [www.army.mil/info/organization/chaplaincy](http://www.army.mil/info/organization/chaplaincy)
- » *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships*, [www.hhs.gov/partnerships](http://www.hhs.gov/partnerships)
- » *U.S. Navy ChaplainCare*, [www.chaplaincare.navy.mil](http://www.chaplaincare.navy.mil)

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## About MFRI

The goal of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is to create meaningful relationships that bring organizations together in support of military families. Working with researchers and practitioners from both the military and civilian communities, MFRI strives to develop outreach and research programs grounded in scientific evidence.



## About the *How to Help* Series

The *How to Help* series equips communities to better serve service members, veterans and their families. The series offers effective, evidence-based guidance on how best to help military and veteran families given the unique challenges they face. Each *How to Help* addresses a different segment of that community, such as extended family, friends and neighbors; teachers; early childhood educators; faith-based groups; and professional service providers. We hope that by increasing understanding of the unique stresses, obstacles and opportunities that often accompany military service; we can strengthen communities by building their capacity to better support the military families within them.

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## RESEARCH REFERENCES

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- 2 Office of the Press Secretary, the White House. (2009). Obama announces White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships [Press release]. Retrieved from [www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/ObamaAnnouncesWhiteHouseOfficeofFaith-basedandNeighborhoodPartnerships/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/ObamaAnnouncesWhiteHouseOfficeofFaith-basedandNeighborhoodPartnerships/)
- 3 United States Army Chaplain Corps, Office of the Chief of Chaplains. (2012). *Spiritual leadership for the Army family: About us*. Retrieved from [www.chapnet.army.mil](http://www.chapnet.army.mil)
- 4 Office of the President of the United States (2011). Washington, D.C.: The White House. Retrieved from [http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2011/0111\\_initiative/strengthening\\_our\\_military\\_january\\_2011.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2011/0111_initiative/strengthening_our_military_january_2011.pdf)



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