

Congregation Military Support Ministry - Getting Started

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Introduction

The faith congregations in our communities can play a major role in supporting military personnel and their families before, during and after deployment. According to Chaplain John Morris of the Minnesota National Guard, who is one of the founders of the Yellow Ribbon Program, the reason that churches are an important part of a strong community support program is that they have a special relationship with the military families in their congregations and serving them aligns well with the service mission of the congregation. Whereas it might be very difficult for other organizations to develop a relationship of trust with military families, congregations by their nature tend to be able to develop trust with their members. In addition, the infrastructure for many of the services for military families is already in place, e.g., prayer groups, pastoral care ministries, home visitation programs, child care programs, etc.

This paper will provide those who have an interest in starting a military service support ministry in their congregations with a step by step approach to do so.

Steps for Starting a Military Service Support Ministry

Step 1: As with any initiative in a congregation one or two people with a passion for serving military personnel and their families has to step up and lead the effort. This person could be an initiator who transfers leadership as the program gets started but ideally it is a person who stays on to lead the ministry during its formative stages until it is sustainable. This should be a person who has a good relationship with the pastor and is respected in the congregation.

Step 2: The leader should meet with the pastor and see if he or she will be supportive of the feasibility stage and if it is decided to launch the ministry. Also get any suggestions from the pastor on conducting the feasibility stage since they have no doubt seen other ministries start in their congregation. In addition find out if there is a formal process for ministry creation so that you can be sure to follow the accepted process.

Step 3: Assemble a small group of like minded people who are willing to work with the leader to assess the feasibility of having a military service support ministry in the congregation. This can be done by putting an announcement in the congregation bulletin and also making personal contacts with people who might be interested. It is good to have at least one veteran in this group if possible.

Step 4: Conduct a meeting with the small group to go over the process for assessing the feasibility of having the ministry and getting their suggestions and buy in to the process. Provide them with information from existing congregational military ministries regarding

the types of services that potentially might be provided. Here is a partial list of potential services:

- Say prayers for deployed service personnel and their families at the weekly services
- Create a “prayer board” with the pictures of military personnel who are congregation members or who are relatives of congregation members and who are deployed (and if desired also any active duty service personnel not currently deployed) along with the branch of service and who their relatives are. (e.g., John Smith, Army, son of Mary and Jim Smith)
- Send care packages to deployed troops and/or to the entire unit that one of the deployed troops is a member of. (The troops can be asked what types of items they want and these can be donated by congregation members.)
- Conduct “send off” and “welcome back” prayer services
- Assign one or two people to check in with the families of deployed troops to see what they might need. (Normally putting in a bulletin announcement asking military families to let the group know what they need does not work well. It is best to be proactive with a check in. Also having one or two people connect with a specific family builds trust and there is a higher probability that the family member will contact that person for help. Remember that military families are a courageous and independent breed of good people who are reluctant to ask for help.)
- Conduct a “send off” dinner for an entire military group that is deploying where there is a connection with the congregation
- Use the congregation day care personnel to provide military moms with a day or half day doing what they would like.
- Put reminders in the bulletin for prayers for deployed troops
- Conduct military mom and grand mom breakfasts/lunches to honor them and get them together with one another
- Conduct an annual veterans and friends of veterans lunch or dinner around Veterans Day
- For returning troops ask a congregation member, ideally a veteran, to contact the returning vet and ask if they would like to have lunch or coffee. The vet may only need to know that someone cares about them and their reintegration efforts. Often vets need assistance in gaining employment so the congregation member can often help them by letting them know about job clubs at the church or in the community, conducting veteran job search talks, etc. Often a friendship develops and the relationship continues long after the vet is reintegrated.
- Send thank you cards to returning troops
- Host gatherings with returning troops to connect them with other veterans
- Identify veteran services organizations in the area that need volunteers and ask congregation members to volunteer. One way to do this is to partner with one or more of these organizations and help them with their events and assist them in their need for volunteers
- Set up a support group for veterans
- Organize talks and panels of veterans to educate the congregation on the experiences and needs of veterans and their families
- Coordinate periodic meetings of for veterans so that they can meet in a group setting and share ideas and stories

Step 5: Identify a few military families in the congregation who are willing to be interviewed. This may be more difficult than it sounds since often military families are not willing to come forth due to concerns about security. Although a bulletin announcement asking the military families to volunteer to be interviewed can be used, normally identifying a few military families must be done by word of mouth. Often once one or two military families are identified and interviewed they will be willing to identify additional military families.

Step 6: Enlist members of the core group to conduct one to one interviews with the military families who have agreed to do this. It is best to do this with a standard form with standard questions and with plenty of space for responses. In addition to open questions like "What are the types of services that would most appreciate?" you can use the list of potential services identified by the core group to ask them which ones they might appreciate the most. Interestingly enough, our experience with military family interviews has surfaced one major theme in all of the interviews and that is a desire of the families that the congregation pray for their deployed loved ones in a visible way, e.g., at weekly services.

Step 7: Bring the core group together and use the information from the interviews with military families to identify the services that you would like to provide. (Caution: It is best to prioritize the services and start with one or two. The services must align with the number of volunteers you have and the budget you have available.) Work with the small group to create the mission for the proposed ministry, scope of activities, and budget needed.

Step 8: Create a plan for the ministry and show it to the pastor for input. If there is a formal process for ministry creation, be sure to follow that process.

Step 9: When the ministry is approved, publicize it and recruit members beyond the core group. When advertising for volunteers it is a good idea to show various levels of volunteering requiring different levels of time commitment. For example the core group would have a higher commitment, e.g., monthly meetings, leading a subgroup, etc. and others only involved on an as needed basis for projects like send off, dinners, etc.

Step 10: Pick the highest priority service that is compatible with the number of volunteers and budget and carry it out. Often the easiest one is to get regular prayers at the weekly service. Also creating a prayer board gives good visibility to the ministry and attracts military families to self identify.

Step 11: Have regular meetings (e.g., monthly) and use a timed agenda and a simple meeting summary with action items. Since this is a faith congregation it is appropriate to start each meeting with a prayer for deployed and reintegrating service personnel and their families

Step 12: Continue to make the ministry visible through bulletin announcements, bulletin inserts and periodic military ministry tables after weekly services. As the number of volunteers grows continue to add services based on the capability and interest of the volunteers.

For additional information and support in starting a ministry contact Mike Wold, US Navy Veteran (michael_w_wold@msn.com or 651-687-9767)