

Kansas State University Excellence in Engagement Award

Marlene K. VerBrugge
Research Assistant Professor and Project Director
4-H Military Partnerships
Extension Family Studies and Human Services
glass@ksu.edu 785-532-1484
www.4-hmilitarypartnerships.org

Abstract

The 4-H Military Partnership at Kansas State University (KSU) represents a national partnership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Land Grant University Cooperative Extension System with U.S. Army Child, Youth and School Services, U.S. Air Force Child and Youth Programs, U.S. Navy Child and Youth Programs, and National Guard Child and Youth Programs. The overall outcome of this engaged partnership is to develop and deliver educational programs that equip military children and youth with the skills needed to lead positive, productive, contributing lives. Military youth are at risk from a variety of stressors that include repeated and lengthy deployments of immediate family members, frequent relocations, and other challenges related to military life. The 4-H Military Partnership promotes positive youth development by supporting healthy environments and providing opportunities for learning and leadership. 4-H supports the development of life skills that help youth and families tackle their challenges with meaning and purpose. Funding is provided by all partners through USDA. For more than 16 years, KSU has led all other academic institutions for the 4-H Military Partnership, with Marlene VerBrugge as the Project Director. KSU facilitates the expertise of Extension 4-H personnel in 47 states and territories to provide research-based knowledge and resources for working with the military audience and supporting 4-H programs for military connected youth. In 2016 alone, more than 50,000 military youth participated in 4-H opportunities and 3,236 military staff members increased their capacity to help youth develop life skills through 4-H positive youth development training. More than 6,800 volunteers contributed 50,342 hours to the partnership. Since the inception of this project, Marlene VerBrugge has been awarded more than \$90 million to support the 4-H Military Partnership and other Extension-Military projects. Two prodigious and diverse organizational systems, Extension and the Military, benefited from this important work with the common mission of positive youth development. The partnerships with Army, Air Force, Navy, and National Guard allowed for the scholarly development of curriculum, professional development for Extension and military staff, and collaborative 4-H programs for military youth on installations and in the communities in which they live. Extension personnel nationwide expanded and refined their expertise in engaging with military youth, families, and military culture. Military youth benefit by participating in 4-H on installations wherever they move in the U.S. and overseas. And by being part of 4-H, research shows that 4-H youth excel beyond their peers (Tufts University, 2012). Military service members are able to focus on mission readiness knowing their children are in quality programs such as 4-H. All partners benefit by the wise use of public resources for support of positive youth development.

The Partnership

KSU's engaged partnerships consist of formal and informal agreements through USDA and the Military Services. KSU manages the partnership at the national level creating a seamless system for the involvement of Land Grant Universities and Military Services.

Extension 4-H Programs at Land Grant Universities: As a result of KSU's leadership, an involved community of Extension professionals emerged across the country to support the 4-H Military Partnership. An Extension professional in each state/territory was named as the Extension 4-H Military Liaison to serve as a link connecting the state extension program, military service branches in the state,

and 4-H Headquarters. VerBrugge brought these professionals together as an engaged community to share resources, develop curriculum, deliver positive youth development training, and further their understanding of military culture and working with military youth and families. Liaisons embraced their work with the military with passion and compassion. 4-H Extension offices were already entrenched in America's communities with a local presence, ready to build partnerships with military and engage the community in supporting military. Liaisons, through grants from KSU, collaborate with local county 4-H staff where installations are located to provide 4-H clubs for military child and youth programs as well as positive youth development and curriculum training for military youth program staff.

Through VerBrugge's efforts, KSU convened design teams consisting of Liaisons and military partners to develop research-based, relevant curriculum for the project. Most notable is *4-H 101—The Basics of Starting 4-H Clubs*. Although written for this military project, it has become widely used across the Extension System for professional development of new 4-H staff and volunteers. Other curricula include project related materials on nutrition and fitness, babysitting, videography, and service learning, as well as a *4-H 201—Resources for Fostering, Enhancing, and Sustaining 4-H Clubs* manual.

VerBrugge's relationships with the Army, Air Force, and Navy resulted in scholarship projects for faculty at the university. Hospitality management faculty are working with Navy Morale, Welfare and Recreation to strengthen businesses on bases. Dietetics faculty are working with Army to develop standardized nutritious menus for all Army child and youth programs. Air Force supported projects with evaluation faculty to conduct a study of Air Force teen programs and youth development faculty to create a web-based resource library of youth development materials. The 4-H Military Partnership has been a catalyst for scholarly work and presentations at KSU and other universities. Many graduate and undergraduate students are engaged in 4-H military youth development work. Additionally, two Liaisons have earned a Ph.D. as a result of their work with the 4-H Military Partnership.

