

Air Force spouse **Erica Struyk** volunteering with the United Way



Keep the Giving Going

'Giving back' to your community can be tough when you're forever moving to a new one. Here are 5 great ways to contribute, even if you've only just arrived.

By Sabra Morris, Marine Corps spouse

Military spouses are pretty awesome at giving. We volunteer at our children's schools, send care packages to deployed friends and loved ones, swap childcare duty and organize meal delivery groups. We keep things going while our spouses are away, juggling the daily demands of family and community life while supporting those around us with those same goals.

But it can be challenging to engage in lasting, impactful community service if you move often. Fresh off a PCS move, it's difficult to identify your new community's unique needs and find the individuals and organizations that need the most help.

"Moving to a new area might mean finding a new way to become engaged in your community," says Christina L. Jumper, volunteer services director at the National Military Family Association (www.militaryfamily.org). Her advice? "Think about what your volunteer interests are, what skills you have, how much time you really have to give and to what extent you might want to be involved." It helps to make a list of these items before starting your volunteer-opportunity search.

When you have your parameters defined, it's time to jump in and seek out your perfect give-back match. Here are a few ideas to get you started.



Taryn Giumento Thomas
Army spouse

1 Run, bike, walk, or ride for charity.


Thousands of athletic competitions pepper the country throughout the year. From January through May of this year alone, 47 percent of the

18,000 athletic events associated with the Active Network, the organization that powers Active.com, had some form of giving associated with them. Just about anywhere you move, you're bound to find an athletic event that moves you.

"We have military members and spouses who are participating now, or who have participated in our training programs in the past," says Kymberlee Setterberg, national director of community fundraising for Team for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) (www.teamaspca.org). "We're a national organization that can provide people with the option to run, walk, cycle and swim in races all over the country."

Eleven-year running veteran, ultra-marathoner and Army spouse Taryn Giumento Thomas had already formed her own successful running group at Fort Stewart when she joined the American Cancer Society as a DetermiNation coach. Through the ACS's DetermiNation Savannah team, Thomas leads weekly training runs, seminars and practice meetings, all of which will culminate in her group's running of the Savannah Rock n' Roll Marathon on Nov. 3. Thomas and her trainees are raising money through ACS to fight cancer while fostering their own healthy lifestyles. It's a win-win, says Thomas. "If you're going to run, if you're going to work out, you might as well do it for a reason. You're training to be a healthier person, you're training for a marathon, but you're also training to save lives." >>

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2 Consider one-time, done-in-a-day, or instant-impact projects.

Established organizations such as the USO offer volunteer opportunities large and small, simple or extensive. "Whether it's assisting a service man or woman with a connecting flight, helping out at events, answering phones at a USO center or just offering a warm smile, volunteers make such a difference in the lives of our troops and families," says Betsy McWhirt, USO director of volunteer services. McWhirt advises spouses to visit uso.org to find and contact the USO location nearest them to discover available volunteer opportunities. Another bonus: "If the military spouse works for, or is involved with, other organizations and clubs, he or she could be the 'link' between the community and the military."

3 Explore your installation.

"The Family Programs Office at your installation may have a designed volunteer program manager," says Jumper. "Or, the employment specialist might have information on volunteer opportunities within the military community." So check in as soon as you arrive at a new duty station.

"If you're not located close to an installation," she says, "your state Family Programs Office is a good place to start." Finally, research national organizations that offer military-affiliated community volunteer opportunities, such as the National Military Family Association, Blue Star Moms (www.bluestarmoms.org), Operation Homefront (www.operationhomefront.net) or USO.

4 Go pro-bono.

If you're licensed in, educated in, or specialize in a specific type of career work, consider performing pro-bono services in your area of expertise. "Some career fields have ways in which they can perform pro-bono work through their own career organizations," says Jumper. "For example, a CPA might look to the Journal of Accountancy, which lists volunteer opportunities. Some professions have separate pro-bono services for military members or families, such as the ProBono project for attorneys. Teachers have opportunities to donate time through www.Tutor.com, which also has a separate website offering tutoring help for military kids." To find these

opportunities in your area, Jumper says, "start with your professional organization and research locally."

5 Join a group that moves with you.

Large philanthropic organizations such as the Junior League and the United Way have large networks capable of absorbing members as they move.

"Any current Junior League member in good standing is able to transfer to any of the other 292 Leagues in the association. Currently there are 293 Leagues in four countries," says Laurie Dodge, director of marketing and development for the Association of Junior Leagues International.

Because large organizations have common missions and goals across states and countries, contributing members can often continue with their desired type of service, even when they've transitioned to a new place.

For instance, "We work specifically in the areas of education, income and health," says Bill Meierling, director of media and public relations for United Way Worldwide. "A military spouse could easily parachute in and chat with their local United Way about the projects

that are happening in these three areas and quickly find a way to become a part of them."

Air Force spouse Erica Struyk experienced that kind of continuity firsthand. Her first job out of college was in the resource development department of the United Way of Anchorage, Alaska, during the time she and her husband were stationed at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. She later became a volunteer at the Anchorage branch's program review committee, a role she still fills virtually today from her home in Albuquerque, N.M.

"I've also done some volunteering with the United Way here in New Mexico," she says. "Even though I've lived in four states in the past six years, it's been wonderful to find and stay connected to an organization I feel strongly about. Many aspects of life change when you are serving in the military or married to someone serving in the military, but I know I can always count on the United Way to be available to me wherever I'm living, to provide opportunities for community engagement in my new home state." ★

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~ Erica Struyk

