Community Relations (COMREL)

Do we need to worry about the communities outside our installations? Aren't they reached through media relations? Well, yes, but we need to have a closer relationship with our local communities.

It's often the grassroots efforts in local communities around military installations that create most of the acceptance, understanding, and support. A good community relations program doesn't just happen; it takes considerable planning and effort. However, the payoff will help your installation, your service, the entire U.S. military and the American people.
Definition

Community relations (COMREL) in the public affairs field is an on-going relationship between a military community and a civilian community. The community relations process can occur through various activities like a planned series of events and activities.

Now that you have a basis of what community relations is as PA specialists, you need to understand why we conduct community relations. It is important to recognize the difference between command and public affairs goals.
Purpose

The objective is to foster understanding and acceptance of the military mission. The lack of a planned program often results in other events or activities determining your community relations climate. In addition, it is Department of Defense policy to foster good relations with the communities at home and abroad. Not only does it foster support of the military, it's a tool that humanizes service members. With current events in the world, the public is bombarded with terms like Soldier, Marines, insurgents and terrorists. It's our responsibility to put a face with our men and women serving in America's armed forces. We aren't to be taken for granted; they are mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters.

In order to develop a good community relations program at your installation, you must start with three basic ingredients -- publics, communication channels, and projects and activities.
Community Programs

Most successful COMREL programs identify the key publics, and/or leaders in the local community.

A. Publics are divided into internal and external publics. Internal publics include active-duty service members, reservists, guardsmen, family members, retirees, and civilian employees. External publics include any people outside of your installation who may have an interest in your installation, including decision makers and opinion leaders in the community.

1. First, look at community leaders in the formal power structure. In this structure identify the elected or appointed officials in the community. These people are "decision makers" since they often vote on issues that may affect military-local community relations.

2. Next, identify those community leaders in the informal power structure. Community leaders in this area have the power to shape public opinion. There are individuals in the community who gather a following based on their perspective on a single issue or a group or related issues. We call these individuals "opinion leaders." Examples include clergy and officers of environmental groups.

3. Another category of key external publics consists of the "influentials." These people often depend on their position in the business world. They are the CEOs and presidents of business associations in your area.

B. Communication channels -- Several communications channels are available to carry-out a good community relations (COMREL) program.

1. Service members' participation in community, church, athletic and social activities are the most important communication channel. The majority of people in your community will base their opinions of the service on the individuals with whom they have come into contact.

2. Public Affairs practitioners also write advance stories about events scheduled to occur on the installation in order to invite the public or announce newsworthy information to the community. These stories, in the form of news releases, are sent out to local print and broadcast media for publication.

3. Other communication channels include the base community council and speakers bureau.

C. Projects and activities -- Lastly, projects and activities such as tours, exhibits, bands, color guards, open houses and other planned activities aimed at communicating with the public are essential.

1. The public has a right to know what we are doing and the military needs public understanding, support and cooperation to accomplish its mission.

2. The community relations program should be tailored to the military organization and, more importantly, the needs of the local community.

3. Remember, good community relations doesn't just happen; it takes considerable knowledge and effort. The payoff will help your installation, your service, the entire U.S. military and the American people.

Now that you are aware of the three basic ingredients to develop a good community relations program, let's see how personal contact is key in creating and maintaining a successful community relations program.

The U.S. Fleet Forces Band is the musical representative for the Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command and is the largest of the Navy's 11 fleet bands.
Civic Outreach Programs

In order to interact with community members face-to-face, public affairs offices may use the following civic outreach programs.

A. The speaker's bureau program is a way of getting your messages to various facets of the local community. The public affairs office can send speakers into the community to talk about their jobs, the installation, and its mission. Your installation is full of people with special skills, talents and interests. Civic organizations are always on the lookout for speakers. The public affairs staff is responsible for maintaining a roster of speakers, evaluating requests and coordinating speaking engagements.

B. Installation tours -- Tours are opportunities for civilians to see the military first hand. They can touch tanks, helicopters, equipment, and can observe the military in action. While tours require detailed planning and manpower, they do provide payoffs in terms of the acceptance, understanding and support of the installation's mission. The public affairs office is responsible for handling request from civic groups, selecting and training tour guides, and planning and coordinating tours.

