

Defender 6 Sends Army Community Covenant – What Gratitude Looks Like

As our Nation commits to preserving freedom through the uncertainty of deployments and conflicts across the world, Americans give us a special gift -- embracing Soldiers and their families with sincere support. It warms my heart to see adults, children, organizations and businesses that represent all walks of life sending care packages to deployed Soldiers and extending special invitations when they return. In a larger way, the Army Community Covenant (ACC) generates a great deal of community support for Army Families while their Soldiers are away.

The Secretary of the Army created the ACC in 2008 to build mutual relationships and strengthen bonds between Soldiers, Families and American communities. It fosters and sustains effective state and community partnerships with the Army to improve the quality of life for Soldiers and their Families. On the ground, the ACC accomplishes two things. First, it recognizes the selfless service of community volunteers, highlighting their great personal contributions. It also shows Soldiers the compassion and support of the American public.

Now in its third year, the ACC kicked off with a series of signing ceremonies affirming the mutual support and trust between the military and local communities. To date there have been more than 450 signing ceremonies.

While the signing ceremonies are the public, outward display of a vital mutual relationship -- support from communities helps build resilience in our Families -- the Army Community Covenant is a highly beneficial two-way partnership that strengthens ties between our Soldiers and home town America.

The generosity of America's neighborhoods, towns, cities, and counties is astounding. Every day communities devise new ways, both small and large, to demonstrate their appreciation for Soldiers and Families. Adults, children, organizations, and businesses send care packages to deployed Soldiers, offer emergency relief to Families in need, welcome Soldiers home after deployment, and most importantly provide a support network to complement and enhance Soldier well being. From students baking cookies for deployed units, to elected leaders promoting legislation that builds equity in school transition for children of Military Families, each is a gift.

Volunteers from all walks of life devote countless hours to giving back to those who defend our Nation's freedom. Here are a few Community Covenant initiatives to give you an idea of the scope of support that target financial, employment, health, youth programs, training, or other needs unique to a particular garrison or group of Soldiers or Family members:

- Camps focus on fun learning experiences for young people that last a lifetime. Some camp sponsors are private organizations like the 4-H Clubs, Girl Scouts, Operation Military Kids; state National Guards sponsor others. Kids form new, lasting friendships with children from a variety of military backgrounds.
- Educator seminars help teachers learn what makes life different for children with parents serving in the military. From frequent moves to deployment and redeployment, military children have a special set of experiences that moves with them, school to school, and that affect their education experience.

- All volunteer Adopt-A-Unit programs support deployed units in-theatre and celebrate returning units with event invitations. These programs also enthusiastically remember those currently deployed through the Yellow Ribbon program, encouraging community members to display yellow ribbons at their homes and offices.
- Financial support programs from states, counties and private organizations take many forms, whether help with property taxes, assistance for Soldiers of all components who deploy in support of the Overseas Contingency Operations, or grants or no-interest loans for emergencies for Reserve Component Soldiers.
- Programs abound to help Families focus on building quality time together. Reduced or free admission to state parks, amusement attractions, and sports events help Soldiers and Families enjoy memorable time together. Retreats for families of fallen Soldiers build strong networks of friendship for those members of the Army Family who have experienced the ultimate loss.
- There are community-based organizations that solicit donations exclusively to fund a variety of programs with 100 percent of all donations going to the designated programs. In-kind donations from community members and businesses entirely fund administration expenses.
- Education support for Soldiers and Family members through scholarships, continuing education opportunities, or grants helps further both individual and Army readiness through access to education.
- Special programs honor the children of wounded warriors, and Families and children of fallen heroes with personalized, commemorative items like hand-made quilts.

These best practices embody selfless service on the part of Americans around the country, but there are many more. I mention them here as great examples of how citizens endure in their support with lasting relationships in the face of multiple and lengthy periods of military conflict. The Community Covenant website, <http://www.army.mil/community>, is a great resource for Soldiers, Family members, leaders, and community organizations to see best practices from around the country. Follow the latest developments and get ideas for your community by following the ACC on Facebook, and join in the discussion on Twitter, both linked via the ACC homepage.

As the Army reflects the face of America, the Army Community Covenant reflects the face of America's gratitude. It's all about relationships. Go out of your way to thank a Community Covenant partner for their active caring for Soldiers and their Families. Work together with community leaders, private organizations, faith-based groups, and individual American citizens. Help America help Soldiers by always taking to heart what partnering opportunities may be possible.