

Strategies for Building and Maintaining Communication Between 4-H Professionals and Local Military Partners¹

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Introduction

The Department of Defense (DoD) and the United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA NIFA) formed a formal partnership in 1982 to provide positive youth development opportunities through 4-H involvement (NIFA, 2025b). 4-H programming is currently offered on Army, Navy, and Air Force installations worldwide. These efforts are a result of the collaboration among installation staff, local Extension professionals, state Extension professionals, and extensive partnership personnel (collectively referred to as military partners), ensuring consistent and multifaceted opportunities throughout the year (NIFA, 2025b). While there are also opportunities nationwide for military-connected children and youth from geographically dispersed guard and reserve families and those living outside the installation, who may even be participating in county programs already, this publication is specifically designed for communication strategies supporting installation-related child and youth programs (NIFA, 2025b).

Purpose

This publication provides a framework for 4-H professionals who work with local military partners to build and maintain successful partnerships. This publication aims to (1) compile a comprehensive list of considerations 4-H professionals should weigh for effective communication before contacting military partners and setting up a meeting; (2) establish a template for guiding professionals through effective conversations; and (3) provide valuable resources that will support 4-H professionals in hosting conversations and develop community needs.

Background

The mission of the 4-H Military Partnership is “Military readiness through 4-H positive youth development for youth, families, and communities” (4-H Military Partnership, n.d.). Recognizing the need for programs for military-connected children and their families, the DoD

leveraged the infrastructure of the 4-H youth development program to integrate educational opportunities and engage in intentional learning experiences (4-H Military Partnership, n.d.). Throughout the evolution of these partnerships, the Army, Air Force, and Marines worked with multiple land-grant universities (LGUs) to support strategies and initiatives for military-connected youth and families and to provide training and resources on positive youth development for the Services’ child and youth staff. In 2005, the USDA NIFA and DoD created the 4-H Military Partnership, formalizing the working relationship between both organizations with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

Each state has at least one out of 112 total land-grant universities. 4-H is available in most counties, parishes, and territories in the United States through the local Cooperative Extension office (NIFA, 2025a). As part of the federal partnership and MOU between DoD Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) and USDA NIFA, 4-H is available for military-connected families on every active-duty installation inside and outside the continental U.S. that has a child and youth program (NIFA, 2025a; 4-H Military Partnership, n.d.).

4-H clubs and programs offer consistency, meaningful connections, and a sense of belonging as military-connected youth navigate deployment, reintegration, frequent relocations, and other challenges related to military life. 4-H provides predictable programming and a safe and nurturing environment for military-connected children and youth to excel.

Preparing to Establish a Collaboration

Relationships with military-connected personnel start with open communication, the understanding of needs, and the setting of goals and expectations (Coultts & Roberts, 2003; Darr et al., 2014; Lakai et al., 2014). A crucial piece of establishing an effective relationship with Child and Youth Programs (CYP) staff and/or DoD staff is to first learn and understand the needs of staff and youth to align goals and

expectations that are fully agreed upon by all parties, thus ensuring mutual investments in programming efforts (Coutts & Roberts, 2003; Darr et al., 2014).

Frustration and conflict most often arise when communication breaks down or the involved parties do not agree on expectations. With a high turnover for both Extension professionals and CYP staff, it is critical that program relationships are maintained with new staff members to ensure the continuity and consistency of 4-H program partnerships (Coutts & Roberts, 2003; Peine, 2023). This publication outlines the framework of conversations that will foster the building and maintenance of strong partnerships between local 4-H professionals and military partners.

There are several pieces of information to keep in mind when approaching a collaborative relationship with military partners. Even though military partners are unique, many of our basic principles still apply. Military-connected youth may face unique and extremely difficult challenges. However, at the end of the day, they are still youth, and positive youth development practices remain the basis for programming.

Our military partners, particularly the military youth sites, collaborate with numerous other community organizations both locally and nationally. Other community partners may offer funding or grants for programming opportunities. It is critical to understand that they may have numerous sources of funding for some programs but limited or no funding for other programs. Therefore, how we partner with each site and installation will look different based on the needs and resources available. Some installations may be willing to openly discuss their available resources while others are not. In any case, the awareness that funding may or may not be readily available may impact opportunities. It is critical to be aware of the variance and embrace the opportunities that could arise.

