

Army Community Services (ACS) Demystified
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Are you a new Army spouse just heading off to your first duty station? Have you been around several years but are still feeling as if you don't quite understand the Army? Maybe you're a "seasoned" spouse and have been asked several questions and are not sure where to find the answers.

Knowing how the Army works is one thing for your soldier and a completely different story for you, the spouse. Too many times spouses know that they have a need, have heard that the Army can provide for that need, but have no idea where to find the help. One of the very first places to look is at your local Army Community Services (ACS) building.

Understandably, if you don't know what is out there, then you don't know what might be available to make your life easier. The Army, in all of its glory, has many acronyms for things that would make a whole lot more sense to spouses if they were just called what they really are. If you are a new spouse, it can be quite confusing and turn you away from even *trying* to navigate the system.

ACS is a wonderful organization full of information and resources. In your local ACS building you will find a helpful staff of employees eager to help you solve any issue you might come across in Army life. Services and training are provided for issues in areas such as employment, financial, deployment and mobilization, volunteering, relocating, stress/anger management, parenting, and much more! At your local ACS building you might find training classes with topics like *Resume & Application Development, Banking, Common Sense Parenting, Budget and Debt Management*, or even a newcomers tour of the installation.

ACS is the cornerstone of services such as Army Family Team Building (AFTB) where individuals can learn more about the Army through Level I – Level III and even Level IV instructor training. AFTB is a volunteer-led organization that provides training and knowledge to soldiers, spouses, and family members. It is AFTB's mission to educate and train all of the Army in knowledge, skills, and behaviors designed to prepare our Army families to move successfully into the future. AFTB classes can teach you the basics of the Army – topics like how to read your LES, rank structure, and basics of a Family Readiness Group (FRG). They are an invaluable--absolutely free--tool. For more information on AFTB visit www.myarmylifetoo.com.

ACS is also home to AER, FAC/FRC, IRO, NPSP, and EFMP to name a few. Here is where spouses might throw their hands up and say, *forget it*. But, let me help demystify some of these acronyms and show you what is really available.

Army Emergency Relief (AER) falls under the umbrella of ACS's financial readiness program. AER is the Army's own emergency financial assistance organization and is dedicated to "helping the Army take care of its own." AER provides commanders a valuable asset in accomplishing their basic command responsibility for the morale and welfare of soldiers. AER funds are made available to commanders to provide emergency financial assistance to soldiers - active & retired - and their dependents when there is a valid need. For more information on AER visit your local office or AER online at <http://www.aerhq.org/>.

A Family Assistance Center (FAC), sometimes also called a FRC or Family Readiness Center, has an important one-stop assistance and referral role for individual families. Depending on the nature of your service – guard or active – you might find one or the other available. The FAC becomes a point to coordinate available resources, such as chaplain services, American Red Cross (ARC), Veterans Administration (VA), and a host of other agencies with direct and indirect interests in assisting and supporting military families. The FRC may provide on-premises chaplains, command financial specialist NCOs, or hot lines for these and other family assistance personnel at division level or lower. Video-teleconferencing and e-mail resources are often provided for communication between families and deployed soldiers. Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) are frequently provided a place to meet at these centers.

Information, Referral, and Outreach (IRO) is an excellent source of information about services available in your community. IRO links soldiers and families with available information on an array of on-post or off-post agencies and services. IRO maintains databases of military and civilian agency resources so they can get you connected to a service that can help you. Some of their services or referrals include childcare, education, financial matters, counseling, employment, food assistance, WIC, Immigration and Naturalization, and more.

The New Parent Support Program (NPSP) began providing services in February of 1995 and since then has become an Army institution. NPSP is targeted toward new or first time parents. Services are available to all parents from pregnancy through the time your child is 3 years old. The program is designed to strengthen parent's knowledge and skills so that they can then provide environments where their children can thrive. The program also seeks to reduce stressors that can increase the risk of child abuse and neglect.

The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) is a Department of the Army Program designed to assist active duty personnel during assignments/reassignments sponsoring Exceptional Family Members (EFM) with special physical, emotional, developmental, or intellectual needs. An EFM is a family member (child or adult) of an active duty Soldier, regardless of age, with any physical, emotional, developmental, behavioral, mental, or intellectual disorder that requires special treatment, therapy, education, training, or counseling on an on-going basis.

As you can see, ACS can literally be your “one stop shop” for all of your needs. The above is just a small glimpse of the actual services offered at your local ACS. From victim advocacy to financial readiness they have it all. To find your local ACS's location, phone numbers, schedules and more do a simple www.google.com search like “Fort Hood ACS” inserting your local installation's name. Most ACS buildings have a home page off of their main installation's website as well. You might also find it through your local Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) location.