

MASTERS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

gulf coast business council

Strengthening the Gulf Coast's Defense Future by Establishing a Regional Defense and Military Communities Support Organization

I. Defining the Challenge

The Mississippi Gulf Coast is home to one of the nation's most concentrated clusters of defense assets—Camp Shelby Joint Forces Training Center, Keesler Air Force Base, Naval Construction Battalion Center Gulfport, Trent Lott Combat Readiness Training Center, John C. Stennis Space Center, U.S. Coast Guard's operations along the coast (including Pascagoula and other Gulf sites), and Port of Gulfport Strategic Seaport. These installations and defense assets form a critical component of U.S. military readiness, innovation, and training infrastructure.

Regional Military Assets



Keesler Air Force Base



Naval Construction
Battalion Center



Camp Shelby JFTC



Trent Lott Combat
Readiness Training Center



Stennis Space Center



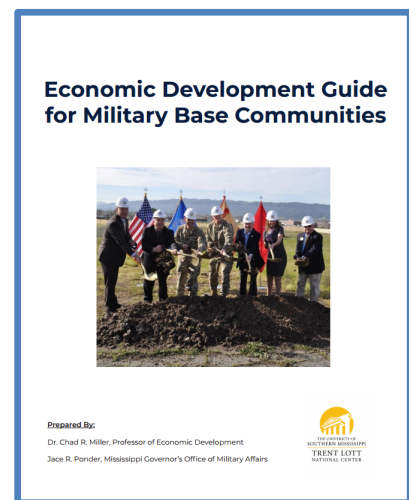
U.S. Coast Guard



Despite these extraordinary advantages, the region faces a fundamental challenge: **competing in a new defense landscape without a coordinated regional strategy.**

The U.S. Department of War no longer makes major decisions based solely on base realignment and closure (BRAC). Instead, missions are competitively awarded based on regional capabilities, workforce readiness, innovation capacity, quality of life (QoL) for service members and families, and the strength of local partnerships.¹ Other regions have adapted, forming well-resourced Military Affairs Councils (MACs) that advocate collectively, coordinate innovation ecosystems, and capture new missions.

The 2025 Masters Leadership Class utilized the *Economic Development Guide for Military Base Communities*, a report developed by The University of Southern Mississippi, which identified communities across the nation recognized by the American Association of Defense Communities as best practices communities. The class then visited and studied two of these best practices communities: The Alliance for Fort Eisenhower in Augusta, Georgia, established in 2003, and 21st Century Partnership in Warner Robins, Georgia, established in 1993. These two non-profits have existed for more than twenty years and have become sustainable organizations by coordinating work and helping establish priorities that are mutually beneficial to both the installations and the surrounding communities.



Meanwhile, the Mississippi Gulf Coast remains fragmented in its support—communities supportive but ununified, resources substantial but unaligned. Without decisive action, the region risks falling behind competitors who are already shaping federal defense investment decisions every day.

Rising to this challenge requires that we meet our primary objective: to position our communities to be a force multiplier to strengthen and grow military installations to the benefit of the region's public and private sectors.

II. The Business Case: Why This Matters

The defense sector represents a multi-billion-dollar economic engine for the Gulf Coast, driving workforce demand, small business vitality, infrastructure investment, and population stability. Defense is not merely another sector here—it is the foundation. Every mission gained or lost creates cascading effects across the regional economy.

¹ 2015-2016 Annual Strategic Sustainability Performance Plan (SSPP)

Our stakeholders play critical roles in defense sector success:

- **Policymakers** enable funding, legislation, and regulatory support.
- **Economic development organizations** align regional strategy and federal competitiveness.
- **Defense industry** serves as an anchor employer and maintains federal supply-chain relationships.
- **Small businesses** provide local employment, supply-chain resilience, and community stability.
- **Academia** builds workforce pipelines and drives research, development, and technology transfer.
- **Non-profit organizations** deliver family, veteran, and quality-of-life support.
- **Military members, families, and veterans** are central to mission readiness and retention.
- **Civic communities** provide infrastructure, schools, and livability factors the DoD now evaluates directly in resource allocation and base structure decisions.

