

USDA and the Military Support Youth

Contents

Collaboration Overview	1
Collaboration Purpose	2
About the Collaboration	2
Collaboration Structure	4
Promising Practices	5
Lessons Learned	7
Accomplishments	8
Resources	9

Collaboration Overview

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) partners with the Department of Defense's (DoD) Office of Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) and the Army, Navy, and Air Force to support military-connected children and youth and to ensure that service members are able to focus on readiness and the mission. The objectives of these partnerships include fostering access to consistent and evidence-informed programs and services, both on and off military installations, that encourage positive youth development.

The collaboration's multifaceted structure includes:

- Partnerships with the DoD, and the Army, Navy, and Air Force
- A memorandum of understanding between the DoD and USDA to support their partnership
- Grants and cooperative agreements that establish the scope of work with land-grant universities
- A Lead University group that meets regularly with DoD and NIFA to review grants and programs
- A 4-H Military Liaison working group that meets monthly to plan and collaborate on child and youth programming
- Continuous and ongoing communication with all military partners.

Promising practices include:

- Sharing information openly to break down cultural barriers and stay aware of the ever-changing environment
- Having a common goal that underlies all program
- Collecting and disseminating evaluation data and using that data for communication and needs assessment

Throughout its tenure, the collaboration has learned the following lessons:

- Goals and plans should be consistently reevaluated to make sure they fit the work.
- It is important to understand the changing needs of the population and the partnership.

Collaboration Purpose

When a service member knows that family members are being supported through a variety of programs and services, it allows him or her to better focus on readiness and the mission at hand. Mission readiness is of paramount importance to the DoD and the respective military services.

The youth-specific purpose of this collaboration is to support military-connected children of all ages, living on or off military installations, as they face unique circumstances and challenges. These multifaceted collaborative programs, infused with the concept of positive youth development, give military-connected youth the opportunity to make connections with their community and peers wherever they move throughout their young lives.

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), a part of the USDA, supports additional partnerships and programs that support military families, specifically adults. Learn [more](#) about these programs.

About the Collaboration

To support military-connected children in accessing consistent, supportive, and multifaceted programs and services that foster positive youth development, both on and off military installations, the USDA maintains four partnerships. One partnership is between the NIFA and the DoD's MC&FP. The additional three are between NIFA and the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

The overarching collaboration between the armed forces and NIFA started in 1982. At that time, local military installations began partnering with land-grant universities, supported through the USDA, to develop programming to support military families. Through these partnerships, the USDA and the armed forces expanded efforts to include programs that support youth:

- Beginning in 1995, NIFA and the Land-Grant University System partnered with the Army, Navy, and Air Force to create 4-H Clubs, on and off installations, in order to bring positive youth-development experiences to children and youth wherever the military takes them.
- The Operation: Military Kids (OMK) Partnership Initiative was created in 2004. The Army National Guard and Army Reserve fund the OMK Partnership Initiative, which is currently administered through a partnership agreement with the Army, NIFA, and land-grant universities. The partnership works with statewide partners, such as the Army National Guard and Army Reserve, 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, veterans' organizations, and local communities and military families.

In 2009, a comprehensive Military Extension partnership was established between the USDA and the DoD. The partnership supports three main objectives:

- Increase and strengthen community capacity in support of military families
- Increase professional and workforce-development opportunities
- Expand and strengthen family, child care, and youth-development programs

The partnership draws on the resources provided by the USDA 4-H youth-development program, [land-grant universities](#), and the Cooperative Extension System faculty and staff to help strengthen military child, youth, and family programs.

Below are some examples of the multifaceted programs supported by the collaborations:

The [Army](#), [Navy](#), and [Air Force](#) Youth Development Projects and 4-H Military Clubs. These projects are funded through the Army, Navy, and Air Force, in partnership with NIFA and 4-H, and administered through Kansas State University working with 4-H Military Liaisons and other land-grant university partners. 4-H Clubs allow youth on installations and in communities worldwide to participate in the following:

- 4-H projects include citizenship, healthy living, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education and focus on leadership and community service activities in a safe and fun environment. As military-connected youth transfer from installation to installation, they can easily make connections through local 4-H Club programs in their new communities.
- 4-H and land-grant university extension professionals provide military partners with professional development training and positive youth development-infused curriculum to help youth engage in 4-H projects.

[Operation: Military Kids \(OMK\)](#). Funded through the Army, OMK is a partnership that serves military-connected children and youth who are experiencing the deployment of a parent by providing them with resources and activities and fostering a local support network. The purpose of OMK is to build state and local community capacity through the formation of collaborative partnerships to support military-connected youth. OMK provides military-connected youth with service-learning and leadership opportunities, strengthens resiliency skills, and promotes life-skill development with an emphasis on communication, problem solving, responsibility, and the formation of positive relationships.

[Teen Adventure Camps & Camps for Children with Special Needs](#). Funded by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and administered through the Military Extension Partnership, military-connected youth are able to attend high-adventure camps that help them build resiliency while overcoming challenges. Additionally, military-connected children and youth with special needs have the opportunity to attend camps specifically designed for their abilities.