Understanding Military Partners

Audience

When preparing to establish a relationship with local military partners, the first step is to determine with whom you will establish a collaboration initially. When working with military partners at an installation, it is first important to understand the structure and roles of each staff member. There are numerous ways to classify contributors; however, for the purposes of this publication, staff will be classified into either management and leadership staff or program staff.

Management and leadership staff tend to be fewer in number and include roles such as center directors, assistant directors, and training and curriculum specialists (trainers). Program staff is often composed of numerous individuals, including center staff and frontline staff. There are two primary types of staff within this group, including the school-age staff who work with younger youth and the youth center staff who work with the other-aged youth. Depending on your goal and the installation size, you can plan one larger meeting or multiple smaller meetings, though it is highly recommended to begin with one specific group rather than all staff together.

When meeting with management and leadership staff, invite the child and youth program director, individual program directors (school age director, youth center director), assistant directors, training and curriculum specialist, and “leads” (lead program staff). When meeting with program staff, note that it may be beneficial to meet with only one program, such as the school-age program staff. Alternatively, hold multiple school-age meetings if there is more than one school-age program or a very large school-age program. Then, conduct another meeting with youth center staff. The key is to ensure that every participant can contribute to conversational flow.

Preparing for the Meeting

Points of Contact

Your primary points of contact with the installation will be within the child and youth program organizations and the school liaisons. It is also important to know whether your installation has a Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) school. If you are unsure where to start for making contacts, reach out to your state 4-H military liaison. It is not uncommon for the point of contact at centers to change just as Extension staff change periodically.

Research

Depending on the branch of the military you are working with, there can be a multitude of facilities and programs able to partner with you. Search your local installation website to see what child and youth program facilities and educational programs are available. The center staff will be able to provide even more information when you meet; however, it is important to have a basic understanding so you can ask informed questions during the conversation. A better understanding of what CYP programs are available and what educational opportunities the schools have will give you a better idea of potential opportunities you can provide for the installation.

What to Bring

While there is a slew of forms we need and resources we can offer, it is important to remember that just as 4-H professionals are overwhelmed in trying to understand the complexities of military partners and their contributions, the 4-H world may be overwhelming to military partners who are learning the 4-H system. Pull together any enrollment and club management forms needed for basic club operation. Also, compile a list of curricula and programs that 4-H could offer to the installation. Curricula and resources are often requested by directors and staff throughout the year.

Conducting the Meeting

While each conversation will be different, even when engaging with the same individuals over time, it is important to remember that the setup of the meeting room, the structure of the conversation, and the expectations of the conversation all play a role in how effective meetings are. The goals of the meeting should determine the structure.

Room Setup

During the conversation, consider the room's atmosphere created by the setup of the space, including the table and chair arrangement. Setups that are most conducive to these conversations are seating arrangements that position everyone to face one another, as illustrated in Figure 1. These setups should also position everyone close enough to hear each other easily without speaking in a raised voice.

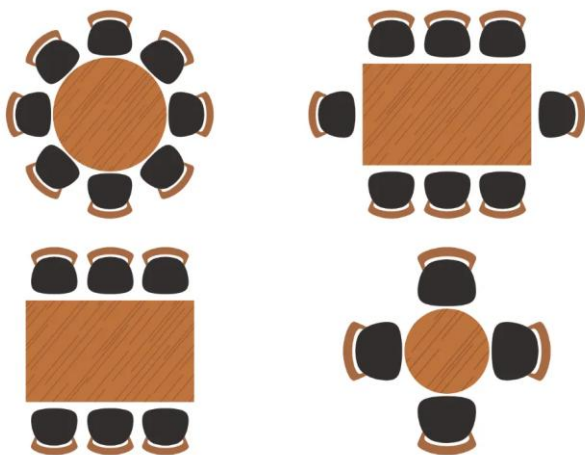


Figure 1. Ideal Table and Chair Configurations
Credit: Created by Alyssa Schortinghouse using elements from © Chendavy from Chenda via Canva.com

Avoid classroom-style setups or those where individuals have their backs to some participants. These setups likely involve too many people; consider refocusing the meeting topic to be more specific and reduce participants. When there are many participants, the conversation will veer into tangents and lose focus from the meeting's goals, which are not conducive to an effective meeting. If the meeting room is organized by the center or in another location, specifically ask for the setup that you want and explain why. The goal is to create an environment that is open and conducive to conversational flow no matter who is leading the conversation or talking.

