



# Joining the Military



A Guide to Assist Youth in Foster Care  
and Their Caregivers in Navigating the Military  
Enlistment Process

The guide is for informational purposes only. To receive the most up to date information you are highly encouraged to talk with an official Military Recruiter.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## **PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE**

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While much of the information here applies to anyone interested in the military, this guide was written with youth in foster care in mind. Experiencing out-of-home care, struggling with past loss and going through lots of changes may generate difficult questions about joining the military.

Finding information on the military can be hard. There are many websites about the military and most of us know someone who is in or has been in the military. However, many of these resources use words that can be confusing or unclear to someone outside the military. This guide will help you understand what “joining the military” really means. This guide will provide basic information and resources. You should not make a decision about joining the military based only on this guide. This guide should be your starting point to get the information you need to make such an important life decision.

The military is not for everyone. The purpose of this guide is not to recommend joining the military over other opportunities you might have. This guide will help you to make the best decision for YOU!

# INFORMATION FOUND IN THIS GUIDE

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## CONSIDERING THE MILITARY

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Why do people join the military? The reasons to join the military vary and range from a desire to defend the country to job benefits. **The decision whether or not to join the military is a personal decision and differs for everyone.**

Joining the military is an important decision that can affect the rest of your life. There are many benefits to joining, but there are also hardships and challenges that come with it too.

The military can provide career training, housing, pay, health care, education benefits, and the pride that you are helping to defend your country. You will also face long hours, difficult challenges, and ultimately may be placed in harm's way.

This guide will present general information about eligibility for military service. **Only you will know whether the benefits of joining the military outweigh what you might see as the negative aspects.** As with any major life decision you should consult many different resources and talk with caring adults such as guardians, school counselors, and even talking with friends. It is important that you have all the information you need before deciding what is best for you.

# PROCESS

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Finding answers to your questions about the military can be hard. Looking through websites online can take a long time and can leave you with more questions. The overview below gives a basic description of the process (what you should do and when) and some places to look if you have questions.



## Branches of the Military

You should begin by familiarizing yourself with the various 'branches.' **The United States military is divided into five branches.** Each branch and their official recruitment websites are:

- **United States Army** (<http://www.goarmy.com>)  
The Army is mainly responsible for land-based military activities.
- **United States Marine Corp** (USMC) (<http://www.marines.com>)  
The Marine Corp is mainly responsible for military activities launched on land from the sea.
- **United States Navy** (<http://www.navy.com>)  
The Navy is mainly responsible for sea-based military activities.

- **United States Air Force** (<http://www.airforce.com>)  
The Air Force is mainly responsible for air-based military activities.
- **United States Coast Guard** (<http://www.gocoastguard.com>)  
The Coast Guard is mainly responsible for sea-based safety and enforcement activities.

Although **each branch has a main responsibility**, there can be overlap; with airplane pilots in the Army, land-based activities being performed by the Marines, and many other examples of the branches operating outside of their main responsibility.

These websites will give you information about what each branch does. They will also explain the jobs available to you in each branch and general information about enlisting. It is recommended that you start with these websites as a first step in learning about the military.

There are a few different paths to enter the military. **People usually enter either through enlistment or as an officer.** This guide focuses on the enlistment pathway. When someone enters the military as an officer, they typically have attended college and have a bachelor's degree. If you would like to enter the military as an officer, you should talk with a recruiter about the requirements to do so.

**Note: This guide provides information on what is called the 'active duty' military. Active duty means that the military is your full time job, 24/7, for the length of time you sign up to serve. Each branch also has other ways of joining such as the Air Force Reserves or Army National Guard. These alternatives have different time commitments than 'active duty.' For example, in the Army Reserves you may serve as little as one week end per month and two weeks per year, although the Army could switch you to active duty at any time. An active duty recruiter can provide more information and resources if you are interested in exploring the military reserves or National Guard**

## Commitment

Joining the military is a big commitment that you should not make without understanding what will be required of you. If you join the military, you will have to sign a contract that says how many years you must stay in the military. This contract is legally binding.