C. Distinguished visitor tours -- Installation public affairs offices may be tasked to develop tours as part of a service or defense department distinguished visitor tour program. These tour participants are usually key leaders selected by a command element, service or DoD to receive insight into military operations. Usually these tour programs require service chain coordination and guidance, and sometimes require specific tour guide selection. Obviously, due to the high visibility of these tour programs, thorough written planning is necessary.

D. Base community councils -- The base community council helps bring the base and local community together. The size of this group depends on the size of the installation and the size of the community or communities affected by the installation. This group works together to deal with problems and programs of mutual interest such as education and housing, and water, electricity, and emergency services. The PA staff assists the commander in developing the base community councils, planning meetings, and establishing agendas.

E. Open houses -- Open houses provide the opportunity for a large portion of the local community to see the military they support through tax dollars, face-to-face. Open houses offer the chance to see demonstrations of equipment and capabilities first hand. They usually include static displays of aircraft, tanks, or other platforms, and demonstrations of mission capability. Open houses are usually scheduled on an annual basis. This is due to the huge volume of planning, coordination and manpower required to put on this event. Because of the size, an open house requires extensive planning and logistical support.

F. Military band performances -- Military bands can provide patriotic or military music in the local community when sponsored by nonfederal entities. However, they are not allowed to provide background, dinner, dance or other social music at programs held away from an installation. This would compete with local private bands. They can, however, perform their patriotic or military music and can be used to support recruiting activities.

G. Participation in community events -- Military members may support community requests to take part in local events as part of an honor guard, science fair or marching unit. Generally, face-to-face efforts involving service members, such as joint cleanup ventures or blood donation drives are most productive. Support must be confined to activities that are common public interest and benefit a local, state, regional, national or broadly representative community unless specifically authorized by public law or executive order.

With all the exciting options available to you as PA specialists, before you can rush out and book your calendar solid, it is important that you have standard operating procedures in place on how to handle requests...both local and national.
Requests from National Organizations

Occasionally, installation public affairs offices receive requests to provide support to national-level organizations. An example would be a request for a speaker to talk about the advances in military technology at the National Technology Symposium or an Honor Guard at the Super Bowl. Such requests are handled differently due to the high exposure of the event. Local commanders may support local and regional chapters of national organizations.

A. Requests for speakers for national events should be directed up the PA service chain of command for possible Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense/Public Affairs approval.

B. If the request is for a speaker or for component unique information, services may handle these requests at the local or service PA level.

Now let's take a look at special service demonstrations.

Photo courtesy of www.usvethub.com
Service Demonstration Requests

Every year, numerous civilian organizations request special military air demonstration teams to perform at their events around the world. In order to handle the volume of requests for the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds, U.S. Navy Blue Angels and U.S. Army Golden Knights, the Department of Defense has developed standard procedures and annual submission deadlines.

1. All civilian requests for these teams must be submitted to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense Public Affairs (Directorate of Programs and Community Relations) using DD Form 2535. All other non-aviation requests use DD Form 2536.

2. Installation public affairs offices may assist organizations by providing forms and assisting in completing them, but the organizations must submit requests directly to OASD/PA. Schedules for team performances are set in December for the next calendar year. To establish the schedule, request submissions must be received by August 1st for the Blue Angels and Thunderbirds, and October 1st for the Golden Knights for the following year.

While community relations is generally viewed as a very positive program, there are some DoD policy restrictions.

DoD Policy Restrictions

Installation public affairs offices must follow DoD policy guidelines for community relations programs. The staff must be aware of these restrictions.

1. Do not endorse or appear to endorse commercial promotional activities. However, you can support commercial activities if there is a recruiting opportunity, such as a recruiting information table set up at a shopping mall.

2. Do not support or participate in segregated events or organizations that discriminate on the basis of gender, race, religion or nationality. The exception is service organizations, which are gender or nationality based, if it is for a community support activity. The military has a special relationship with the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, so it can give the group support for a wide range of needs, including office space and administrative non-appropriated fund help.

3. Do not complete with local businesses. We cannot provide personnel, transportation or equipment when such services are reasonably available in the public domain. This can be interpreted as appearing to endorse a particular group or organization.

4. Do not participate in partisan politics. Appearances are key. Avoid stories and activities on base that involve incumbents running for re-election to avoid favoring one candidate over another. Federal voter registration commercials and commanders encouraging the military community members to vote are not partisan political activities.

