Introduction to Community Engagement

We already know that one of the primary objectives of military public affairs is to gain acceptance, understanding and support of the public. It's often the grassroots efforts in local communities around military installations that create most of the acceptance, understanding and support. The high favorability the military enjoys didn't just happen; it has required considerable effort to establish and maintain the strong support of our publics.

In 1858, Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln campaigned against each other for one of the U.S. Senate seats from Illinois. They held debates at seven Illinois sites, one in each of the seven Congressional districts. Lincoln believed the country could not survive divided between slave and free states, which was in contrast to Douglas' "Popular Sovereignty" stance. The Lincoln-Douglas debates drew the attention of the entire nation. Lincoln, who was largely a political unknown at the beginning of the debates, lost the Senate race, but went on to defeat Douglas in the 1860 race for the U.S. presidency.

It was during the 1858 debates that Lincoln expressed the understanding a leader must have of his surroundings: "In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed."

As a PAO, you have to recognize the importance of community engagement and the role it plays in maintaining the public's trust of the military and our
Definition

Community engagement consists of fostering and building good relations with communities at home and abroad in the best interest of the military and the Department of Defense. Well-planned community engagements programs help earn public support and understanding of military operations, missions, and requirements of the U.S. military.

A principle goal of all community engagement activity is to increase the public’s understanding of the DoD mission and the U.S. defense posture and capabilities by increasing public exposure to, and understanding of, military personnel, facilities, equipment, and programs.

Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with, and through, groups of people affiliated by geographic location or special interest to enhance their understanding and support for military operations. During joint operations, any number of personnel may be involved in activities that engage the community, such as public affairs, civil affairs, military information support operations, military health specialists, lawyers, and engineers.

It is the responsibility of senior military officials to engage key leaders within their operational areas, including those from other government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. As the PAO, it is your responsibility to assist in identifying these key leaders and recommending opportunities for military engagement to command leadership.

Now let’s look at the various publics you need to consider supporting within your community engagement program.
Potential Publics

The overarching objective that determines publics is "fostering and sustaining good relations on mutually acceptable terms with the many elements of the public, at home and abroad, on which the military services depend for support and cooperation" (DOD 5410.18).

Within the United States, specific categories of publics targeted for community engagement activities include: the communities and neighborhoods located near a base or facility, community leaders at the local and state level as well as federal elected officials and leaders of civic organizations, and specific volunteer organizations. Community engagement support must consist of activities that have a common public interest and benefit local, state, regional, national, or a broadly representational community, unless support is specifically authorized by statutes or executive orders.

Specific categories of publics targeted for community engagement activities outside the U.S. include those who can influence or lead a group such as tribal, regional, and state leaders. When trying to identify publics outside the U.S., PAO’s are required to coordinate with the respective U.S. Embassy community relations or public information office, depending on the embassy structure.

You now have a sense for which publics you need to target for a community engagement program at home and abroad, but it is also important to be familiar with the DOD guidelines for community engagement activities.
DOD Support Criteria

Guidance on community engagement programs and activities can be found in Department of Defense Directive 5410.18, Public Affairs Community Relations Policy. This should be your first step in becoming familiar with and understanding the support criteria for community engagement functions. The most recent Joint Doctrine (JP 3-61 from 2010) changes the term to community engagement from what DODD 5410.18 refers to as community relations.

Within the directive, you will find key provisions related to community engagement activities. For example, according to the directive, no charges or fees resulting in an increase in military funding above that allocated by Congress shall be imposed by the military installation or its agents for admission, parking, or viewing community relations activities.

Also, the use of Department of Defense resources or personnel for community relations activities shall not interfere with accomplishment of operational missions or with mission-essential training or materiel upkeep.

It’s important to keep in mind that community engagement support must be confined to activities that are of common public interest. These can be nonpartisan patriotic events that are open to the general public or invitation only events.

