

Military Thriving® San Diego

Breakout Session Summary

San Diego has many of the foundational assets needed to build a thriving military-connected community, including strong employers, educational institutions, healthcare systems, nonprofits, government agencies, military organizations, and philanthropic partners. Across five working groups (employment, education, health and family stability, community connection, and entrepreneurship), a consistent picture emerged: **the region is not starting from zero. The core opportunity is to connect, coordinate, and strengthen what already exists, while closing specific gaps in affordability, spouse employment, and family-support capacity.**

1. Strengths

- **Deep integration between military and civilian life.** Military-connected individuals and families are already employees, business owners, students, parents, and community leaders in the community, and are not viewed as a transitory population.
- **A broad, willing ecosystem.** Employers, military installations, nonprofits, higher education, healthcare providers, and community organizations are all active and motivated to collaborate.
- **Real career and economic pathways.** Apprenticeships, fellowships, returnships, employer engagement, and a growing veteran/military-spouse entrepreneurship movement offer genuine opportunity.
- **A whole-family, whole-life vision.** Working groups consistently framed thriving as extending beyond the service member to the whole family, and beyond transition to belonging, purpose, and long-term contribution.
- **Collaborative appetite.** Participants repeatedly emphasized wanting stronger connections and warm handoffs between organizations rather than another directory or program.

2. Core Gaps and Barriers

Fragmented resources and difficult navigation

Resources exist, but individuals and families struggle to know what's available, what's relevant to them, where to start, whom to trust, and how to move between services. San Diego lacks a consistently trusted navigation system offering personalized guidance and warm handoffs.

Cost of living, housing, and affordability

High housing costs, taxes, and childcare expenses put pressure on military family stability and can push families to leave San Diego even when they have strong professional or community ties to the region.

Military spouse employment and career continuity

Spouses face barriers connecting to jobs before/after relocation, underemployment, licensing and credential portability issues, low awareness of available benefits, employer misconceptions about mobility, and difficulty sustaining career progression through repeated moves.

Translating military experience into civilian value

Employers often don't recognize the value of military leadership, technical, and operational experience, while transitioning service members struggle to translate that experience into civilian resumes, interviews, and career paths.

Entrepreneurship barriers

Military-connected entrepreneurs face difficulty accessing startup/growth capital, building credit, finding mentors, navigating a large landscape of business-support resources, understanding regulatory requirements, accessing contracting opportunities, and finding qualified employees. Participants called for a clearer "single source of truth" to route entrepreneurs to the right resource for their stage of business, rather than more new programs.

Healthcare, mental health, and childcare capacity

The issue isn't only whether services exist, but whether there's enough capacity, affordability, and coordination. Childcare shortages in particular can keep spouses out of the workforce.

Weak bridge between military and civilian life

Transition involves simultaneous decisions across employment, education, housing, healthcare, finances, childcare, and identity, but existing processes don't consistently connect these into one cohesive experience.

Limited belonging, purpose, and long-term connection

Thriving isn't just a job or a completed transition program. Individuals, families, and military-connected youth need pathways to relationships, civic engagement, and a genuine sense of belonging.

Inconsistent measurement of long-term outcomes

Most programs track participation or immediate outputs, not what happens afterward, which leaves the region without shared measures to know which interventions work or where to invest.

Overall gap: San Diego has the resources military-connected individuals and families need, but those resources don't yet function as a connected, trusted, navigable system. This problem is compounded by affordability pressures, spouse employment barriers, and gaps in family-support capacity.

3. Priorities for Leaders

1. **Connect what already exists:** prioritize coordination, communication, and referral pathways between organizations over new programs or directories.
2. **Make navigation simple, trusted, and personal:** build a system of warm handoffs and personalized guidance, not another list of resources.
3. **Treat military-connected talent as a strategic economic asset:** give employers better tools to recognize and recruit military experience, and support entrepreneurship as a viable path.
4. **Make spouse career continuity a workforce priority:** spouse employment directly affects family financial stability, employer talent pipelines, and regional retention.
5. **Support military-connected entrepreneurs as economic contributors:** strengthen connections to capital, mentors, procurement opportunities, and the right support resources at the right stage.
6. **Treat affordability as a retention strategy:** housing, childcare, and cost of living aren't just quality-of-life issues; they determine whether families can stay.
7. **Define thriving beyond transition and employment:** support should extend across life stages, including health, relationships, belonging, and purpose.
8. **Measure what matters over time:** track outcomes, not just outputs, to identify what's working and where to invest collectively.

4. Measuring Success

A thriving military-connected community is one where individuals and families build stable, meaningful lives and choose to stay connected to San Diego over time. Proposed measurement areas:

- **Employment and economic stability:** livable-wage employment, career advancement, employer retention, business growth
- **Military spouse career continuity:** employment rates, time-to-employment after relocation, underemployment reduction
- **Navigation and transition:** successful warm handoffs, time to access resources, confidence in knowing where to go
- **Entrepreneurship:** businesses started and sustained, revenue growth, access to capital and contracts, jobs created
- **Housing and financial stability:** reduced housing displacement, income relative to cost of living
- **Healthcare, mental health, and childcare access:** availability, wait times, capacity relative to demand
- **Belonging and community connection:** sense of belonging, civic/volunteer participation, youth engagement
- **Regional retention:** percentage remaining at 1, 3, and 5 years; intent to stay or return
- **Ecosystem performance:** quality of cross-sector partnerships, reduced duplication, shared use of outcome data

North Star question: *Are military-connected individuals and families not only successfully transitioning, but building stable, meaningful lives and choosing to remain connected to San Diego over time?*

5. Process Note

Participants recommended that future breakout sessions include more veteran and military-spouse business owners along with local entrepreneurship/economic development leaders, and suggested recording sessions (with consent) or using a dedicated note-taker to ensure insights are fully captured. More detailed notes from the sessions are available upon request.