Prepare Mentally

A key to successful conversation is curiosity and the willingness to listen. Note that it is possible for directors and staff to have experienced conflict or frustration with other 4-H professionals in the past, and this could set a harsh tone before even beginning the meeting. While it is important to listen and note any comments, avoid pursuing conversational tangents that stray away from a programmatic focus. Having a prepared conversational flow will help keep the conversation on track.

Preparing for the Conversation Flow

Now that the table is set, consider the actual conversation. There are numerous models that exist outlining the concept and requirements for effective communication. In 1964, J. Paul Leagans stated in a publication that “effective extension education is an intentional effort, carefully designed to fulfill certain specifically predetermined and presumably important needs” (Leagans, 1964). When approaching formal conversations with military partners, intention and purpose should underscore all conversations. It is critical to intentionally prepare questions and conversation flow, ensuring effectiveness and achieving the desired results. While there are a number of models sufficient for establishing effective conversational flow, this publication utilizes the COIN model. This model, first introduced by Anna Carroll in 2014, is an acronym to guide conversational outcomes and to utilize as a tool when hosting partnership meetings, as outlined in Appendix A (Carroll, 2014; O’Rourke-Henriette, 2024). The acronym is as follows: context/connections, observations, impact, and next steps (Table 1).

Table 1. Outline of the COIN Acronym

Letter	Meaning	Related Questions
C	Context/Connections	What is the purpose of the meeting? What topic/situation needs to be covered?
O	Observations	What has happened? Use facts and avoid personal frames even if other parties respond personally.
I	Impact	Define how the topic/situation is affecting current functionality and team members.
N	Next Steps	What changes are needed? What improvements can be made moving forward?

Source: Carroll (2014) and O'Rourke-Henriette (2024).

Context/Connections

This model relies on building relationships and setting up the conversation for success, including the setup of the room, clear communication before and during the meeting, and assurance that all parties are in the mindset to share and receive information. It could be helpful to ask the other parties involved what topics or situations they would like to cover before settling on a meeting agenda. This allows for planning to ensure adequate time and attention to each part of the conversation.

Step 1: Introduce everyone in attendance. These introductions should focus on understanding the roles everyone has and how they contribute to 4-H programming at the military youth center. This introduction should include how they have been involved with the program but also consider a component that will end on a unifying and positive note. For instance, ask why they choose to participate in 4-H or another similar question.

Step 2: After completing introductions, identify intentions that focus on what goals you intend to accomplish. To further set the stage, clearly indicate the purpose of the meeting, announce what topics or programs will be covered, and establish the groundwork for constructive feedback, outlining the need to set aside personal grievances.

While some questions may help inform multiple goals, defining each goal clearly and independently and preparing a list of questions for each are recommended.

Whenever possible, it is encouraged that you walk through the questions you plan to ask with someone else. This will help you become more familiar with the questions and flow of the conversation. See Appendix B for a compiled list of example goals and associated questions. You can also reference a quick checklist of best practices in Appendix C.

Observations

The next component of the model is observation. This stage should involve the consideration of facts and inferences about the situation. This is not meant to pass judgment, nor is it a forum to air grievances. Please note that in contentious situations or times when relationships have frayed, emotions and carry-over issues may derail the intended conversation. If this happens, know when to retire from the conversation and reschedule to avoid focusing on negative or unsolvable situations.

Step 3: Note the observations of the group. What was accomplished? What did you notice?

Impact

The impact portion of the model is designed to understand how the observations contribute to the overall picture of the topic or situation.

Step 4: What worked well? What did not work well? How did this impact the topic/situation? What were the lasting impacts of the programs, and what takeaways does each partner have? For example, if relationships between the previous agent and the youth center were strained, focus on how that relationship impacted the programming. Potential impacts include a knowledge gap of county program opportunities and a lack of resource sharing.

Next Steps

This part of the model is just as it sounds. This is the ideal point at which a follow-up meeting should be set. A follow-up will keep participants focused post-meeting and will encourage follow-through and long-term engagement. To encourage mutual ownership and contribution, all parties should have follow-up actions to complete.