Nonpartisan patriotic events include those sponsored by local, state, or federal governments, schools, civic organizations, veterans associations, or recognized organizations whose primary purpose is to foster public service, stimulate patriotism, promote understanding of national security issues, or increase public appreciation of our national heritage. Events such as these are generally considered to be in the common public interest.

Events where attendance is by invitation only may also be considered to be of common interest and benefit to the local, state, regional, national or community if invitations are extended to a cross section of a broad community. For example, an association convention representing an entire industry could be considered of common interest, however, a meeting of representatives from only one organization, firm, or business within that industry is not considered to be of common interest.

Community engagement support to events sponsored by organizations with a narrow membership base or interest, such as commercial enterprises, religious or sectarian organizations, ideological organizations, and political organizations and campaigns, may occasionally be considered to be in the common public interest when it is clear that the support primarily benefits the community at large, rather than the sponsoring organization. Examples of such instances include the use of a church as a site for a public concert, speech, or display, when the activity is not part of a religious service; the use of a shopping mall as a site for an event when the site is made available as a community service and not as a promotion; and using a local airport for an air show.

Events such as testimonials, tributes, or honors to individuals are not generally of common interest or benefit to the community at large and are not supported by the DOD. In addition, community engagement activities must not employ military personnel in uniform, in such capacities as ushers, bag handlers, guards, escorts, messengers, parking lot attendants, or in similar capacities during public events that are not conducted on military installations.

Now let’s take a look at the guidelines for service member participation within community engagement activities.
Service Member Participation

There are no restrictions on DOD personnel who participate voluntarily in community or civic activities during their personal time or while they are in an off-duty status. For instance, a service member or civilian DOD employee is free to volunteer at a local soup kitchen or serve as a scout leader as long as it is not during normal duty or work hours. As a matter of fact, such efforts are encouraged as long as they comply with Joint Ethics Regulations and do not imply DOD endorsement.

Military service members are prohibited from participating in any activity or association that the public could interpret as linking the services to a political candidate or cause. Specific guidelines on active duty political involvement are outlined in detail in DODD 1344.10. Rules for political activity among federal civilian employees differ slightly and are outlined in the Hatch Act which specifies acceptable and prohibited political activities on the part of federal, state and local employees. (http://www.osc.gov/hatchact.htm)

Military personnel may not participate in a program or event that appears to endorse or favor any private individual, special interest group or business, religion, ideology, commercial venture, or political candidate or organization. Any event with military participation shall not be intended to provoke controversy or public confrontation, nor shall it bar anyone from attending because of race, creed, color or national origin. Participation in community events is limited to dignified activities that conform to the letter and spirit of all current directives.

Military personnel may take part in community events or command events allowing community participation when such involvement is also in the common interest and benefit and as long as organizational or individual participation does not interfere with operational missions, priorities, resources, ethics, and other policy (Joint Ethics Regulation, DODD 5500.07-R, 2011, p. 38; Navy Tactics Manual, p. 155).

It is important to understand the ins and outs of service member participation in community engagement programs. This is frequently an area of discussion and confusion. An additional area you need to consider is political involvement and activities.

Photo courtesy of media.dma.mil
Political Guidelines

As a public affairs practitioner, another area that you need to consider regarding community engagement is political involvement and activities. You’ll find most of the guidance you’ll need by becoming thoroughly familiar with the intent and content of Department of Defense Directive 1344.10, Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces.

Our service members are encouraged to carry out the obligations of citizenship. They can register and vote for the candidate of their choice and express a personal opinion on political candidates and issues, but not while representing themselves as a member of the Armed Forces. Tradition and policy dictate that active duty members should not engage in partisan political activity. Members not on active duty should avoid inferences that their political activities imply or appear to imply official sponsorship, approval or endorsement of any political candidate or view.

