

## **Engaging Military Partners: Supporting Connections to Communities**

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### **Abstract**

In the current Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO), families and communities have been impacted by multiple deployments. This is particularly challenging for families that are geographically isolated from military installations and resources typically available near these facilities. Operation Military Kids (OMK) is a national partnership reaching out through Cooperative Extension and land-grant universities to support military families by educating communities about the challenges of deployment, providing age-appropriate activities for children, and encouraging communities to actively support family members as their soldiers serve the country. To ensure quality and effectiveness, OMK initiatives are required to establish and maintain state-level leadership teams or advisory committees. While involving these individuals at the state level is important and is a tremendous asset for the overall program, it is also one of the most challenging tasks for state project directors in each state, which makes developing successful collaboration strategies an important program component.

### **Introduction**

In the current Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO), deployments have impacted families and communities as they struggle to access needed support systems even as they find themselves geographically isolated from military installations from which family support is traditionally provided during times of war. Activating National Guard and Reserve soldiers for full-time active duty assignments has created new challenges for community organizations. These new challenges are resulting in the development and implementation of new programs designed specifically to meet the needs of these families.

Operation Military Kids (OMK), an initiative of the Army Child and Youth Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), National 4-H Headquarters, and land-grant universities across the country, was established in 2002 and implemented to assist in connecting military families, particularly children, to support systems and resources regardless of their proximity to military bases and installations. By reaching out to these families through

the resources of the Cooperative Extension system, a gateway for accessing assistance existed and was ready for activation to support these hometown heroes. Indeed, the initiative is clearly a responsibility for an engaged university system, considering the elements of engagement shared in the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) report (1987). This report stated that among the most important factors needed for university extension to remain viable into the future were a focus on current societal issues, some flexibility in programming, and planning that includes a component of future visioning. Responsiveness to local needs has long been the hallmark of extension programming (Ferrari 2005), so responding to the war as a partner to support children and families is just another programming component for citizens in need.

Even so, as with all partnerships and collaborations, there are challenges to overcome. Recognizing these obstacles is a first step in developing strategies to be successful and, working together, the collaborators in this partnership are making a difference in the lives of military families. While the focus in this article is specifically on the strategies utilized in North Carolina, most of the lessons learned in implementing the program statewide can be applied to this initiative in other states, or even to similar initiatives related to other audiences.

### **What Is OMK?**

Operation Military Kids was originally a collaborative effort between the U.S. Army and the states to extend military support directly to the families of National Guard and Reserve soldiers activated for deployment in the Global War on Terror. The program initially targeted the twenty states with the highest rates of deployment of Guard and Reserve soldiers, with other states coming online as funds became available. The program serves to help the civilian community recognize that Guard and Reserve families have become “suddenly military” families, and that while the children of these families may look the same to teachers, friends, and the rest of the community, serious and long-lasting changes have taken place very rapidly in their lives (*Operation: Military Kids* 2005). More recently, OMK programs have expanded to include children of active-duty military families residing on military installations.

The program operates with four core components to achieve its mission of support. First, a training component provides education and awareness for community members to help citizens better understand military culture and the impacts of deployment upon

the soldiers, their families, and the community itself. The training is provided to educators, civic organizations, and others interested in supporting military families, or who might be unaware of the impacts of deployment. A second component of the program is the distribution of Hero Packs, which are backpacks filled with age-appropriate items for children of deployed soldiers. Items such as journals, disposable cameras, stuffed animals, and other materials along with resource materials for parents are included in the backpacks, as well as letters of appreciation to the soldier and to the child receiving the Hero Pack. A third element of the OMK mission is the Speak Out for Military Kids program, through which teens gain skills in public speaking and create personal messages to help others in the community understand the types of support needed and to share ideas about how best to support military families. The fourth component of the OMK program is the Mobile Technology Lab, a mobile computer lab made up of fifteen laptop computers, several cameras, scanners, laminators, printers, and other accessories to enable users to create scrapbook pages, to link through e-mail, and to utilize other creative software to communicate with their soldiers. Many states also operate special day camps and/or summer camps where military children connect with each other. These special activities give youth opportunities to bond with others who understand the unique challenges and privileges of being military children. The program was pilot-tested in 2002 and has subsequently undergone partnership development to build a strong initiative as well as annual adjustments based upon feedback from the field. The needs of military families are being addressed through OMK initiatives in all fifty states as of 2009.