**In general, a new enlistee will be required to serve four years of active duty.** The length of service can vary (for instance certain jobs have higher bonuses but you must stay in the military longer). The military is not like a normal job where you work 40 hours a week. When you join the military you are on duty at all times. Some weeks you may only work 40 hours (plus extra time for training) but other times you may be working 15 hours a day, 7 days a week. If you are deployed, you may not have any set working schedule at all.

## Exploring Your Options

Once you have a basic idea of what each branch is, you can do some more exploration. You should start your research as soon as you think the military might interest you. **The choices you make in life can affect your eligibility for military service** (see the requirements and FAQ sections of this guide).

After reading the official military websites, you should contact a recruiter. A recruiter is someone who serves in the military. A recruiter's job is to find qualified candidates to join the military. Some schools may bring in recruiters and you can always contact a recruiter directly.

Scheduling a meeting with a recruiter is easy. Each military branch has a website that provides the phone number and address of your local recruiting station:

- **Army:** <http://www.goarmy.com/locate-a-recruiter.html>
- **USMC:** <http://www.marines.com/contact-a-recruiter>
- **Navy:** <http://www.navy.com/locator.html>
- **Air Force:** <http://www.airforce.com/contact-us/recruiter-locator/>
- **Coast Guard:** <http://www.gocoastguard.com/about-us/find-recruiter>



Remember, a recruiter's job is to find people best suited for the military. Recruiters are willing and able to answer your questions. Do not be embarrassed to ask a question. Entering the military is a huge decision and you should not have any questions unanswered before making your decision. Also, feel free to **bring someone like your guardian, caregiver, foster parent, or other trusted adult with you when you meet with a recruiter.** This may help address any questions your guardian may have that you had not considered.

In order to maximize your interactions with a recruiter, you should be prepared to discuss your interests. You should ask about jobs you are interested in or have questions about.

The military has an incredible variety of career fields. The military has medics, mechanics, paralegals, intelligence specialists, and air traffic controllers in addition to combat soldiers and many more. **It is important to know that not everyone who joins the military will be a fighter pilot, or a combat operative.** It is a good idea to think about what job you might be interested in as early as possible.

It is in your interest to be honest with a recruiter. Remember, the purpose of the discussion is to figure out if the military is **a good fit** for both the military and you.

The Army has a website with examples of questions that you should ask a recruiter. These questions may be helpful when talking to any branch of the military. <http://www.goarmy.com/learn/talking-to-a-recruiter.html>

## REQUIREMENTS

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Before you get too far into the process, you should learn what the minimum requirements are. Below are some of the key eligibility requirements. These **requirements can change**, so you should ask specific questions to a recruiter.

### Age

In general you can enlist at age 17 with parental or legal guardian consent and at age 18 without consent. In some states, if you are in foster care, the court can give consent at age 17. If someone is in the foster care

system after age 18, they can still enlist without parental/legal guardian consent. The following are the age requirements for enlisting in the various military branches:

- **Air Force:** 17 to 27 years old
- **Marines:** 17 to 28 years old
- **Navy:** 17 to 34 years old
- **Army:** 17 to 35 years old
- **Coast Guard:** 17 to 27 years old

## Education

A General Education Development (GED) certificate can satisfy the education requirement for enlistment in some branches. The requirements do change though so it is best to have a high school diploma. **The jobs available to an individual with a GED may be fewer than those available to someone with a high school diploma.**

The following are minimum education requirements by branch. Educational requirements can and do change. You should talk with a recruiter to find out the current requirements.

- **Air Force:** High school diploma or GED with at least 15 college credits
- **Marines:** High school diploma
- **Navy:** High school diploma, GED, or equivalent
- **Army:** High school diploma or equivalent
- **Coast Guard:** You must have a high school diploma. GEDs are accepted in rare circumstances.

**A recruiter will also have you take the Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB).** The ASVAB tests your reasoning, vocabulary, reading, and math knowledge. The test is used to help determine whether or not you can join the military. The ASVAB is also used to determine which jobs you qualify for (the higher you score the more choices you will have). More information can be found at:

*<http://official-asvab.com/applicants.htm>*

## Health

In order to join the military, **you must be in good mental and physical health.** The recruiter will ask you questions about your health. If you are not sure about your medical records, you should ask your guardian, caregiver, foster parent, or caseworker about getting a copy.

### Physical Health

The physical requirements for entry into military service vary by branch. Everyone enrolling in any branch must pass a physical health examination. In general, you must be in good physical health.

