

3rd Annual Military Thriving Change Forum

Breakout Session Summary

Building Military Thriving Communities: State & Regional Perspectives

Session Purpose

This breakout session brought together leaders from government, nonprofits, higher education, workforce development, and the private sector to explore what it takes to build Military Thriving communities at the state and regional levels.

Participants examined barriers that prevent veterans, military spouses, and transitioning service members from reaching their full potential while identifying the partnerships, policies, and performance measures needed to create stronger, more connected ecosystems. The discussion focused not only on existing challenges, but on the long-term vision for communities where military-connected individuals and families can successfully live, work, lead, serve, and thrive.

Executive Summary

Participants consistently described Military Thriving as an ecosystem challenge rather than a program challenge. While many communities offer numerous and valuable services and resources, those efforts are often fragmented across organizations, agencies, and jurisdictions, making them difficult for military-connected individuals and families to navigate.

Rather than calling for additional programs, participants emphasized the need for stronger coordination, clearer governance, shared accountability, and a more connected approach to serving veterans and military spouses. They envisioned communities where economic opportunity, social connection, quality of life, and effective collaboration work together to support long-term success.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of measuring Military Thriving through meaningful outcomes rather than activity alone. Participants identified economic mobility, community well-being, and ecosystem collaboration and measurement as key indicators of successful Military Thriving communities.

Finding 1: Fragmentation Limits Community Impact

Participants repeatedly identified fragmented systems as one of the greatest barriers to Military Thriving.

Discussion

Although many organizations are working toward similar goals, efforts are often disconnected. Information is housed in separate systems, responsibilities are spread across multiple agencies, and organizations frequently operate independently rather than collaboratively.

Participants observed that this fragmentation creates unnecessary complexity for veterans, military spouses, and transitioning service members attempting to navigate available resources.

Participant Insights

- Duplicative jurisdictions and overlapping responsibilities
- Siloed information systems
- Limited coordination among organizations
- Competing priorities instead of shared goals
- Lack of a unified system for collecting and sharing data
- Need for clearer governance and accountability through measurement.

Implications

Communities may not need additional programs—they may achieve greater impact by improving coordination among the resources that already exist.

Finding 2: Access to Opportunity Requires Better Navigation

Participants described an ongoing "opportunity gap" between available resources and awareness of those resources.

Discussion

Even when valuable programs exist, military-connected individuals often struggle to understand where to begin, who is responsible for specific services, or how to navigate multiple organizations throughout their transition journey.

Participants emphasized that improving access requires simplifying navigation rather than simply expanding available resources.

Participant Insights

- Numerous, complex access points
- Unclear pathways between and across organizations
- Lack of consistent guidance and handoffs between organizations.
- Limited visibility into existing opportunities

Implications

Improving navigation may be one of the fastest ways to strengthen Military Thriving outcomes.

Finding 3: Military Thriving Requires More Than Employment

Participants consistently described “thriving” as a broader concept than simply obtaining a job.

Successful communities create opportunities for long-term economic mobility, family stability, and personal well-being.

Priority Areas

Economic Mobility

- Meaningful employment
- Modern apprenticeships
- Veteran-owned business growth
- Career advancement
- Cross-industry workforce pathways

Family Stability

- Military spouse workforce participation

- Social connection
- Community engagement
- Mental health support
- Overall quality of life

Policy Development

- Stronger transition governance and clear guidelines on which organizations get access and why.
- Favorable public policy
- Defined leadership roles
- Improved collaboration between sectors

Implications

Military Thriving should be measured by long-term success across multiple dimensions rather than employment alone.

Finding 4: Communities Need Shared Measures of Success

Participants emphasized that lasting improvement requires measurable outcomes.

Rather than focusing solely on program participation, communities should evaluate whether military-connected individuals experience sustained improvements in economic opportunity, quality of life, and community engagement.

Suggested Indicators

Economic Mobility

- Employment outcomes
- Career progression and Retention
- Veteran-owned business growth
- Time to employment

Community Well-Being

- Quality of life
- Civic engagement
- Veteran retention within the state

- Social connectedness

Ecosystem Effectiveness

- Cross-sector collaboration
- Resource utilization
- Shared data
- Alignment across organizations

Implications

Communities cannot improve what they do not measure. Shared metrics create accountability and enable organizations to evaluate collective progress.

Emerging Opportunities

Participants identified several opportunities for future collaboration:

- Improve coordination across organizations
 - Develop shared data and information systems
 - Strengthen public-private partnerships
 - Expand military spouse policy initiatives
 - Create clearer transition pathways
 - Increase collaboration among employers, educators, nonprofits, and government agencies
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Closing Observation

The discussion reinforced that Military Thriving is fundamentally a community responsibility rather than the responsibility of any single organization.

Communities that succeed will be those that intentionally connect people, organizations, resources, and policies into a coordinated ecosystem that supports military-connected individuals throughout every stage of their journey.

ZeroMils Perspective

Military Thriving is not created through isolated programs or individual success stories. It emerges when communities intentionally align leadership, resources, and opportunities around a shared commitment to supporting veterans, military spouses, and their families as catalysts for growth and change at the local level. Building these ecosystems requires investment, collaboration, accountability, and a willingness to measure success collectively rather than organizationally.