[Military Extension Internship Program](#). Funded by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, this program, administered by Purdue University, places college students and recent graduates on military installations around the world to work in child, youth, and school services. The objective is to expose college students studying child and youth development to the military child care system as a career track.

[Project YES! \(Youth Extension Service\)](#). Funded by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, this program, administered by North Carolina State University, provides college students with the opportunity to support military-connected children and youth by offering educational programs while their parents are attending military programs. Project YES! focuses on three major areas:

- Leadership development
- Resiliency and life skills
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) activities

All programs offer interactive, activity-based exercises designed to keep youth excited and engaged. The partnership hosts one- to two-day educational events for children impacted by military deployments. While parents or guardians participate in Yellow Ribbon Program events or other military support programs, children and youth participate in specially designed fun programs and activities.

Collaboration Structure

Key aspects of the collaboration structure include the following elements:

Partnerships with the DoD, Army, Navy, and Air Force

The multiple programs facilitated by the collaboration represent successful partnerships with DoD and military service branches. The collaboration includes the following partners:

- The USDA and the NIFA
- 4-H Youth Development Program
- The [Land-Grant University System](#)
- The DoD and the MC&FP
- Army Child, Youth, and School Services
- Navy Family Readiness
- Air Force Airman and Family Services

The programs supported through these partnerships differ in focus, from 4-H Clubs to internship programs, but each infuses positive youth development practices within its work and contributes to military mission-readiness. Funding for the collaboration's multiple programs comes from the DoD and the individual military services. NIFA, DoD, and service branches work collaboratively through a cooperative agreement to ensure project success at the land-grant universities.

A memorandum of understanding established between USDA and DoD

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) laying out a common mission was established in 1986 between the USDA and DoD. This was revised and renewed in 2010. This MOU continues to support the work of the partnership.

Grants and cooperative agreements that establish the scope of work with land-grant universities

Under the comprehensive framework outlined in the MOU, interagency agreements are created and updated to establish the scope of work and goals for the period of the partnership. Land-grant universities provide the expertise to run the multiple programs supported by the collaboration.

A Lead University group meets regularly with DoD and NIFA to review grants and programs. The group is comprised of staff from universities who were awarded funding to manage the collaboration's family and youth programs. At these meetings, the Lead University group

shares promising practices, updates program goals, and discusses how to expand and improve its programs based on the needs of its populations of focus.

4-H military liaisons at land-grant universities

Faculty at land-grant institutions have been selected to serve as 4-H military liaisons and oversee the collaboration's programs on the ground. There are 4-H military liaisons in every U.S. state and territory. These individuals serve as contacts for state and overseas installation programs available for military-connected families, children, and youth. 4-H military liaisons can also serve as principal investigators for grants for military children and youth programs.

4-H military liaisons help shape the direction of programs by providing feedback and insight from their state programs. The 4-H military liaisons meet annually to share their successes and challenges and learn from each other and from military partners. During the meeting, they share ideas, set goals, and plan for future work. The meetings also includes training on information and resources, such as new curricula or emerging youth development research, that can be taken back to inform their work with military families in their home states.

A subset of the 4-H military liaisons from each region serve on a working group and meet monthly to collaborate with each other and with other partners.

Multiple mechanisms that facilitate ongoing communication

To ensure that the public and the partners involved in the collaborative work of the USDA and the military are always informed of new developments, the collaboration uses multiple forms of communication and resource dissemination.

The 4-H Military Partnership supports two websites, for the [Military 4-H Military Partnership](#) and [Operation: Military Kids](#), and manages an [email inbox](#) to disseminate information and answer questions from both program partners and the general public. The email inbox accepts requests for information or assistance from individuals managing programs on the ground. This enables partners to reach out with issues and receive a personalized answer. The public also has the opportunity to submit questions to this inbox to learn more about programs and services.

For communication within the partnership, role-specific listservs are used to ensure ongoing communication between USDA, NIFA, and program staff. These listservs provide a place where questions, challenges, and promising practices can be shared. An annual meeting is held with each branch of the service—Army, Navy, and Air Force—and NIFA to review grants and programs.

Promising Practices

The following are practices that have helped the USDA and the armed forces to be successful in working collaboratively and achieving results.

Open communication that breaks down cultural barriers

The USDA and the armed forces are systems with very different federal rules and cultures guiding their work. They also have different processes, paperwork, acronyms, and reporting

systems. These differences can make it challenging for these partners to work together. However, recognizing these differences and embracing a spirit of open communication has facilitated the breaking down of these barriers.

Having and encouraging crucial conversations that allow partners to get and remain on the same page has allowed the work to progress fruitfully. The key to overcoming differences for this collaboration has been addressing these challenges up front and then strategizing together for a solution. This is accomplished through conference calls, video conferencing, and face-to-face meetings with NIFA, DoD, and the Army, Navy, and Air Force. There are also annual meetings with the university partners who are working on the programs to share progress and new insights, and make any adjustments going forward.