Step 5: Establish action items and tasks to accomplish moving forward that will help address the topic or situation at hand. This should include timelines and guidelines for the tasks and items that need to be accomplished. Lastly, set a time for a follow-up meeting. Whether it should occur in person or over a video conference, intentionally dedicate time to revisit these action items.

Using the Model

This model is scalable and cyclical, which is ideal for the versatile situations and conversations encountered while working with military partners. The model is sequential, so utilize all the steps for each topic or narrow situation. Similarly, this model is scalable and can be used for conversations on topics such as why partnerships have broken down. When talking, it is easy to drift from the original intention of the conversation, so keep in mind that while these side conversations and tangents are important, it is equally important to recenter the conversation, ensuring all steps within the model are covered for each topic/situation. For example, when completing Steps 1, 2, and 3, a piece of feedback may lead to a tangential conversation. As the facilitator of the conversation, it is critical to ensure a linear and sequential flow. If a tangential conversation of substance arises, note it and take it up again after all the steps for the previous conversation have been completed.

Arranging Communication Pathways

During this wrap-up time, it is also important to establish communication pathways. Whether this is the first or a long-term interaction, confirm email addresses and contact methods. While doing this, also note each participant's preferences for receiving newsletters, whether digital or physical copies. Some staff rely on their emails through work, and it is not uncommon to have emails and newsletters flagged as spam or blocked, with the net result of them not receiving communication.

Ask about adding them to listservs such as a Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) state military information listserv that will allow them to receive military 4-H information directly. This will ensure that even if there is turnover among 4-H professionals on the county level, center staff can stay up to date and engaged. They can also follow the 4-H Military Partnership PDTA [Facebook page](#).

Organizing the Meeting Follow-Up

While there is a lot to learn from the meeting, action after the meeting is just as crucial to setting the tone for your working relationship with center staff. While each party should have ownership in the conversation and plans as intended by identifying tasks to be done after the meeting, follow-through and checking in on the progress is crucial. Send a follow-up email thanking the participants, listing the items to be followed up on, reiterating who is responsible for these items, and setting a target timeline.

The final recommendation after the conversation is to keep and review the meeting notes. Write a reflection and outline an action plan to help you stay on track. It is easy to lose track of time and tasks, so while it is still fresh and

there is momentum, allocate time to refocus on the action items that will support achieving the goals you identified for the meeting.

Best Practices for Continued Communication

- Communicate as often as you can with your military points of contact. Let them know when new things are coming out or special events are coming up.
- Give them 4-H materials and branded items when you visit, if possible (curriculum, stickers, pencils, signs, water bottles, etc.).
- Develop and maintain relationships. Maintaining relationships is easier than constantly building new relationships. This will also support program sustainability, as military staff come and go.
- Look for opportunities to be in touch: in person, via email, through text, and by comment on their program's social media.
- Do not hesitate to ask 4-H military liaisons, county Extension professionals working with the military partnership, or 4-H military specialists for assistance.

Conclusions

Building and strengthening communication between 4-H professionals and local military partners is an ongoing, dynamic process crucial to the success of impactful youth programming. Each partnership is unique, reflecting the specific needs and resources of the involved communities. The key is to identify what fosters a strong connection and prioritize sustaining and building upon that foundation. Re-establishing a lapsed partnership requires significantly more effort than maintaining an existing one, underscoring the importance of consistent communication and engagement. Cultivating a varied network of contacts within the CYP program safeguards the partnership against disruptions caused by staff turnover.

Flexibility, a hallmark of Extension work, is essential in navigating the ever-changing landscape of military partnerships. Changes, while sometimes disruptive, often present opportunities to re-evaluate and strengthen existing plans and meetings. Proactive networking, both within and beyond established connections, opens doors to new possibilities and strengthens existing ties. Leveraging professional development opportunities and actively participating in installation meetings are invaluable strategies for expanding your network. Finally, remember that you are not alone in this endeavor. Do not hesitate to reach out to other 4-H military points of contact or liaisons for guidance, support, and shared best practices. By embracing these principles, we can ensure vibrant and enduring partnerships that empower youth connected to the military community.

