

What are Hero Packs?

Hero Packs are a hands-on way for youth to hand deliver a salute to military children and youth for their strength and sacrifice while parents are deployed. Hero Packs serve as an expression of support for military families from their communities and OMK Partners.

The Hero Packs Project is community service work that builds awareness and fosters community support for geographically dispersed military families. Hero Packs consist of three elements: an appreciation element, a content element, and a support element.

The appreciation element:

The Hero Pack as a whole serves as a salute and a token of thanks to the “suddenly military” family. Hero Packs are backpacks that include a collection of family support materials, communication tools, and fun items military children can enjoy with their siblings, non-military parent, or friends.

The content element:

Youth will “pack” into the backpack a variety of family support materials, communications tools, and fun items. Communication tools are meant to help encourage a connection between the deployed parent and their child. For instance, the camera can be used to capture memories the child may wish to share with their parent either by mailing the pictures immediately or saving them in the photo album/scrapbook or picture frame until reunion. Fun items, such as a stuffed animal or Frisbee, are there simply to bring joy to the affected youth.

The support element:

In each backpack, youth will be provided with OMK Partner information and family support materials. The OMK program has partners on the national, state, and local level. (Please refer to Section 3 for more Partner Program information) OMK Partners are working together to create networks in communities across America to support these geographically dispersed military families.

Who can build Hero Packs?

Any group of youth that wants to get involved – Boys & Girls Club members, The American Legion, local baseball team, 4-H members, chess club from School, church youth group, etc.

Where do you start?

First and foremost, the Hero Packs Project is a youth-led and adult supported project. Youth and adult leaders who want to participate in the Hero Packs Project must contact the State 4-H Military Liaison (<http://www.operationmilitarykids.org>). The State 4-H Military Liaison along with the National Guard Youth Program Coordinator, the Army Reserve Region Child and Youth Services Coordinator and/or the Family Readiness Group leader(s) associated with those units can assist your youth group in identifying what units are currently deployed in your area.

Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) are the primary way of communicating information to a Soldier's family. The FRG Leader(s) will assist your group in identifying the number of youth affected by the deployment and how best to access the families. As this process takes place, please understand there is a great degree of confidentiality in working with the families. We do not want to promote that a family has a loved one gone and set them up for any risks.

Contents

Core contents of Hero Packs

Backpack - Backpacks can be bought or made. (Please refer to Appendix 2 for directions to sew an inexpensive backpack.)

Partner information for Parents – Recipients' families need support information available from the many partners (national, state, and local) to assist them during this stressful deployment time. A sample list of national partner information follows but is not limited to:

OMK Information card

OMK information and resources specific to the state and/or community

Up-to-date 4-H club program information

Up-to-date Boys & Girls Clubs of America program information

Up-to-date program information for The American Legion

Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) “staying involved in your child’s education during deployment” booklet

Operation: Military Child Care Blue Card (OMCC)

MilitaryOneSource Information (<http://www.militaryonesource.com>)

Operation: Child Care Rest & Recreation (R&R) card (OCC)

Local Partner information (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, etc...)

Handwritten appreciation letters – These letters should be written to the child and to their deployed family member thanking them for their service and sacrifices to our country. You may also consider collecting letters of encouragement from local partners or businesses that have donated items for the Hero Packs.

Fun items – Good examples of fun items may be stickers, a stuffed animal or Frisbee. These non-breakable items are there simply to bring joy to the youth.

Connection/communication tools – Although the items listed above can communicate to the recipient the community’s appreciation and support it does not assist the youth in staying connected to the deployed family member.

Hero Packs must include 3 acceptable connection tools to complete the core contents.

What type of items are acceptable as connection tools?

Disposable camera –If a parent is deployed for long periods of time, we want the recipients to have an opportunity to take pictures of family and friends and have people take pictures of the recipient to send to the deployed parent or to post in a photo album/scrapbook.

Photo album/scrapbook –Military children will want to take lots of pictures to show their parent. Photo albums/scrapbooks will help the child organize the pictures by chronological order, by events, or by favorite pictures. (Please refer to Appendix 2: Resources for directions to create two different types of inexpensive photo albums/scrapbooks).

Journal/pen –Recipients will use the journal to write down their thoughts and daily events. This can be shared with the deployed parent upon homecoming.

Stationery –Military youth will want to send their parent lots of mail, especially handwritten letters. Soldiers really enjoy getting mail. Providing the child with paper will motivate him or her to write more to the parent.

Other items that the recipient could send to the soldier:

Video diaries created with the MTL

Worry dolls (Directions found in Appendix 2)

Postage stamps

Pens

Gift card to the Post Exchange (PX)

Prepaid phone calling card (Operation: Uplink)

Locally donated items

** Please note OMK State teams will need to decide if they want to have the same three connection/communication tools in each backpack distributed or to give youth groups an acceptable list and let them choose their three tools.*

As discussed above, these elements are considered the core contents for Hero Packs because they are important in helping the youth stay connected to the deployed parent and assist the youth and their family in becoming more aware of the local support available to them. Hero Packs are not limited to the items listed above. Youth may include additional items as long as they fall into one of the following categories - family support materials, communication/connection tools, and fun items. Example items may be: OMK lanyards or hard candy.

How to obtain locally donated items?

Locally donated items will assist the OMK initiative in building community awareness and the local support network. In addition, it will give the “suddenly military” families a little touch of home. When working within your community and asking for donations, please keep in mind the donations need to be a family support item, a communication tool, or a fun item to support the goal of the Hero Packs Initiative.

A good example of a locally donated item is from a company in New York State, which is located just outside of Ft. Drum. The company, famous for their “ittle-Tree” hanging air fresheners, expressed an interest in donating a product (specifically their patriotic trees). These items can either be a connection tool or a family support item. The trees can be easily mailed to the deployed Soldier (i.e., assist with connecting to the Soldier) or displayed by the family of the deployed Soldier (i.e.,

community awareness and support). As a result of the desire to become involved, the company becomes a local support partner through its donation.