Overview of the Military Supportive Communities Initiative

Purpose

The Military Supportive Communities Initiative (MSCI) is a two-component effort intended for places that are dedicated to improving the lives of veterans, service members and their families. The initiative helps communities organize and mobilize a locally representative group (called a Community Enrichment Coordinating Team) that is seeking to discover and engage the talents that military and veteran populations can offer to communities. Through the use of a guided process, the local team carefully assembles and studies key data, expands its understanding of important elements of the community and pursues a plan that invests in the development of a military caring community.

The two parts of the MSCI are the Community Enrichment program and the Data Academy. Two communities or counties will be chosen to participate in the Community Enrichment program, a program that will launch February 2019. An additional two communities or counties will be selected to take part in the Data Academy option (which will start in the fall of 2019).

This document highlights information on each of the two MSCI components.

Component 1: Community enrichment

Communities (or counties) selected to be part of the Community Enrichment program will organize a representative team of local residents who will play a vital role in coordinating the Community Enrichment program in the community. Members of the Community Enrichment Coordinating Team will begin the program by studying demographic and economic data on their community and develop the skills needed to identify and act on priorities designed to benefit military and veteran families. This portion of the MSCI program will encompass 8 sessions.

As part of the process, the Community Enrichment Coordinating Team will explore and select one of three Building Blocks: (1) *Leadership*: expanding opportunities for military and veteran families to be part of a new generation of community leaders, (2) *Economy*: helping military veterans grow small businesses and launch entrepreneurial activities, and (3) *Placemaking*: enhancing place-related amenities that improve the quality of life for veterans, service members and their families. Examples of each Building Block include the following:

- *Leadership:* Expand leadership opportunities for the existing military-connected population of a community, such as organizing a leadership retreat for military-connected youth or focusing on current or future community leadership by providing a speaker series for military-connected families.
- *Economy:* Focus on building a supportive environment for small businesses and entrepreneurs. Examples include providing entrepreneurial training for military-connected families or developing a business directory for military or veteran-owned businesses in the community.
- *Placemaking:* Invest in public space development, local foods or other quality of life initiatives for military-connected families. This could include building a veterans memorial park or garden, or addressing the food security needs of military-connected families.

The Community Enrichment component of the program will involve about 17-20 hours of group meetings and planning. Additional time will be required to more fully explore and implement the Building Block selected by the local Coordinating Team. At the conclusion of this portion of the initiative, the community will prepare a Military Supportive Pathway Project. The proposal will include a clearly defined project that the local team must implement and complete in a 4-6 months' period.

Prior to the launch of the Pathway Project, the local Community Enrichment Coordinating Team's proposal will be reviewed by members of the State MSCI Team. It is possible that the State Team will recommend adjustments to the proposal prior to its formal launch. Once the plan is approved by the State Team, the Coordinating team will be awarded seed funding of $2,000 to help support the launch of its Pathway Project. At the conclusion of the Pathway Project, Coordinating Team members will meet for a final session to discuss possible future projects that it wishes to pursue.

Component 2: The Data Academy

Communities (or counties) selected to be part of the Data Academy will learn to use existing data to inform the type of community-level programs that can help improve the well-being of military and veteran families. Data Academy communities or counties will organize a representative team of local residents to participate in the Data Academy.

The Data Academy will help participants explore, refine and enhance their skills in data use and data management. Team members will learn to access and interpret information found in Measuring Communities. Measuring Communities is an online social indicators platform that includes a wide array of data items that can be used to focus and propel community action, help communities track their progress and sustain attention to military issues.

At the completion of the Data Academy, team members will have a deeper understanding of the issues affecting military-connected populations in their community/county. Such insights can position their community to take part in the Community Enrichment component or pursue military initiatives within their own organization.

MSCI delivered by state agency and university professionals

Training and technical support for the Military Supportive Communities Initiative will be provided by an experienced team of subject-matter experts from the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI), Purdue University Center for Regional Development (PCRD), Extension Community Development Program and other internal/external partners.

Important starting point: Organize a coordinating team

Communities will be required to organize a Coordinating Team made up of approximately 10 individuals for communities wishing to participate in the Community Enrichment program and about 10 individuals for communities wishing to take part in the Data Academy. The respective teams will be responsible for coordinating all aspects of the Community Enrichment program or Data Academy undertaken in their communities. As such, it is important to have people on the local team who: (1) represent different interest groups and organizations, (2) reflect the population diversity of the community, including military and veteran representation, and (3) share a desire to improve their community for military and veteran families. Team members should include representatives from business/industry, education leaders, local and/or regional government, health care providers, social services, faith-based and nonprofit organizations, civic groups, community foundations, economic development organizations and key demographic groups (youth, elderly, low-wealth, race/ethnic populations).

Key expectations of your Community Enrichment Coordinating Team

The following are expectations for all Community Enrichment Coordinating Team members:

- Openness and willingness to take a fresh look at where your community is, where it wants to go and the best path to get there while exploring new approaches to addressing challenges. Team members should consider the community's military population when going through this process;
- Commitment to being creative in gathering a wide array of input and insights from community members and sharing the progress of the Community Enrichment program;
- Willingness to devote the time and energy needed to (1) serve as a member of the community's Coordinating Team, (2) assess the key assets and needs of the military and veteran members of your community, (3) use initial Community Enrichment sessions to guide the selection of a Building Block to launch in your community, (4) finalize and implement a Pathway Project in your community and (5) attend a final session to discuss next steps for continuing the team's work in your community;
- Understand that your Community Coach is there as a mentor to guide you through the Community Enrichment process. The Coordinating Team is tasked with executing the action steps associated with the Community Enrichment process. Tasks include promoting focus groups, helping coordinate the focus group sessions, communicating with the Community Coach and community at large, learning about their Building Block and leveraging funds/resources to complete their Pathway Project.

Key expectations of your Data Academy Coordinating Team

The following are expectations for all Data Academy Coordinating Team members:

- Willingness to devote the time and energy needed to learn new ways to use data to support your community's military-connected population;
- Commitment to learning to use gathered data in ways that enhance the lives of military and veteran families in your community;
- Incentive to share new knowledge gained while participating in the Data Academy with others in your community or organization;
- Dedication to using information learned while participating in the Data Academy to help guide local residents as they seek to launch a Military Supportive Community Initiative program in the community.

Initiative partners

The Military Supportive Communities Initiative is being developed and implemented by the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University, Purdue's Center for Regional Development (PCRD) and Purdue University Extension Community Development Program.