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Appendix A

Using the COIN Model

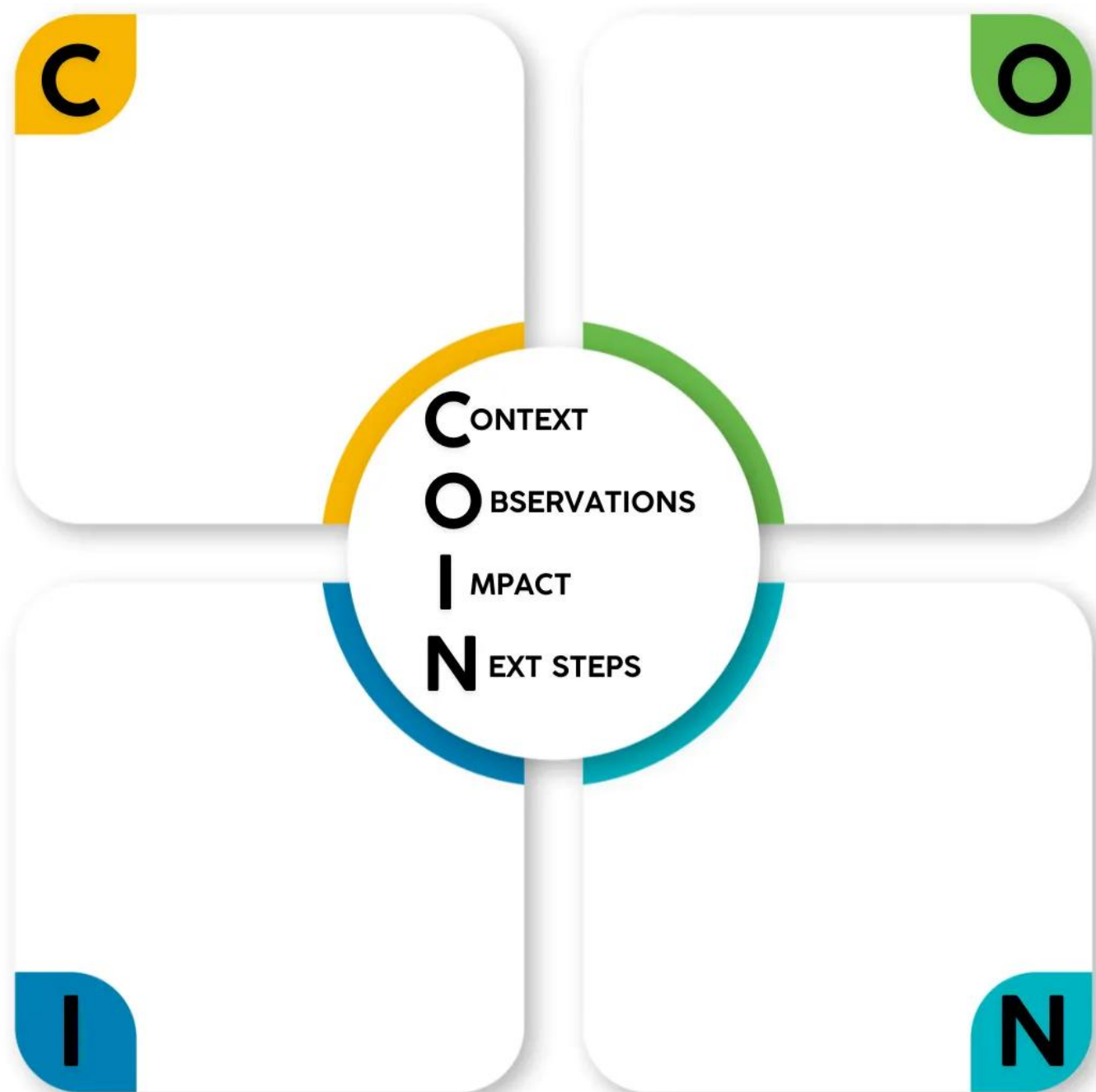


Figure 2. Visual representation of COIN method worksheet. Pair the worksheet with the category descriptions provided in the text of this publication.