For example, the Marines require recruits to pass an **Initial Strength Test (IST)** to begin training. This includes the following:

- For males: 2 pull-ups, 44 crunches in 2 minutes, 1.5 mile run in 13 minutes and 30 seconds
- For females: flexed arm hang for 12 seconds, 44 crunches in 2 minutes, 1.5 mile run in 15 minutes

### Mental Health

Individuals seeking to enroll in military service must meet mental health requirements to enlist. Individuals with a history of mental health issues may encounter difficulties. For example, the Army requires an individual with prior mental health issues to be **off any medication for at least 12 months**, have clearance from their doctor, and proof there has been no decline in your academic performance.

### Drug/Criminal History

All individuals will be required to pass a drug test to enlist in the military.

Additionally, each branch makes a determination of acceptability on the potential enlistee's record of drug and/or criminal history. It is essential that someone seeking to enlist should answer any question about their drug or criminal history honestly throughout the enlistment process.

An individual could be disqualified from enlisting in the military if he or she has prior charges for illegal drug use. **If a potential recruit fails the required drug test, they will be disqualified from serving**

**in any branch of military service in the future.** Once enrolled in the military, an individual will continue to be subject to random drug testing. Illegal drug use is prohibited in every branch of military service.

Individuals seeking to enlist in the military will be subject to a police background check. Felony convictions are grounds for disqualification. Depending on the number and circumstances, misdemeanor convictions can be grounds for disqualification. If an individual was arrested for possession of drugs or drug paraphernalia, he or she will likely be disqualified from military service unless they were found to be not guilty.

## Waivers

**An individual who doesn't meet every requirement is not automatically disqualified from enlisting in military service.**

If you have questions about your eligibility, contact a recruiter to determine if you are eligible for a waiver.



## MILITARY LIFE

If you decide to join the military, what can you expect? What is boot camp really like? Where will you live? The following information walks you through an outline of some of the main aspects of military life.

## Basic Training

Enlisted service members attend Basic Training (commonly referred to as **“Boot Camp”**), which lasts between 7 to 12 weeks depending on the service branch. Basic Training will put you through a tough physical fitness program, and also teach you the basics of military history and tactics. Each branch of the service has its own training program and the training is tailored to each branches' mission. **During this training you are generally not allowed to contact your family, guardians, or friends.** It can be a very difficult time, and an individual may feel isolated and wonder if they made the right decision.

Basic Training is very demanding. As soon as you decide that joining the military is right for you, **think about starting daily cardio work outs, weight training, push-ups, and sit-ups.** You should also take time to consider who will handle your personal affairs so that you can focus on your training once you start Basic Training.

No matter which branch of the Service you choose, **Basic Training is an intense experience.** The purpose of this training is not to “break” recruits. In fact, the combination of **physical training, field exercises, and classroom time** will make you stronger and more capable. To be clear, it is a tough process, but after completion many recruits report a sense of achievement and pride in all they have accomplished.

## After Boot Camp

After successful completion of Basic Training, you will continue on to **Advanced Individual Training (commonly referred to as AIT).** AIT varies in length depending upon the specific career you chose upon enlistment. Your recruiter will be able to tell you how long each specific Advanced Training last.

## Boot Camp Links

- **Army Basic Combat Training**  
*<http://goarmy.com/soldier-life/becoming-a-soldier/basic-combat-training.html>*
- **Marine Corps Basic Military Training**  
*<http://www.marines.com/todaysmilitaryENLTRNG>*
- **Navy Boot Camp**  
*<http://www.navy.com/joining/getting-started>*
- **Air Force Basic Military Training**  
*<http://airforce.com/joining-the-air-force/basic-military-training/>*
- **Coast Guard Basic Military Training**  
*<http://www.gocoastguard.com/active-duty-careers/enlisted-opportunities/advance-through-training>*

## Housing

Everyone in the military is provided with housing. The type of housing the military provides will be determined by your marital/dependency status and rank.

If you are married and living with your spouse and/or minor dependents, you will either live in on-base housing, or be given **a monetary allowance called BAH (Basic Allowance for Housing)** to assist with costs of living off-base. The amount of BAH is dependent upon your rank, your location, and whether or not you have dependents. Some locations offer **on-base housing**, but there is typically a long waiting list for this type of housing.