The risk of inaction is systemic. A loss of mission would not just affect installations, it would ripple through every sector by reducing jobs, tax revenue, real estate stability, and consumer spending. The region's current over-reliance on defense as an economic driver compounds this vulnerability.

III. Regional Strengths: Our Competitive Advantage

The Gulf Coast's defense infrastructure is unmatched in the Southeast, offering a unique combination of physical, institutional, and human capital advantages.

Strategic Geography

From the Pearl River on the west to the Pascagoula River on the east to Hattiesburg region to the north, the triadic-shaped region provides the only integrated inland-to-coastal training range in the nation. This riverine-to-littoral training environment is irreplaceable. Combined with deep-water port access, year-round training climate, and proximity to Gulf operations, the Mississippi Gulf Coast offers enduring strategic advantages.

Federal Influence

Mississippi's federal delegation holds significant defense and appropriations influence through senior congressional leadership, providing crucial advocacy channels.

Strong and Diverse Federal Defense Presence

Installations representing every military branch create interservice synergies, strengthened by a robust military support culture with deep community engagement that enhances morale and retention.

Local Culture of Military Support

The Mississippi Gulf Coast has cultivated robust military-supportive communities with liaisons at many schools to support military-connected students, a memorial and recognition culture including veterans'

recognitions, and pro-military focused local businesses, community leaders, chambers of commerce, and civic organizations that actively engage in defense advocacy.

Adaptive Human Capital Development

The military and defense economy needs talented individuals who are well prepared for career opportunities beginning with exceptional public schools. The K-12 schools in the region rank among the



best in Mississippi. Regional workforce training initiatives, offered by strategic partners like Accelerate Mississippi, community colleges, and Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District, are highly adaptive and align talent pipelines with defense career opportunities. Conglomerates, like the Defense Industry Training Accelerated Courses (DITAC), are designed to rapidly prepare adult learners for

high-demand, high-paying careers within the defense sector. Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College and Pearl River Community College actively collaborate with defense employers to customize training programs in cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, oceanography, and much more. Universities also specialize in offering degree plans in fields of study like engineering, oceanography, marine science, cybersecurity, and advanced computing technologies.

Vibrant Research and Development Ecosystem

The Gulf Coast is home to core research and development initiatives and applied research centers. These include, but not limited to, Stennis Space Center's Naval Research Laboratory, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s Office of Marine and Aviation Operations, The University of Southern Mississippi's ocean and blue economy expertise, and Mississippi State University's cyber and computing expertise. The Gulf Blue Navigator Program is attracting new technology-focused companies to the region.



Existing State Support Framework

Mississippi has made strides as a state to establish a framework of support for military institutions including the Governor's Office of Military Affairs, the Defense Communities Development Council, Accelerate Mississippi, Mississippi Enterprise for Technology and the Mississippi Defense Initiative. The Gulf Coast regional defense strategy fits naturally within this existing framework by providing focused geographic coordination, enhanced federal interface, installation cluster benefits, and local implementation capacity.

IV. Regional Challenges

Despite its many assets, the Gulf Coast faces vulnerabilities that limit its ability to secure new missions and sustain existing ones.

Quality of Life Gaps

Limited civic engagement around military quality-of-life issues has constrained progress on housing, infrastructure, workforce development, and community amenities. These family support gaps directly impact mission attraction, readiness, and retention.

Structural Fragmentation

The region lacks a unified coordination mechanism to align military installations, local governments, economic development entities, and educational institutions. While individual efforts exist across multiple organizations, **competitive effectiveness versus organized rival regions is drastically reduced**. Innovation remains insufficiently integrated into regional defense strategies, leaving untapped potential for defense-commercial technology transfer and dual-use economic development.

Limited Innovation/Research and Development Integration

This region has untapped potential for defense-commercial technology transfer and dual-use economic development and needs to leverage its growing technology to bridge these gaps. While Gulf Blue initiative and the new Keesler Air Force Base Cybersecurity facility are underway, there is need for a unified regional strategy focused on innovation, research and development, and technology transfer.



Competitive Disadvantage

Peer regions have established strong, coordinated advocacy networks and secured consistent federal support. **They are winning missions we could capture.** The absence of a cohesive federal advocacy strategy has weakened the region's ability to compete effectively for mission growth and infrastructure investment.

