



Get to Know the National Guard

The National Guard is an important source of manpower, support, and expertise for the military. These service members and their families face challenges that are similar to those confronting active military personnel, such as the inherent risk of military life, busy schedules while on military duty, and the need to keep their marriages and families strong. However, guard members have some very unique challenges such as balancing their civilian employment with their military obligations and the fact that they are geographically dispersed over more than five thousand communities throughout the country. Consequently, these service members may not live near military bases where support services are readily available, may not know what services are actually available, and may encounter difficulties when attempting to access services. They and their families also might feel like outsiders to the overall military structure.

The National Guard is a part of the larger U.S. military structure. As background, the Department of Defense (DoD) is comprised of four main military branches: Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. The National Guard is exclusive to the Army and Air Force. Therefore, the term “National Guard” refers to the Army National Guard and Air National Guard, which are components of the Army and Air Force branches, respectively. Both the Army and Air Force have service members in three components: active (those who are full-time, or “active duty”), the reserve (part-time soldiers and airmen similar to the National Guard but without the dual or state mission as discussed below), and the National Guard. The Navy and the Marine Corps both have active and reserve components; however, neither have National Guard elements. The bottom line is that National Guard members and their families are very much a part of the military, but how they fit into the bigger picture of the military is not always understood by the civilian population.

Each state, along with three U.S. territories and the District of Columbia, has its own National Guard organization comprising both the Army and Air National Guard and totaling approximately 470,000 members. National Guard soldiers and airmen are citizens first and service members second. When their unit is not called up for war or another military need, these men and women are police officers, teachers, accountants, students, homemakers, and more. One weekend a month they don the uniform and meet at a local military facility to participate in training, which prepares them to answer the nation’s call to war or to assist with a natural disaster. National Guard members often are referred to as “Weekend Warriors” or “Citizen Soldiers.” In addition to this one weekend a month, National Guard members typically work two weeks in a year in what is most often referred to as “Annual Training” — a period of time for more in-depth preparation to perform their military duty should the need arise.

In addition to the typical military obligations that exist, a guard member might find him- or herself deployed for extended periods of time. Both overseas war and domestic tragedy require the services of the National Guard, and the call-up for service can come as an unexpected challenge to these service members and their families who may have grown used to a “Weekend Warrior” schedule. “I didn’t sign up for this,” is a common thought in the minds of National Guard members and their families, and this sentiment intensified after our country entered the post Sept. 11, 2001, conflicts. But as deployments have become the norm for the National Guard, most members and their families have become accustomed to what it now means to be a part of the system. As the guard has become more involved in local, national, and foreign efforts, political and military leaders have touted the vital contribution of the National Guard members and their families in supporting military needs.

Dual Mission

National Guard soldiers and airmen are unique from the other military components (e.g., active duty Army and Air Force, and the Army and Air Force Reserve), in that they have what is often called a “dual mission.” While in their home state, territory, or district, a National Guard unit is under the command of the state leadership. In most cases, the governor of the state is the commander-in-chief of his or her state’s National Guard forces. The governor can call up the National Guard to assist with local emergencies or disasters. Generally these state missions are considered non-combat. A clear example of this was in the late summer of 2005 when Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. Thousands of National Guard members were mobilized to provide security, search and rescue, demolition/reconstruction and logistical support.

However, the National Guard, as part of the overall U.S. military forces, can also be called up to active service in support of wartime operations overseas. The president has the ultimate authority to activate National Guard units to support combat efforts in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

The National Guard has played a significant role in foreign operations since the start of military conflict over the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Hundreds of thousands of National Guard members have deployed both home and abroad, many for multiple tours ranging from three months to two years. The anticipation of deployment, as well as the deployment itself, creates serious strain on home and family life and civilian employment.

Support to the National Guard

Because of the unprecedented need for National Guard support in recent years, leaders have dedicated funding to providing additional support and resources to the guard members and their families. Many programs have been developed and implemented with the intent of increasing both readiness and resilience.

Most of the programs designed to support National Guard families are under the direction of each state, territory, or district National Guard Family Program. While structures vary from state to state, most such programs are led by a state family program director — a military or government employee who heads up all of the efforts that support readiness and resiliency among guard members and families. These directors often oversee or are involved in the implementation of plans involving family readiness volunteers and employees, family assistance, military family life consultants (counselors), suicide prevention, employer support, financial counseling, reunion and reintegration, and child and youth programs.

Chaplains also provide additional support to National Guard members and families. Chaplains serve National Guard commanders to ensure that the spiritual and moral well-being of soldiers and airmen, and their families is addressed. In addition, chaplains provide counseling and training in relationship skills building, personal wellness, crisis management, grief and loss, and resiliency. A major program that National Guard chaplains facilitate is called Strong Bonds. Strong Bonds is an education program designed to empower military couples, families, and single service members with skills that enhance relationship quality and reduce negative and destructive relational behaviors. Strong Bonds is usually taught in a weekend retreat format, using established curricula that chaplains have been trained to use (e.g., PREP®, PICK®, Couple Communication™, and 7 Habits of Highly Effective families™).

Opportunities for Marriage and Relationship Education

While many efforts within the military are aimed at creating strong relationships, National Guard leaders all understand that their reach and effect is limited to the very small amount of time and resources available to engage this geographically disbursed population. More can be done

in communities to provide National Guard members and families with appropriate and readily available tools to assist them in dealing with the complexities of their lives and relationships.

As a community marriage and relationship educator, you are well-positioned to provide relationship enhancement programming to National Guard members and families. You, like the National Guard personnel, are in the community. You have the ability to reach this group in innovative and consistent ways. National Guard leaders know that they cannot do it alone. They rely on the community to provide the best possible resources and opportunities to build strong and ready soldiers and airmen and their families.

Opportunities for Marriage and Relationship Education

This toolkit will help you in your desire to both gain access to and develop marriage and relationship education program services for National Guard members and families in your community. You will find many tools, including quick reference guides, group activities, and illustrations. These tools are designed to make you familiar with National Guard jargon and programs, help you understand the unique stressors of National Guard members and their families, and provide guidance on connecting with key leaders in your community. Additional tools will equip you to tailor programming to reflect issues and scenarios that will resonate with a National Guard audience. Many of the tools provided in this toolkit are modules that you can use in just about any marriage and relationship workshop, either as stand-alone items or as supplements to other programs you teach. We invite you to use these items to make the best of your programming as you courageously serve the brave men and women of the National Guard and their families!

The National Guard Marriage/Relationship Education Toolkit

This toolkit will help you in your desire to both gain access to and develop marriage and relationship education program services for National Guard members and families in your community. You will find many tools, including quick reference guides, group activities, and illustrations. These tools are designed to make you familiar with National Guard jargon and programs, help you understand the unique stressors of National Guard members and their families, and provide guidance on connecting with key leaders in your community. Additional tools will equip you to tailor programming to reflect issues and scenarios that will resonate with a National Guard audience. Many of the tools provided in this toolkit are modules that you can use in just about any marriage and relationship workshop, either as stand-alone items or as supplements to other programs you teach. We invite you to use these items to make the best of your programming as you courageously serve the brave men and women of the National Guard and their families!