Involving experts who inform the research base of the work

The network of land-grant universities, supported by the USDA, has provided a crucial resource for the collaboration to utilize in its work. Faculty and staff at land-grant universities serve as positive youth development content experts and help to ensure that the latest thought and research in the field is incorporated into programs supported by the collaboration. In addition to positive youth development work, the land-grant universities are able to support curriculum development and trainings for military staff, youth, and families.

Commitment to a shared mission and vision

A key strength of the collaboration is its commitment to a shared mission and vision. The collaboration's adherence to its original MOU illustrates the pledge of the partners to serve military-connected children, youth, and families through effective programming and research and to ensure that service members are able to focus on readiness and the mission. The collaboration credits the sustainability of its mission in part to long-standing relationships among partners, all of whom share this vision. Through organizational changes experienced by many of the partners, as well as fiscal challenges that threaten funding, the strong relationships between partner organizations, as well as the trusted commitment to serving their population of focus, has kept this collaboration not just sustained, but growing.

Collecting and sharing of Army evaluation data

In partnership with land-grant university staff, the USDA and NIFA are constantly collecting data on the outcomes of their programs. Data is not only collected from youth who have participated in the programs but also from their parents, in order to capture the perspective of service members and their spouses. Some examples of outcomes that are collected include measures of:

- The well-being of participating youth and their ability to make friends
- Service members' thoughts on what impact programming has had on their choice to stay in the armed forces
- Their spouses' perceptions of how the services have impacted their families positively

This data is compiled annually and shared among all partners by way of program-specific reports. The gaps and recommendations found in these reports help shape the collaborative

work moving forward. The service members and their families also have access to many of these reports, something the collaboration hopes will encourage utilization of services and involvement in programs.

Lessons Learned

The following are lessons that the USDA, NIFA, and the military have learned while working collaboratively.

Goals and plans must be reevaluated to keep up with a changing environment

While the mission of the collaboration has remained consistent for more than 25 years, the collaboration partners are actively working to ensure that the guidance that drives their work is relevant and effective in an environment that is continuously changing as a result of political shifts, changes in the availability of funds, and internal staff transitions as many of the individuals who were in-seat at the inception of the collaboration retire. 4-H military liaisons are currently working to develop a youth logic model and strategic plan that will help guide the vision of 4-H and the [Extension](#) partnership in working with youth from military-connected families. Collaboration members will be involved in this work as it moves forward. Many of the individuals who were in-seat at the inception of the collaboration are now retiring, while partners are analyzing the current leadership structure to make sure that it still fits the needs of the work. From years of experience, the collaboration acknowledges these kinds of shifts and self-reflection is necessary for progress.

Understanding the needs of the population is key

Members of the armed forces and their families are a dynamic population facing a unique set of challenges. The issues faced by military families are often out of their control and shaped by national and global events or changes in administration. Collaboration partners have developed an understanding of the necessity of keeping track of the changing needs and challenges of military-connected youth and their families in order to make sure services, programs, and research are targeted and effective.

This update of services is evident in the evolution of the collaboration's programs throughout the years. Most recently, partners have been focusing on the issue of reintegration, as many service members who were previously deployed return home. The Army is currently conducting an ongoing study to gather data on reintegration, which will inform programming and services to families and service members moving forward. The evolution of the collaboration's work is equally dependent on information coming from those working directly with families in the field, as well as staff focused on the latest youth development research.

Accomplishments

Through their numerous collaborative programs, the USDA and the military have been able to impact the lives of youth across the nation and on military installations throughout the world. For example:

- 4-H Military Clubs provide opportunities for 30,000 military-connected youth in 47 states and two territories annually.
- In 2011, 33,229 children of armed forces families participated as members of 4-H Clubs through the Army, Navy, and Air Force Youth Development Projects. These included 13,076 children of Army families, 3,261 children of Navy families, and 16,892 children of Air Force families.
- 1,059 military-connected youth attended adventure camps in 2011.
- The Military Extension Internship Program has placed 155 students from 90 universities on 28 Army installations, 17 Navy bases, and 33 Air Force bases, both in the United States and abroad. The program is currently resulting in a hiring rate of 25 percent of eligible interns into military child care programs.
- In 2011, Project YES! supported 100 events in 25 states and Guam, reaching 2,572 children and youth. Organizations served included the Air and Army National Guard, Air Force Reserve Command, Army and Navy Reserve, Operation: Military Kids, and the Wounded Warrior Program.
- In fiscal year 2011, 9,201 children and youth from all branches of service participated in OMK camps, resulting in a total of 9,949 hours of camp programming in 260 camps.
- A 2011 evaluation conducted by Virginia Tech University on Operation: Military Kids shows the following:
 - Almost 80 percent of service members with children under 18 years of age, or their family members, have participated in at least one of the support programs, services, and activities offered through the military.
 - Ninety percent of participating service members reported that they believed the support programs, services, or activities had met the needs of their families, and 71 percent reported that the programs had a positive impact on their decision to remain in the military.
 - Of youth who participated in a summer camp supported by the collaboration, 59 percent reported having lower stress levels related to dealing with a family member's deployment.
 - Of the spouses of service members, 79 percent reported that the programs, services, and activities have helped them and their children support their service member's military readiness and commitment.

