

# Bridging the Communication Gap Between Military Communities and Public Health: Tobacco Cessation Resources in Oklahoma

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## Summary

Military Service members and the organizations that support them now are receiving consistent information about tobacco cessation resources and partnership opportunities thanks to Oklahoma's Building Healthy Military Communities (BHMC) pilot. Service members have historically used tobacco products, such as cigarettes and smokeless tobacco, at higher rates than the civilian population and connecting them to public health cessation resources has been challenging.

To address this gap, BHMC became a central communication hub allowing public health agencies and community organizations to deliver tobacco cessation support and messaging to all armed services in the state as well as other military entities including the Defense State Liaison Office and Military OneSource. These efforts have paved the way for collective action on innovative projects to support cessation.

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Medicine (2009). Combating Tobacco Use in Military and Veteran Populations. [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK215333](https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK215333) doi: 10.17226/12632

<sup>2</sup>Office of the Surgeon General; Press Release (July 8, 2019) [hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/about/news/tobacco-product-use-threatens-military-readiness.html](https://hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/about/news/tobacco-product-use-threatens-military-readiness.html)

## Your Involvement Is Key

Tobacco use is a threat to the health and fitness of our military forces and undermines our national defense.<sup>2</sup>

Most of our active duty Service members live in communities outside of bases. Additionally, our National Guard and reserve Service members hold civilian jobs. These individuals require support from communities and public health to remain healthy and ready to accomplish their military mission.

While difficult, efforts to bridge the communication and partnership gap can be successful, as demonstrated by the BHMC pilot.

Military partners can learn more about how to collaborate with public health at [chronicdisease.org/BHMCToolkit](https://chronicdisease.org/BHMCToolkit).



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## Challenges

The use of tobacco products in the military is pervasive, harmful, and an urgent public health problem. It is a leading risk factor for chronic diseases, and has been linked to higher drop-out rates during basic training, poorer visual acuity, higher rates of early separation from service, and higher rates of absenteeism among active duty personnel.<sup>1</sup> Service members who use these products are more likely to sustain injuries and are slower to heal from them.<sup>2</sup>

Oklahoma is home to approximately 20,000 active duty, 13,000 National Guard and reserve Service members, and 343,000 veterans. Smoking rates are higher for Oklahoma Service members than the general population (20.47% versus 19.7% respectively.) While active duty Service members and veterans have access to cessation services through TRICARE and the Veterans Health Administration, most reserve component Service members need to find other sources of support to help them quit.



## Solution

BHMC was initiated in 2017 to address pressing health and social issues affecting the readiness of military Service members—tobacco being one of them. The BHMC State Coordinator developed a network of military and civilian partners to address tobacco use and supported it with three communication mediums: a website, a Facebook page, and a newsletter. The consistent communication has facilitated a united approach to tobacco cessation and prevention in this high-risk group.

## Results

3,500 webpage views ● 5,600 Facebook followers ● 11,400 newsletter subscribers

These efforts increased connections between military stakeholders and key public health partners in the state. Since 2018, the network has opened the door for the cross-promotion of tobacco prevention and cessation resources at more than 400 meetings and events. The webpage has received more than 3,500 views, the Facebook page has attracted almost 5,600 followers, and over 11,400 private individuals and organization representatives have signed up to receive the newsletter.

One key outcome of the partnership is the addition of a question during the intake process for the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline: “Are you active service or a veteran of/retired from any branch of the U.S. Military, including the National Guard or the reserves?” In the first month of data collection, 135 individuals (~7% of the total Helpline callers) answered “yes” to the question. Adding this question is a significant accomplishment, as many state quitlines do not ask callers about military service, and thus are unable to track quitline use by this population, and their success in reaching Service members.



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