

A Win-Win Partnership: Marriage/Relationship Education and the National Guard

The Army and Air National Guards represent a unique opportunity for local family support professionals to provide marriage enrichment and education to military families. National Guard members, referred to as “Citizen Soldiers” or “Airmen”, and their spouses are not as easily identified as others in the military. These individuals serve both the state and federal governments and are civilians’ next door neighbors. They rarely live on a military base. There are over 365,000 Citizen Soldiers and 107,000 Airmen in 3,000 communities across the United States and its territories. Just under half of the Army National Guard members are married and almost 60% of the Air Guard are married (see NHMRC Fact Sheet [Marriage and Divorce in the National Guard](#)).

The National Guard’s dual mission is to fight terrorism abroad as well as to provide security at home. Recently, the “Total Force Policy” enlarged the federal mission of the National Guard to include regular deployments for national military objectives, thus making deployments of National Guard members much more frequent than a decade ago. Many have studied the effects of deployment on marriage and family. Community-based services and programs are working diligently to meet the needs of families who are coping with deployment and reentry; researchers have found that no factor predicted positive coping and adjustment more than having a strong marriage.

Guard families are frequently self-reliant and resourceful. They have a keen appreciation for diversity and global communities and a commitment to a national mission. While the honor and benefits of service are considerable, the Guard faces



circumstances unique from other branches of the military that challenge their ability to maintain happy and healthy romantic relationships. For example, Guard families may not be located near a base where family support services are available; they may not know other Guard families; Guard families are less likely to be prepared for a deployment than active military families; and there is often a disconnect between “citizen” and “soldier” resources. Unlike active duty troops whose sole career is the military, National Guard members have parallel civilian careers. They must juggle their civilian lives as well as the demands of the military. When activated they not only leave family responsibilities but civilian jobs as well. Each time they are activated, the National Guard members and their families transition to military support services, especially medical insurance and deployment related services. When the activation or deployment is over, they must transition back to civilian providers. Sometimes, Guard men and women return from deployment to find they have no job.

The National Guard offers supports to families; however, they may be underutilized and vary by state. A key service offered by the Guard is family readiness. These services have the objective of preparing families for deployment and reentry (among other things) and there is agreement that taking care of families is central to maintaining overall force readiness. Thus, marriage/relationship education (MRE) can be a core skill set offered to support this objective. This Tip Sheet offers tips for marriage/relationship educators who would like to form a partnership with the National Guard. See also [Strengthening Resources and Supports for National Guard Couples and Families: Proceedings Summary](#) for more information.

Approach the National Guard

Before you contact the Guard in your state, it is a good idea to learn about military culture, language, and protocol. The military is a hierarchical organization. It is composed of officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel. There is the expectation that one will be addressed formally, using one's title or rank, as a sign of respect. Often one will hear "sir" and "ma'am." Be prepared to use this language when addressing leadership.

Meet the leaders. You will want to engage various leaders in discussions about MRE. The following table offers an overview of the main role of each leadership position and how it might serve as a valuable ally for your program. Keep in mind that roles may vary across state.

Position/Title	Role	How they can help
State Family Program Coordinator	Charged with family support programming.	May already be aligned with local community resources and can help make appropriate referrals to your MRE program.
Commanding Officer*	Leadership of the units. (Leaders change frequently)	May encourage military couples to attend your MRE program.
Chaplain	Provides counseling, referrals, may teach MRE.	May encourage military couples to attend your MRE program.
Family Readiness Group (FRG)	Each unit forms an FRG made up of unit spouses and other family members. The FRG serves as a conduit of information and linkages to military and community resources.	Can encourage attendance and provide mentorship/support for individuals and families.

*Note: You may want to consider conducting a protocol visit. This is a formal visit made out of courtesy to the commanding officer in order to introduce key personnel.

Show that you know your population. When interacting with any leadership or military-based service providers, convey that couples with a strong marriage are almost three times (289%) more likely to adjust well to military separations than couples who do not describe their marriage as being strong. Further, the next best predictive factor of adjusting well to separation is a strong social support system by 24%. The stay-behind-spouses report relying on other unit members, family and friends for support. Your MRE services are an opportunity to make marriages stronger and help members of the National Guard meet other couples who may ultimately form support networks.

Make it clear that you will address issues specific to the National Guard (and ensure your program integrates these nuances into the curriculum you are using). For example, mention:

- The MRE curriculum will offer a skill set for couples that will help them with the difficult transitions between civilian life and military life. A core goal of your program is to bridge formal programs and informal networks (friends, coworkers, etc.) to ensure that National Guard families are equipped to deal with stressors.
- Make it clear you are there to supplement, rather than supplant, current services. For example, many chaplains offer Marriage Enrichment weekends through the *Strong Bonds* and *Yellow Ribbon* programs. However, chaplains are often occupied with crisis management so your assistance can help lighten their load.
- Your workshop will give service members the tools to adjust to the period following the return of the deployed service member, which military families say is often more stressful on the relationship than when he or she was deployed.

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- MRE services teach both emotional intelligence and communication skills that will help families negotiate through the emotional cycle of deployment. The cycle includes anticipation of departure, detachment and withdrawal, emotional disorganization, recovery and stabilization, anticipation of return, return adjustment and renegotiation, and reintegration and stabilization (*note: various models exist*).
- Other core skills that can help Guard families include effective communication, problem solving, teamwork, and conflict resolution.
- You (or your marriage educator) will come prepared with everything you might need to present your program. That includes all electronic equipment. (If the program is at a military installation, no matter how well equipped the classroom is, do not expect to be able to use their equipment. For security reasons, memory sticks are not allowed in military computers nor is access to the Internet easily available.) Keep in mind that unless the military installation is in a central location for Guard families, you will most likely conduct your program in a different location to make it more accessible for those who do not live on base.
- Make it clear that although the demographics of your workshops may vary, you (or your marriage educators) will have and utilize examples that pertain to the National Guard

and military life as appropriate. In the event that you are serving National Guard members in your workshop, you will want to ensure its relevance and work with military providers to help the Guard service members navigate through both military and civilian resources.

Be flexible. Schedules can change with little warning. Orders may change at the last minute. Programs may be cancelled. The number of participants may vary from what was originally scheduled.

Market your program. Word of mouth is the best advertisement. Those who have participated in successful programs spread the word. Develop brochures that are military friendly. The [Department of Defense](#) (DoD) has a number of pictures in the media section of its website that are copyright free. Make certain the uniforms in the pictures are correct for the National Guard. Be aware that there is a perception that military culture discourages seeking help for psychological or emotional problems. Service members are often hesitant to ask for help if they think it may hurt their careers. You may want to put some sort of confidentiality disclaimer on your marketing materials.

National Guard families are caught in two cultures. National Guard Headquarters will view them as military. The citizen soldiers may view themselves as primarily civilian. Their communities may not know that they are in the National Guard. Inroads into this culture are not made overnight and trust must be built. It takes patience. Strengthening marriages for National Guard couples will help prepare families for deployment and for common issues that arise when the deployed spouse returns. Ultimately this contributes to force readiness.

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