

A PRE-DEPLOYMENT CHECKLIST FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

Karen Von Der Bruegge, Chief Marketing Officer for Pioneer Financial Services

With so much going on before a military deployment – the preparation, the training, the loving goodbyes – it is easy to see how seemingly and separately ‘small’ details that go with deployment may slip through the cracks. Whether administrative, legal or financial, there are a number of tasks families need to complete before the deployment date.

The following tips can help service members better prepare for what is a stressful time, and may help mitigate some unnecessary difficulties associated with a loved one’s departure and return.

There are a number of financial tasks that need to be addressed to help ensure a seamless transition during deployment:

- » **Policies and Benefits**—Spend a couple of hours going over insurance, investments, benefits, and beneficiaries, as well as the location of the policy documents. Be very clear about what is expected, explain the details, and make sure both of you write down your desires for future reference.
- » **Tax-Free and Hazardous-Duty Pay**—Service members may receive several hundred dollars more each month due to hazardous-duty pay, or a tax exemption on wages earned while in a war zone. This is a good opportunity to build up savings or pay off outstanding debt. Decide as a family what you are willing to commit these funds to before deployment—then create a plan and follow through with it.
- » **Financial Obligations**—Review your monthly budget, and contact creditors to ask about paying bills by allotment or Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT). It may also be easier to pay bills online rather than by mail. You may also choose to consider a debt management loan that can consolidate many bills into just a single payment to be managed during deployment.
- » **The Service Members’ Civil Relief Act**—If a service member’s military obligation has affected his or her ability to pay financial obligations such as credit cards, loans, mortgages, etc., the service member can have his or her interest rate capped at six percent for the duration of the service member’s active-duty obligation. There are two key parts, however, for you to consider:
 - The interest rate reduction only applies to debts incurred prior to active duty service.
 - The service member must prove that he or she has been materially affected by coming on active duty.
- » **Direct Deposit**—If you are keeping the same bank or credit union, direct deposit will not be affected. If you are switching institutions, make sure that the new direct deposit is working correctly before canceling the old bank account. As a rule of thumb, wait at least one month to ensure that everything is working properly.
- » **Bills**—Make sure that all bills are organized and a payment plan ready, and a power of attorney is in place if needed. Also, be sure to inform creditors, banks and any investment representatives of the deployment.

- » **Income Tax**—If deployed when taxes are due, decide in advance how income taxes will be filed. Extensions can be filed through the Internal Revenue Service by filing Form 2350: Application for Extension of Time to File U.S. Income Tax Return, available at http://deploymentlink.osd.mil/pdfs/tax_ext.pdf.

There are also a number of administrative tasks that are simple and straightforward, but sometimes overlooked during the pre-deployment process:

- » **Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS)**—Verifying DEERS enrollment prior to deployment will ensure that the family at home can receive medical care. To confirm enrollment contact DEERS at 1-800-538-9552.
- » **ID Cards**—Check the expiration date of all ID cards. If they expire prior to the end of the deployment, contact the appropriate personnel office to initiate the paperwork.
- » **Service Record**—Check for the correct contact information in case of an emergency.
- » **Contact List**—Compile a precise list of agencies, businesses, and units that offer assistance in case of an emergency. This is both for the family staying stateside, and the family member headed overseas.
- » **Staying in touch with home**—For the service member being deployed, include a voice recorder (tape or digital), stationery, stamps, an address book, and/or e-mail addresses, depending on what is allowed.
- » **Red Cross Notifications**—The Red Cross is often the most efficient and rapid way to contact service members overseas. Write down your local Red Cross contact information, including phone number, address and hours. The Red Cross also has an entire section dedicated to helping military families on their Web site, www.redcross.org.
- » **Spouse Relocation**—It is imperative that command is notified with new contact numbers and addresses if the service member's family will be moving to a new location (back to a hometown, closer to family, etc.). If moving off post, housing authorities will need to be notified in advance of the move.

And finally, there are several legal tasks that are often overlooked:

- » **Power of Attorney**—There are several different types of Powers of Attorney:
 - **General Durable Power of Attorney**—A general grant of authority that authorizes a spouse to act on behalf of the other in financial affairs. It can be revoked at any time and usually takes effect immediately unless otherwise stated in the document.
 - **Health Care Power of Attorney**—This is for when one spouse becomes incapacitated and is unable to make medical decisions on his or her own, as determined by one or more physicians.
 - **Limited Power of Attorney**—This document is intended to grant a spouse a limited amount of authority with regard to one or more matters. For example, it can grant the authority to make withdrawals from a specific bank account in order to pay bills, but nothing else.

- » **Wills**—The military will assists with a General Will and Testament. However, both a Living Will and Ethical Will are also options.
 - In a Living Will, either spouse can state wishes regarding future health care in case one or both become incapacitated and are unable to share their wishes. This includes how to handle such issues as having a feeding tube inserted or removed, or if “extraordinary” measures should be used.
 - An Ethical Will is a letter that expresses feelings on common themes such as personal and spiritual beliefs, values, life’s lessons, forgiving or asking for forgiveness, and love. This information is then shared with family and friends in case of death.

- » **Servicemembers’ Group Life Insurance (SGLI)**—Each active duty service member is eligible for life insurance, which is available in increments of \$10,000, up to a maximum of \$400,000. Before deployment, verify beneficiaries and make changes as necessary.

Having all of these housekeeping matters resolved can make what is a time of great anxiety and uncertainty much easier. And the effort to organize and manage your legal and financial issues can wind up paying huge dividends during post-deployment as well.

For more information on how the military can help during deployments, visit <http://deploymentlink.osd.mil>.

About the author

Karen Von Der Bruegge proudly grew up as a military brat whose father served 32 years in the United States Army. She is currently Chief Marketing Officer for Pioneer Financial Services, Inc., a company that provides responsible financial services and education exclusively to the military community. She is both a Certified Credit Report Reviewer and Identity Theft Prevention Specialist, and serves on the national board of USA Cares and the Kansas City chapter of Association of the United States Army.