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Each state employs a state program director to coordinate the outreach efforts within that state. These state program directors are responsible for creating state-level leadership teams to advise and assist in achieving the OMK mission. Establishing and maintaining these state teams is one of the most challenging components of managing the state-level program. When asked about the challenges they faced, these individuals consistently stated that their work in developing state teams was hindered by the rapid staff turnover both in the military community and within extension (Ferrari and Lauxman 2005). State program directors also indicated

that they need more time, more staff, and more resources to do the job well.

### **Engagement Challenges and Overcoming Them**

Why did the partnership between USDA and the Department of Defense seem so natural? The outreach of land-grant universities in an age of engaged university involvement was a critical consideration in the initial program design. In light of the Kellogg Commission's (1999) identification of the seven elements essential for public higher education to recommit with its communities, the element of supporting "conscious efforts to bring the resources and expertise at our institutions to bear on community, state, national and international problems in a coherent way" (35) is epitomized through the OMK program. Engaging university faculty and staff to work in tandem with military and civilian personnel to create support networks is a win-win situation in which the university is viewed more holistically as a partner to help identify solutions to the myriad challenges faced during all phases of deployment. Cooperative Extension, serving as a primary outreach initiative of the land-grant university, has remained relevant for more than a hundred years by being able to adapt and change to meet the needs of local citizens (*Ferguson 1964*), so using extension as the conduit through which OMK functions is a natural evolution of its commitment to putting knowledge to work by bringing the resources of the university to the citizens.

As with any collaboration, there are successful components as well as challenging obstacles through which the state team must work. In considering collaboration, utilizing Rubin's (2002) definition, the OMK state team is a group of individuals representing various organizations who are aligned to accomplish something. In this case, the purpose is to support military families by sharing information and resources. Rubin also points out that collaborations may be itinerant (short term) or sustained (ongoing) and that by establishing the formality and expected time horizon for the group, its focus can be more appropriately assigned to the task at hand or to building a longer term set of operating standards by which to work together. Understanding from the start of the initiative that this was going to be a long-term collaboration that would also involve several itinerant relationships has helped the group build a strong core of representatives who are supportive of those individuals and organizations that come and go as short-term members. Creating a strategy that allowed this flexibility early in the state team's formation has been an important aspect of connecting

the core team members to one another and to the long-term objectives of the initiative.

With the strength of the grassroots tradition of extension, the challenge of a national partner identifying specific state leadership team members created a new dimension within which to work. This approach has, however, brought appropriate military community partners to the team who might not have been identified otherwise. In addition, giving each state program the autonomy to add partners who may bring unique perspectives to that state's team creates flexibility to better address uniquely local programs.

Trust building, a key to collaborative success (*Austin 2000*), has been one of the greatest challenges in maintaining the state-level leadership team needed for this multifaceted initiative. Bringing together youth development specialists with career military staff, and then adding community leaders associated with newly formed nonprofits into the team, often creates tension. Individuals are seeking opportunities to support each other without duplicating work that is already in progress, while identifying potential new programs and partnerships. Building trust among partners who are potentially competitors in garnering support funding is indeed a challenge for the state team.

Another challenge related to team communications is staff turnover (*Ferrari and Lauxman 2005*). With military personnel constantly being reallocated to new missions, and with many of the nonprofits involving military spouses who are also impacted by military relocations, getting consistent representation is difficult. The key in the North Carolina program has been frequent and consistent communication with the core team members to ensure that everyone's needs are met to the fullest extent possible. Poor communication, even for short periods of time, hinders progress and achievement for the state leadership team (*Connors, Smith, and Hickman 2004*). Scheduling quarterly face-to-face meetings, in addition to monthly reporting contacts and weekly electronic communication, supports the work of the members of the state team, enabling them to reach out to the military families across the state. Another approach that has been valuable is requesting that state team members help identify additional team members or replacement team members for the program.