In short, the Gulf Coast possesses world-class defense and economic assets but lacks a unified vehicle to align them for maximum impact.

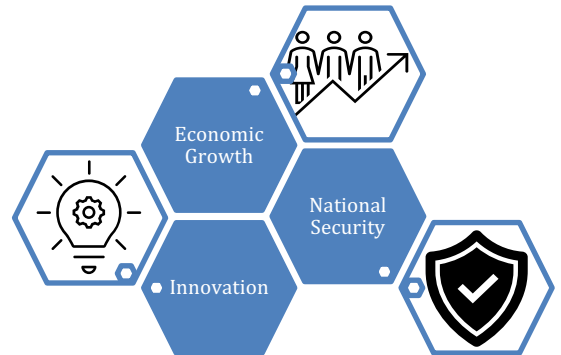
V. Recommendation: Establish, Fund, and Support a Regional Defense and Military Communities Support Organization

To address these challenges, we recommend the Mississippi Gulf Coast establish a **Regional Defense and Military Communities Support Organization** that positions the region as a force multiplier—strengthening and expanding military installations while driving economic growth.

Strategic Objectives

1. **Culture of Community Support Capitalization** – Strengthening the community support for installations and military families and demonstrating that in intentional ways
2. **Economic Advancement** – Maximizing workforce retention, economic development opportunities, and local economic impact
3. **Strategic Continuity** – Building institutional resilience beyond individual champions
4. **Mission Development, Attraction, and Retention** – Attracting and retaining military missions through strategic advocacy
5. **Infrastructure and Quality of Life Enhancement** – Improving conditions for service members and families
6. **Federal Resource Maximization** – Securing competitive funding and support
7. **Regional Advocacy Organization** – Creating unified voice and strategic coordination for advocacy at the regional level
8. **Innovation and Industry Growth** – Fostering technology transfer and dual-use development and attracting new industry, innovation, and talent

By uniting public and private sector leaders, the Military Communities Support Organization would serve as both strategic convener and execution platform—creating the structure and momentum necessary to align local efforts, leverage regional strengths, and deliver measurable outcomes.



VI. Risks of Inaction

Without immediate and coordinated action, the region faces several critical risks that could undermine its long-term defense competitiveness:

- **Closing political window** – Federal priorities shift; current congressional seniority is temporary; opportunities for mission growth narrow; competitors exploit regional delay
- **Competitive acceleration** – Organized rival regions are advancing rapidly and winning missions; we are already behind
- **Institutional fragility** – Current reliance on key individuals rather than institutional infrastructure creates single points of failure

- **Economic concentration and vulnerability** – Heavy defense reliance means mission loss cascades across the entire regional economy

Addressing these risks requires building institutional resilience through sustained collaboration, not reactive mobilization. Long term success demands intentional planning, preparation, and continued innovation.

VII. Call to Action

Achieving regional defense strength and resilience requires decisive leadership and action from business and industry partners with one unified voice:

- **Executive Commitment** – Demonstrate clear commitment through board and committee participation
- **Industry Mobilization** – Rally DoD contractors and suppliers
- **Federal Advocacy** – Engage federal partners and leverage existing relationships
- **Sustained Support** – Financial and human capital
- **Innovation Investment** – Lead technology development and defense-commercial partnerships

Unified Action

The message is clear: success depends on a unified voice and immediate action. The Gulf Coast must embrace "One Team, One Mission" to secure its future. Every month of delay strengthens competitors and weakens our position.

The time to act—together with one voice, one purpose, and one mission across all installations—is now.

VIII. Conclusion

The Mississippi Gulf Coast stands at a crossroads. It possesses unmatched military assets, a powerful congressional delegation, and a culture of service that cannot be replicated. But **success in today's defense economy requires more than assets—it demands alignment, agility, and advocacy.**

A Regional Defense and Military Communities Support Organization is the mechanism to convert potential into sustained advantage. By acting now, the region can secure its installations, attract new missions, strengthen its economy, and ensure the Gulf Coast remains indispensable to America's defense for decades to come.

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