If you are single, you will most likely be required to live in barracks, where you typically share a room with at least one other person and with a communal bathroom. If you are single, you can expect to spend at least the first few years of your military service residing on-base in the **dormitory, or “barracks.”** There is no charge to live in the barracks or dormitory and you are not entitled to BAH.

## Children

If you have children, you will receive the housing allowance, even when staying in the barracks at basic training and/or AIT School. This is because the military makes it mandatory for you to provide adequate housing for your children. This will be included as part of your military monthly base pay.

If you are not married and have a dependent that you are responsible for paying child support for, you will still receive BAH even while living in the barracks, however it will be at a reduced rate. **Unmarried parents cannot join the military and maintain their custodial rights.** Prior to joining the military, you will be required to transfer your custodial rights for your entire first enlistment period (usually first four years). If you are willing and able to legally waive your physical custodial rights, then you will be eligible to enlist.

## Military Pay

Military members receive a monthly base pay which is based on their rank and time in service. **Active duty members receive full-time pay.** Guard and reserve members (who are not on active duty) receive part-time pay, or drill pay, depending on much they work each month. Military pay is subject to income taxes unless it is earned in a designated combat zone.

Here are some links to help describe the difference in pay based on duty status:

- **Active Duty Enlisted Base Pay**

*<http://usmilitary.about.com/od/2014militarypaycharts/a/2014enlistedpay.htm>*

- **Reserve Enlisted Drill Pay**

*<http://usmilitary.about.com/od/2014militarypaycharts/a/2014ReserveDrillPayenl.htm>*

Each military service has its own names for the various enlisted ranks. Most enlisted members enter the military at the lowest pay level and move up the pay scale to higher positions with greater pay.

## Hardships

While the military has many benefits in the way of pay, housing, education, and travel, it is not all fun and adventure. There are many hardships that you will have to endure and should think about before deciding if the military is right for you.

While in training, you will be **away from family and friends** for up to six months. This can be a very stressful time for you. You will face **tough physical and mental demands.** You will be constantly training and expected to meet **strict rules and guidelines** for both physical fitness and career advancement. Military life means a lot of travel and you will likely not be stationed in one place for more than a few years at a time. This means picking up and moving yourself and/or your family many times over your career. **Repeatedly adjusting to new environments,** schools, and jobs can be very stressful for your family. Some of the duty assignments you receive may be unaccompanied tours, meaning

your family will not be allowed to come with you. You will be leaving your family for extended periods of time and they will have to deal with day-to-day issues without you.

Many families have adapted to military life and for some it is a great experience. You should consider what the military might mean for your family or future family.

## AFTER THE MILITARY

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Many benefits of serving in the military come after one leaves the service. The military can provide assistance in making the transition from uniformed service to civilian life.

### Jobs

Depending on your career in the military, you may be able to find a similar job after leaving the military.

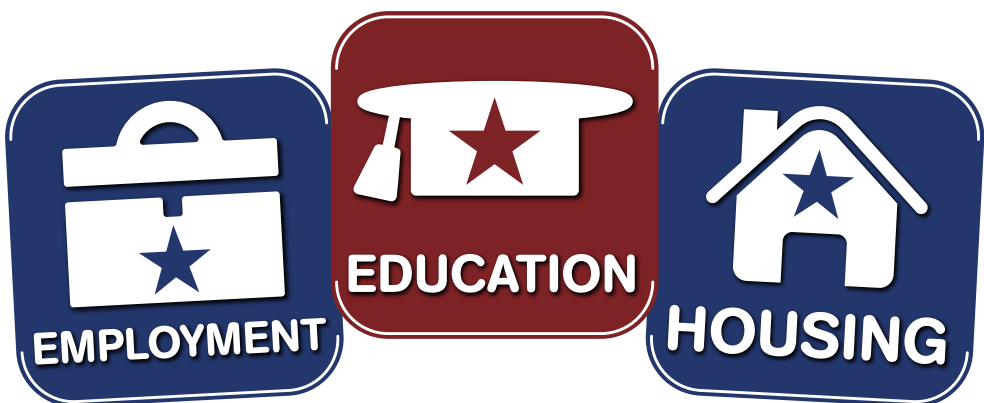
**Veterans receive hiring preference for federal jobs if they meet certain qualifications.**

### College

The military offers educational benefits and **financial incentives that help** with pursuing and paying for a college education.