Credit: Alyssa Schortinghouse, UF/IFAS, using Canva.com

The model is sequential, so utilize all the steps for each topic or narrow situation. When talking, it is easy to drift from the original intention of the conversation, so keep in mind that while these side conversations and tangents are important, it is equally important to recenter the conversation, ensuring all steps within the model are covered for each topic/situation. For example, when completing Steps 1, 2, and 3, a piece of feedback may lead to a tangential conversation. As the facilitator of the conversation, it is critical to ensure a linear and sequential flow. If a tangential conversation of substance arises, notate it and take it up again after all the steps for the previous conversation have been completed.

Appendix B

Questions and Associated Goals

Integrating the Model

While the COIN model forms the framework, it is important to identify questions you intend to ask to ensure an effective conversation. Each set of questions is designed to inform the given section in which they fall. Ideally, you will select only a few questions from each section. As the conversation continues, more questions will arise organically. **This appendix provides examples of questions centering on topics that will aid new agents in conversations designed to learn about the center and center staff.**

Context Questions

Background and Role

1. What is your current role within CYP?
 - *Goal:* Understand their position and scope of responsibilities.
2. How long have you been working in this position?
 - *Goal:* Gauge experience level and familiarity with the organization.
3. Have you held other roles in CYP or in similar programs?
 - *Goal:* Learn about their career path and broader background in child and youth programs.

Motivation and Purpose

1. What motivated you to work with children and youth, especially those from military families?
 - *Goal:* Uncover personal motivations and alignment with the mission.
2. What keeps you committed to this work?
 - *Goal:* Identify sources of ongoing inspiration and job satisfaction.
3. Is there a moment or experience that reaffirmed your decision to work in this field?
 - *Goal:* Highlight impactful moments that drive long-term engagement.

Experience and Impact

1. What do you find most rewarding about your work?
 - *Goal:* Understand what aspects of the job they value most.
2. What are some challenges you have faced, and how did you overcome them?
 - *Goal:* Assess resilience, problem-solving skills, and support needs.
3. How do you think your work impacts the lives of the children and families you serve?
 - *Goal:* Evaluate their sense of purpose and connection to the program's mission.

Observation Questions

CYP/CYS Program Structure and Staffing

1. What does the CYP program look like at this installation?
 - *Goal:* Understand the overall setup—size, scope, and presence of various services.
2. What does a typical day look like for you?
 - *Goal:* Get insight into their daily workload and key tasks.
3. Are School Age Centers (SAC) and Youth Centers combined or operated separately?
 - *Goal:* Learn how services are organized and delivered to different age groups.
4. How many staff members currently support these programs?
 - *Goal:* Gauge staffing capacity and potential strain or support within programs.

Youth Participation and Seasonal Trends

1. Approximately how many youth are actively enrolled in the programs?
 - *Goal:* Assess the scale of youth participation overall.
2. How do participation numbers change during the school year versus summer months?
 - *Goal:* Identify seasonal trends and resource planning needs.
3. How does programming differ by season?
 - *Goal:* Understand programming flexibility and how it adapts to school breaks.

Demographics and Mobility

1. What percentage of enrolled youth live on the installation versus off the installation?
 - *Goal:* Understand population distribution and how it may affect access and engagement.
2. How often do families at this installation experience permanent change of station (PCS) moves?
 - *Goal:* Learn the frequency of transitions and potential disruption in youth continuity of care.
3. How does frequent relocation affect enrollment or program consistency, including staffing?
 - *Goal:* Explore operational challenges due to high mobility and staff adaptation strategies.
4. How do you support families during transitions like PCS moves or deployments?
 - *Goal:* Explore how staff actively support military families through key challenges.

Impacts

Program Insights

1. What do you think sets CYP apart from other youth programs off the installation?
 - *Goal:* Understand staff perspective on program strengths or uniqueness.
2. Are there any recent initiatives or changes in the program that you are excited about?
 - *Goal:* Learn about current developments and staff engagement in new initiatives.
3. What aspects of the program have worked well, and which need improvement?
 - *Goal:* Identify areas of success and areas for growth to improve overall program effectiveness.
4. How has the program's success influenced youth and family engagement?
 - *Goal:* Assess how changes or challenges in the program have affected participant involvement and satisfaction.
5. What challenges have emerged within the program, and how are they being addressed?
 - *Goal:* Identify emerging issues within the program and evaluate the steps being taken to resolve them.
6. What key takeaways can we use to improve the program moving forward?
 - *Goal:* Extract valuable insights that can inform improvements and adjustments to enhance the program's future success.