Paragraph four of DODD 1344.10 provides specific public affairs guidance regarding political activities that pertain to correspondence and running for elective office. See below guidance from the directive:

- Members of the Armed Forces on active duty may, for example, write a letter to the editor of a newspaper expressing their personal views on public issues or political candidates, if such action is not part of an organized letter-writing campaign or a solicitation of votes for or against a political party or partisan political cause or candidate. If the letter identifies the member as on active duty (or if the member is otherwise reasonably identifiable as a member of the Armed Forces), the letter should clearly state that the views expressed are those of the individual only and not those of the Department of Defense or Department of Homeland Security, as appropriate.

- Members not on active duty who are nominees or candidates for elective civil office in the U.S. may use, mention, or permit the use or mention of, their military rank or grade and military service affiliation in their campaign literature, provided they clearly indicate their retired or reserve status.

Now you have a sense for service member participation in community engagement activities and guidelines for political activities. Now let’s see what the components are that make up a community engagement program.
Components

There are three components that make up a community engagement program – funding, logistics and programs. Let’s take a look at each of these.

Funding. Funding programmed and expended for public affairs activities is an integral part of the Operations and Maintenance (O&M) fund account for each DOD component. Except for those programmed O&M funds, community engagement activities must not involve any additional cost to the federal government (DODD 5410.18, para. 4.2.1). For example, there may be a separate line of accounting in your budget for community engagement activities. These funds must be used solely for community engagement events or programs such as paint, books, even light refreshments, but they may not be used for full meals or personal gifts of any nature. These funds must not be used to purchase fuel for a ship – this expense comes from O&M funds. Distinguished visitors wishing to set sail with the crew can only do so when the trip is part of normal operations. No exceptions can be made just for a VIP visit. Keep in mind that any support provided to the community must be funded through annual budget appropriations or other authorized sources and is in accordance with applicable status, executive orders, DODD 5410.18, and other pertinent guidance.

Logistics. Military logistical support to events sponsored by non-Federal entities may be provided with approval by the head of the DoD component command or organization. The command or organization may provide military service members in their official capacities to address DoD policies as speakers, panel members, or other participants. On a limited basis, the loan of DoD facilities and equipment (and the services of DoD personnel necessary to ensure proper use of the equipment), may also be provided when all of the following criteria are met:

- The logistical support does not interfere with the performance of official duties and does not detract from readiness.
- Department of Defense community engagement with the immediate community and/or other legitimate DOD public affairs or military training interests are served by the support. DOD assets routinely support air shows, for example, that may coincide with a community program. During the Bicentennial of the War of 1812 observation in Baltimore, Maryland, the Navy Blue Angels performed as part of the program. This was coordinated, planned and funded years in advance as a legitimate community engagement event to benefit all the services.

- The association of the Department of Defense, including the concerned military departments, with the event is in the best interest of the Department.

Programs. Depending on the service component and resources available, there are several common programs designed to support community engagement efforts such as:

- Aerial demonstrations, which include performances by the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds, the U.S. Navy Blue Angels, and the U.S. Army Golden Knights; flyovers; tactical demonstrations; aerial reviews; static displays and other events.
- Public speaking by DOD personnel in their official capacity.
- Joint Civilian Orientation Conference (JCOC), which is a week-long, multi-service orientation to U.S. Armed Forces missions and programs for approximately 60 civilian guests of the Secretary of Defense.
- Armed Forces Day and Veterans Day observances and events.
Components (continued)

- Armed Forces bands, troops and units in support of public programs. (DODD 5410.18, para. 4.3 through 4.8).

*Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornet planes fly in formation past spectators on a bastion of Fort McHenry, participating in the air show during the weekend-long Star Spangled Sailandration 200 Saturday, June 16 2012. (Karl Merton Ferron/Baltimore Sun)*
Conclusion

Your ability to recommend and foster an effective community engagement program is based on your knowledge of the different elements to consider. As you continue learning the basics of public affairs, use what you have learned about community engagement to make everything you do more focused and responsive to command and community needs.
References and Additional Resources

DODD 1344.10 (2008). Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces

DODD 5410.18 (2007). Public Affairs Community Relations Policy

Joint Publication 3-61 (2010). Public Affairs