### Housing

While you will no longer receive a housing allowance, there are **loans** (mortgages) that are **specifically for veterans.**





# SUMMARY

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Anytime you face a decision this important you should get as much information as possible. Asking questions and getting many opinions (caregiver, school counselor, talking it over with friends) is important. **You have the right to get the facts and information you need to make the best decision for you.** Hopefully, this guide has provided you with basic information about joining the military. If you are interested in finding out more, you should contact a recruiter who can provide the most up-to-date information.

# FAQ'S

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## **Do I have to disclose every detail of my past history?**

Yes. There will be questionnaires that you will need to complete as part of your enrollment process. You will also have conversations with your recruiter. In all of these you should be truthful. If you are later found to have misrepresented the facts, it can lead to your discharge.

## **I use recreational drugs, am I eligible?**

No. Habitual drug use, or any criminal charge related to drug use is likely to disqualify you from joining the military. Isolated drug use in the past may or may not affect your eligibility - you should talk with a recruiter. You should expect to have to pass a drug screening at multiple points in the enlistment process and throughout your military career.

## **I have a criminal record, am I eligible?**

Any felony conviction will make you ineligible. If you have misdemeanors, it will depend on the number and circumstances, but may lead to disqualification. You should talk with a recruiter about your specific history.

## **I do not have a High School diploma, am I eligible?**

It is recommended that you have a High School diploma. In some cases, a GED may be accepted.

## **I take or have taken psychotropic medication, am I eligible to enroll in the military?**

Generally, and in consultation with your doctor, you should be off of any psychotropic medications for 12 months. Your military recruiter will check that you have not had any behavioral issues while not taking medication and that your academic performance has not declined. You will also need to have a letter from your doctor stating that you do not need to take any psychotropic medication.

## **I sometimes see a counselor, am I eligible?**

Yes. You should talk with a recruiter, but generally receiving counseling alone will not affect your eligibility.

## **I have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, am I eligible?**

No. In order to join the military, you will need a letter from your doctor stating that you are free of any mental health conditions.

## **I am a single parent with sole custody, am I eligible?**

No. Unmarried parents cannot maintain their physical custodial rights when joining the military. Prior to joining, you will need to transfer your custodial rights for your first enlistment period. You may be able to establish a family care plan for subsequent enlistment periods (if you want to serve longer than say your first four years), but for your first enlistment period you cannot have physical custodial rights.

## **Is there anything I should know as a woman considering the military?**

There are slightly different physical requirements for men and women entering the military. You should talk with a recruiter to learn more about these requirements. Most jobs in the military are open to both men and women. There are also active military and veteran women's groups that provide support to women in the military.

# RESOURCES

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## **Army**

*<http://www.goarmy.com/>*

Recruiter: *<http://www.goarmy.com/locate-a-recruiter.html>*

## **Marine Corps**

*<http://www.marines.com/home>*

Recruiter: *<https://www.marines.com/request-information>*

## **Navy**

*<http://www.navy.com/>*

Recruiter: *<http://www.navy.com/locator.html>*

## **Air Force**

*<http://www.airforce.com/>*

Recruiter: *<http://www.airforce.com/contact-us/recruiter-locator/>*

## **National Guard**

*<http://www.nationalguard.com/>*

Recruiter: *<https://www.nationalguard.com/get-started/>*

## **Coast Guard**

*<http://www.gocoastguard.com/>*

Recruiter: *<http://www.gocoastguard.com/about-us/find-recruiter>*

## **Things to Consider Before Joining the US Military, About.com**

*<http://usmilitary.about.com/od/joiningthemilitary/a/consider.htm>*

## **US Military.com**

*<http://www.usmilitary.com/>*

## **The American Legion**

*<http://www.legion.org/>*

## **Social Media Sites (Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Youtube)**

*<http://www.defense.gov/RegisteredSites/SocialMediaSites.aspx>*

## **Guide on Psychotropic Medications for Youth in Foster Care**

*<http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/publication-db/documents/psychmedyouth-guide.pdf>*