Research tells us that young people want meaningful opportunities for service and that they want to work with adults to design programs that will directly impact young people (*Zeldin et al. 2002*). We also know that organizations that involve young people in governance are more connected and more responsive to the needs of

youth in the community. Recognizing this critical component of youth involvement, the OMK state team includes young people as full, contributing members. These teen members include 4-H members, as well as military youth, to ensure a more rounded vision of what resources are available and what new resources are needed. Providing opportunities for youth to share their perspectives supports the notion that they are valued as partners engaged with adults to address family and community challenges of deployment, thus giving youth a stronger voice with which to share their new status of military kid.

Additional research indicates that involving young people gives them a sense of power over their own situations, which contributes to a healthier view of deployment stresses and challenges (Huebner and Mancini 2005). Additionally, providing social networks and identifying activities that families can participate in together

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are positive ways to manage some of the stresses of deployment. With a primary objective of supporting children and families, involving young people in making decisions about how best to support themselves and their families seems a reasonable approach to ensure that programming is relevant and responsive to family needs and concerns. Creating these opportunities for youth input on the state team involves various logistical considerations. For example, does the team

meet when youth can attend meetings? Who will be responsible for transporting the youth to the meetings? Are there alternative meeting strategies like videoconferencing or teleconferencing that can be utilized more effectively to allow youth to participate? Truly embracing youth involvement requires the entire team to take a larger view of the impact upon the youth who participate and upon the program itself when young people are given avenues for engaged membership (Zeldin et al. 2002).

## **Conclusion**

The current and future success of collaborative initiatives like OMK lies in extension's capacity, through its connection to land-grant universities where community and scholarly engagement are vital components, to create positive and lasting community partnerships.

Key to the success of the OMK state team in fulfilling the OMK program objectives is the engagement of partners to create projects and activities that are appropriate for the audiences and relevant for the public. Through trust-building, communication, and youth involvement, these state teams serve as critical components to ensure program responsiveness to a nontraditional audience for Cooperative Extension and the land-grant university. Since building partnerships is one of the most effective tools for change (*National PTA 2000*), establishing the appropriate state team provides a foundation for developing a sustainable, relevant program that meets its objective of supporting our military families.

Perhaps our greatest challenge is actually in expanding and strengthening extension's reach into communities. Utilizing the expertise of extension staff members as community conveners can help to bring positive youth development programs into the military community to better showcase the resources and programs available to support military families and their communities (*Jones and Roueche 2007*).

Long after the war has ended, there will be families in need of special services and resources to cope with the realities of life changes. Extension, through its connection to the land-grant university, is uniquely positioned to reach young people and help them deal with the stresses of deployment cycles, but also to help adults in a variety of lifelong learning curricula. The collaborations and partnerships established through programs like OMK ensure that sustainable support will be available for as long as these families need assistance from their communities. Truly, this is an outstanding opportunity for the engaged university to support heroes across the country.

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## **About the Author**

- Harriett Edwards, EdD, is an assistant professor and extension specialist in the Department of 4-H Youth Development and Family & Consumer Sciences at North Carolina State University, providing leadership for continuing volunteer education in a statewide program that engages more than twenty-five thousand youth and adult volunteers annually. Harriett's first-of-its-kind dissertation research investigated critical aspects of effectively engaging episodic volunteers in community-based youth programs. She has been the volunteer administrator of a county-based volunteer program and has served as president of the N.C. Association of Volunteer Administration. Dr. Edwards has presented at numerous national and international conferences, including the International Conference on Volunteer Administration, the Association for Research in Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Agencies (ARNOVA), and the European Seminar on Extension Education.