

From the Homefront: Ombudsmen Share their Secrets to Success

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Written by Shelley Kimball

Every Coast Guard ombudsman has a list of favored resources and services that are as distinct as the families they serve. Families' needs, whether on cutters, at stations or "geobatching," are diverse and ombudsmen are prepared to respond.

This week, I asked them to open their toolboxes and share the resources they find most useful for Coastie families.

Step one, for every ombudsmen, is to ensure they are connected to their families. To find your ombudsmen, go to the [Coast Guard Ombudsman Registry](#), then scroll all the way to the bottom right where it has a link for finding an ombudsman.



Photo by Bill Keefrey.



Coast Guard Auxiliarist Dan La Jeunesse is the ombudsman for Station Michigan City on Lake Michigan. Photo courtesy of Dan La Jeunesse.

Having a person already living in the area to share knowledge can be invaluable. Dan La Jeunesse, who is both an auxiliarist and the outgoing ombudsman for [Coast Guard Station Michigan City](#) on Lake Michigan said that his most requested resource is information about real estate and school ratings for transferring families. He said he and his wife, Linda, are always on the lookout for information to pass along to families.

"My housing information is usually a collection of real estate and rental guides that we find in the boxes at the entrances of grocery stores as well as tips from my wife – a perpetual real estate junkie," he said.

Hurricane season is the busiest time for Dal Bailey, who is also an auxiliarist and the ombudsman for [Sector Hampton Roads](#) in Virginia. He said his best resource for helping



Coast Guard Auxiliarist Dal Baily serves as ombudsman for Sector Hampton Roads in Virginia. Photo courtesy of Dal Bailey.

families prepare is a [hurricane prep document](#) published by District 5.

More of a challenge, though, is reaching enough families, Bailey said. They have to opt-in on a form for him to have access to their contact information, and few do that. Having that connection to families, especially during hurricane season, allows Bailey to be of assistance in chaotic circumstances. The [Coast Guard Personnel Accountability and Assessment System](#) may not always be up to date, and ombudsmen can fill in the blanks, Bailey said.

“I feel the assistance in emergency preparedness, as for a hurricane, could be my biggest help to the command,” Bailey said. “I can be backup and/or provide details to spouses when the command is preoccupied with operational activity.”

Amanda Gornik, the ombudsman for the [Coast Guard Cutter Spencer](#) out of Boston said she advises Coasties to find their ombudsmen as soon as they have orders because they have a wealth of information they can share.



Amanda Gornik is the ombudsman for the Coast Guard Cutter Spencer, homeported in Boston. Photo courtesy of Amanda Gornik.

“When you contact your ombudsman, that opens all of that information to the individuals,” she said.

Finding families’ contact information can be a challenge, Gornik said, so it helps if families contact the ombudsmen. Other than trying to access the ombudsman registry, Gornik said, she has seen families have good luck over social media. Often, when a spouse puts out a call on a general Coast Guard spouses Facebook page, he or she will get a

quick response to finding the ombudsman for a particular area.

In her area, Boston, she said she finds that families rely on her quite a bit for help with finding affordable childcare and spouse employment resources. This time of year, during moves, it is common for families to reach out for help, she said.

“We find a lot of families calling, especially during transfer season, needing childcare.” Gornick said.

Unfortunately, the cost difference for child care in her area, even with the help of the [Child Care Subsidy Program](#), is difficult to balance, she said. Added to the challenge is spouse unemployment.

“We have a lot of professional spouses who are trying to find work,” she said. “It’s so hard – we have tons and tons of job fairs, but it’s a constant struggle trying to get that job.”

Other than transfer season, deployments are a very busy time for a cutter’s ombudsman, Gornick said.

“When they are deploying, that’s when I find that I have so much to do there. We have a lot of young spouses who don’t understand how things work or where to get help,” Gornick said. “That’s busy for me.”

So, for Gornick, finding the families and connecting with them is a priority, she said.

Communication is also crucial for Shelley Drisko, the ombudsman for PATFORSWA, or [Patrol Forces Southwest Asia](#) because it is an unaccompanied tour, and the active duty members are separated from their families as geographic bachelors.



Shelley Drisko, the ombudsman for Coast Guard Patrol Forces Southwest Asia, and her husband, Chief Petty Officer Alan Drisko, assigned to PATFORSWA in Bahrain. Photo courtesy of Shelley Drisko.

“Connecting with the command as well as families can be challenging because of how spread out we are,” Drisko said. “Every time I travel, either on leisure or official business, I make myself available to meet any of my families.”

She has found creative ways to speak with her families, beyond phone calls and e-mails – she has met up with some families at Yellow Ribbon events, and she has hosted online chat sessions. Next on her list is finding a way to meet via Skype or Google Hangouts.

Drisko said the needs of her families stay relatively consistent because crews rotate regularly.

“Because crews rotate in and out frequently, the hardest part is keeping up with a current roster. But, I have an awesome command that really helps with keeping a current roster,” Drisko said. “It remains fairly consistent for me, but there is a rotation of needs based on where everyone is in the deployment: either pre-, during, or post-deployment.”

Drisko developed a Top 10 list of Resources that she goes to time and again:

CG SUPRT: Drisko said she likes this because it is a good general resource for finding more specific resources about a variety of topics.

Coast Guard Work Life Office and the downloadable Health Safety and Work-Life App: Drisko said she recommends this one to families because it is a great place to start for local information especially when relocating. It also has a variety of information about topics like the Health Eating Every Day program, spouse employment, local childcare resources, the childcare subsidiary, special needs, local school liaisons, and adoption.

American Red Cross: Drisko encourages families to visit this site for its resiliency training and have pre- and post-deployment workshops. She said she also directs families to contact the Red Cross prior to the deployment to update their information in case of emergency – it makes response times faster, she said.

Coast Guard Ombudsman Registry: Drisko refers families, no matter where they are, to register with local ombudsmen to ensure they are included in information about with local events or emergency messages.

National Guard Family Assistance Center: This joint services program has centers in all states that serve all branches of military service. Drisko said the centers have been very helpful for families trying to find local resources.

Coast Guard Mutual Assistance: Drisko said the Supplemental Education Grant reimburses up \$250 of reimbursable items for CGMA eligible clients. There are also programs that provide layettes for new parents and short-term respite childcare for deployed service members.

Twice a month, Coast Guard All Hands will feature "From the Homefront," a column for Coast Guard spouses by Coast Guard spouse Shelley Kimball. Shelley has been married to Capt. Joe Kimball, chief of the office of requirements and analysis at Coast Guard headquarters, for 13 years. She serves as an advisor for the Military Family Advisory Network and a research analyst for Blue Star Families.

The views expressed herein are those of the author and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the Commandant or of the U.S. Coast Guard.