U.S. Army Child, Youth and School Services: Army, as the first partner in this project, recognized that 4-H could provide consistency, predictability, and positive youth development in the lives of military youth as they move from location to location. Extension staff, on assignment to Army Child, Youth and School Services, developed curriculum for use across both systems. KSU developed training conferences in partnership with Army to bring Extension and military staff together to learn about both cultures and how to integrate 4-H programming for military youth. Sixty-seven Army installations across the county and overseas receive support and are engaged in 4-H programming in their child and youth programs.

KSU supported Army's Operation: Military Kids project that provided predictable services and high quality educational, recreational, and enrichment programs to geographically dispersed children, youth and families of National Guard and Reserve by focusing on building state and local communities of support. Extension professionals educated communities about military families living in their own backyards and engaged them in supporting the families. Extension staff partnered with Army to develop the national Ready, Set, Go! (RSG!) training curriculum which helped America's communities understand the impact of deployment on children and youth in families with geographically dispersed service members. State teams of military, Extension, and community partners participated in RSG! trainings facilitated by VerBrugge and the KSU staff. Teams then trained their communities to help them understand the impacts of deployment and created strategies for supporting military families locally.

U.S. Air Force Child and Youth Programs: Air Force became an enthusiastic partner in the 4-H Military Partnership in 2004. Air Force youth program staff attended regional 4-H 101 trainings and joined with their local Extension counterparts to begin 4-H programming on 60 bases around the world. KSU sub-

contracts with three universities to provide additional support and technical assistance to the Air Force/4-H partnership. Air Force values the knowledge, resources, and expertise Extension offers and has utilized a variety of universities to conduct additional projects to support military families. A grant program for implementing 4-H camps for youth of geographically dispersed Air Force service members is managed by KSU. The camps, designed and implemented by 4-H camping specialists, focus on STEM topics and career/college readiness.

U.S. Navy Child and Youth Programs: Navy joined the partnership in 2008. VerBrugge coordinated and presented regional 4-H 101 trainings for Navy staff members from 55 bases around the world. Consequently, Navy advocated for an online version of 4-H 101. KSU sub-awarded funding to Extension staff at Purdue University to create a web-based 4-H 101 training platform for all military services and the Extension system. Navy values the expertise of Extension in providing 4-H camping programs for Navy youth. Five 4-H/Navy camps, designed around STEM topics, are conducted each year. Fun camping experiences, tailored to the locality, engage youth in building life and leadership skills.

National Guard Child and Youth Programs: The support of youth of geographically dispersed service members was paramount in the OMK project. After Army discontinued funding for OMK, the 4-H Military Partnership continued to find ways to support geographically dispersed military youth wherever they lived through the state 4-H Military Partnership grants. Liaisons and local Extension staff connect military youth to 4-H in their communities and provide 4-H programming opportunities for youth. The Reserve Component is an important and unique audience for this partnership. When the War on Terrorism commenced, many families living in our local communities were suddenly thrust into military life. Extension played an important role in helping communities understand the stressors military families faced, the stages of the deployment cycle, and identified resources and partners to build support. These families continue to live in our communities and need the unique support the 4-H Military Partnership provides.

Best Practices/Lessons Learned

The dedication, commitment, and collaboration of all partners and the strong relationships fostered has promoted the sustainability of this project over the years. KSU has facilitated and cultivated the relationships of all partners through tenacious communication to fulfill the greater good of serving military youth and families. The challenge of working with five federal agencies, 182 military installations, and 54 states and territories requires persistence, patience, and willingness to learn about other people and systems. Universities identifying an Extension professional whose mission was to develop an on-going relationship with military installations in their state and provide the latest research in youth development for military staff is a best practice learned early in the project. This established the structure for communicating and providing sustainable programs for military youth. Extension embraced the military as a new audience to serve and continuously worked to identify and meet the needs of this unique community. Military families have been exposed to various Extension programs in foods and nutrition, science, gardening, agriculture, and citizenship. Integrating youth into local 4-H programs is another best practice. Local connections with 4-H brings military youth and families off installations to engage in community and state events such as 4-H Fairs, contests, and camps. Engaging local and military youth in community partnerships creates new ideas and approaches to addressing needs. Throughout the past 16 years, this partnership has addressed challenges by bringing the states/territories together with the military services to identify needs and strategies to meet those needs. Through the consistent hard work of KSU and Marlene VerBrugge, a robust and successful long-standing partnership has been developed between the Cooperative Extension System and Military Child and Youth Programs that best serves the needs of our youth, families, and communities.