Next Steps

Background and Overall Goals

1. What is your current understanding of the 4-H program?
 - *Goal:* Assess baseline knowledge of 4-H's mission, structure, and relevance to youth development.
2. Are there specific aspects of 4-H you would like to learn more about?
 - *Goal:* Identify knowledge gaps or areas where staff are interested in additional training or support.
3. How is 4-H curriculum or resources currently being used in your programs?
 - *Goal:* Understand current integration of 4-H materials and identify examples of practical application.
4. What 4-H clubs and programming do you currently offer to youth?
 - *Goal:* Learn which specific 4-H programming areas are being implemented and at what scale.
5. How comfortable do you (or your staff) feel when it comes to finding and using 4-H curriculum and resources?
 - *Goal:* Evaluate staff confidence and ability to access and apply 4-H materials independently.

Unmet Needs and Youth Interests

1. What are some unmet needs in your program that 4-H could potentially support or help address?
 - *Goal:* Identify gaps in the current program that could be filled through 4-H resources, curriculum, or initiatives.
2. What are the current interests and passions of the youth in your programs?
 - *Goal:* Gain insight into the topics, activities, or areas that resonate with youth participants, which could guide future 4-H offerings.

Appendix C

Best Practices for Effective Communication

1. **Develop a comprehensive database of key information.**
 - List of Available Programs on the Installation
 - Start with the Child and Youth Program (CYP).
 - Include additional military-affiliated programs and community partner services.
 - List of School Liaison (SL) (only Army calls them SLOs—School Liaison Officer)
 - Include contact information for SL to help coordinate 4-H activities in schools.
 - List of Teen Center or School Age Center (SAC) Directors and Trainers
 - Include directors and trainers at Teen Centers and SACs for potential program collaboration.
 - Additional Useful Contacts for Extension and 4-H Services
 - Include local Extension agents and 4-H military liaison contacts.
 - List State 4-H specialists for program support and curriculum development.
2. **Prepare key meeting supplies and materials.**
 - 4-H Promotional Materials
 - Give away swag: pens, pencils, and/or notebooks with 4-H branding.
 - Provide 4-H Pledge posters or other signage for display.
 - Ask about facility signage policies.
 - Enrollment
 - Decide how you want to track the numbers/memberships before asking the program to enroll all their kids. Some states do not use physical forms anymore; it is all online. NOTE: Depending on how your state wants to track numbers and engagement, decide if you should make enrollments for each individual or if you will use group enrollment forms.
 - Include county/parish and state-specific enrollment forms if applicable.
 - Annual Calendar Deadlines
 - Include 4-H deadlines (program applications, 4-H fairs, workshops, etc.).
 - Share these deadlines with all stakeholders during meetings.
 - 4-H Curriculum
 - Bring 4-H project guides (e.g., animal science, STEM, leadership).
 - Share 4-H activity kits or hands-on materials for engagement.
 - Highlight how 4-H curriculum complements military programs.
 - 4-H Program Overview Handouts
 - Prepare a program overview or fact sheet that outlines 4-H's mission, values, and offerings.
 - Include success stories or testimonials from other military installations.
 - Include a one-page handout from Tufts study on Positive Youth Development.
3. **Build and maintain strong relationships.**
 - Developing Long-Term Partnerships
 - Regularly engage with military staff, families, and local leaders.
 - Offer a variety of professional development training for staff to meet the needs of the program (4-H 101, Experiential Learning, Engaging Youth, Projects and Programs, etc.).
 - Share 4-H updates through email, newsletters, or social media.
 - In-Person Engagements
 - Attend community events or military installation activities for direct engagement and developing relationships.
 - Promote 4-H programs during these informal opportunities.
4. **Monitor and evaluate program effectiveness.**
 - Assessing Impact and Effectiveness
 - Collect feedback from military families, youth participants, and center staff.
 - Use feedback to refine 4-H programs and improve outreach efforts.
 - Regular Check-Ins and Follow-Ups
 - Send follow-up emails after meetings and events.
 - Confirm roles and next steps for continued collaboration.
 - It is recommended that at least once a year, maybe at the start of the school year, sit down with leadership to plan for the upcoming year and set a calendar for training, support, events, identifying needs, and goal setting together.

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