5. Do not use military personnel in demeaning or inappropriate capacities, such as waiting on tables or opening doors, to support unofficial programs conducted off military installations.

6. Do not endorse fraternal or religious groups. We can provide educational or patriotic support to religious schools. Also, we may participate in community activities held at churches if they are not religious in nature and are opened to the entire community. Veterans groups, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion, are considered fraternal organizations, though we may give them information about obtaining DD Form 214 (military discharge papers) and donate surplus military hardware to them.

7. Community relations support cannot be given where public confrontation is planned or likely, or where the apparent purpose is to stage controversy to increase a group’s visibility. This does not prevent DoD participation in events where fair and equitable discussion of differing opinions is likely to occur.

8. Military speakers have to deal with a few other restrictions to their activities, which are outlined in DoD and service Standards of Conduct regulations. These restrictions include:
   
   a) Honorarium or gratuities -- there is a set dollar limit, which is currently $20.
   
   b) Speeches by military members cannot give an advantage to a defense contractor.

Up to this point we have been talking about fostering good relationships with the community. But community relations doesn't stop there. You need to consider other aspects of that relationship like the impact you have on the community just by sharing relatively the same space.
Impact on Local Schools

The Impact Aid program is paid by the Department of Education directly to local school districts to partially underwrite the cost of educating military children.

1. For military children who live on an installation and attend a local public school, 100 percent of allotted aid is paid to that district per military child.

2. For military children who live in town and attend a local public school, only 25 percent of the allotted aid is paid to that district per military child. Why? The theory is that the military families who live in town are paying more taxes.

The Department of Education handles all amounts and distribution of funds concerning the Impact Aid program. When you receive a query from a concerned civilian or media, refer them to your local district's Department of Education. We refer all these types of Impact aid calls to DoE because we don't have releasing authority to speak about another department of the government. We're DoD, not DoE.

Now let's take a look at a growing problem around many military installations -- encroachment.
Dealing with Encroachment

Encroachment is the expansion of man-made or controlled elements to such an extent that the base is no longer able to perform its primary mission.

A. Traffic congestion, noise complaints and reduction of training operations are all signs that an installation has encroachment problems.

B. There are several means of preventing encroachment.

1. Zoning, which prevents residential and some commercial activities from being built around the installation and specifically in the flight paths (preferred).
2. Purchase of air easements. The military sometimes pays residents in order to fly above their homes.
3. Land purchase (expensive/last resort)
4. Land exchange
5. Operational solutions such as increasing the glide path of aircraft or insulating buildings through the modification of building codes.

B. Air Installation Compatibility zones (AICUZ) are health and safety zones that promote compatible development around military installations. In a nutshell, the identification of these zones prevents civilians from moving into areas where they may experience lots of noise or damage from incoming and outgoing aircraft.

C. The program identifies clear zones, accident-potential. The AICUZ noise and accident potential zones were mapped out in 1979 and are reviewed regularly in an effort to minimize and track the base impact on the local community. Public affairs must record local complaints as part of the administrative record for future zoning recommendations and purchase decisions, and also serve as a conduit between the base and the community.

For every action there is an equal, but opposite reaction. In sharp contrast to encroachment, there are installation closures.

Photo courtesy of /www.bcdcog.com
Installation Closures

Under the Base Realignment and Closure Act, installations began closing in 1989. So far, 50 installations have been closed with 47 more marked for closure. Because a military installation has an effect on the surrounding community, public affairs (tours/stories) and community relations efforts will need to increase after a base is slated for closure.

Our main concern is that the local community understands what the land will be used for after we are gone and that we will ensure the area is clean and safe when we leave.

Environmental Assessment for BRAC 05 Disposal and Reuse of Fort Gillem, Georgia

Prepared by:
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: Mobile District
With Technical Assistance from:
Mantel-Day, LLC
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

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Photo courtesy of img.docstoccdn.com
Conclusion

Now you can define military community engagement (outreach) programs. Remember, good community relations doesn't just happen; it takes considerable knowledge and effort. You want the surrounding community to think of you as their military not just the military.
References and Additional Resources


Department of Defense Instruction 5410.19, Public Affairs Community Relations, 13 November 2001

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Army Regulation 360-A. Army Public Affairs Program, 15 September 2000

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