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Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Dec. 15, 2009 – Defense officials have launched virtual “listening sessions” in hopes of gaining more insight into the effectiveness of military family programs, a Pentagon official said today.

The anonymous, online survey solicits feedback from servicemembers and their families on the military’s educational programs, support networks and other services.

“We hope to hear from a tremendous number of people and have the opportunity to hear from people with wide-ranging issues,” said Cathann Kress, program lead for partnerships within the Pentagon’s office of military community and family policy. “Whether you’re a brand-new military family with no children or a military family with many years in with several children, we want to hear from you.”

Servicemembers and their families are invited to participate in the survey at <https://survey.vt.edu/survey/entry.jsp?id=1253631402808>.

The online component is an addition to the face-to-face listening sessions already being conducted on military installations throughout the world. The Defense Department and U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture began conducting these discussion groups in October to help in determining the best way forward for military family programs, Kress said.

“We needed to hear from the people invested in the programs,” she said. Past sessions have included leadership directly responsible for family programs and policies and frontline professionals who provide support at the local level, she added. Future sessions will focus only on servicemembers and their families.

Virginia Tech University faculty members have been conducting the face-to-face sessions. “It helps to have a neutral, third party so people can have a relaxed conversation,” Kress noted.

Both the online and face-to-face listening sessions will wrap up in April. Officials will analyze the feedback and create a report that outlines trends and program gaps and offer future recommendations.

The report also will highlight the good-news stories, Kress said. “We’d like to know what programs families have used and are using, what have been helpful and how have they been helpful,” she said. Finding out what’s working can be just as beneficial as finding out what isn’t, she added.

“This information will help us know what direction we need to go in,” she said.

Officials will share the report with each service and their partners, Kress said. “We’ll use it to help determine our priorities for the future, such as where to put resources.”

The feedback also will be invaluable for officials who hear of issues through word of mouth, but don’t have a concrete way of pinpointing the “big picture” problems, she said.

“We’re hearing that there are a lot of programs out there, but those programs aren’t communicated to the people who need them,” Kress said. “Or, people are overwhelmed by information on programs and aren’t sure which program to use when there’s a need.

“We’ve heard this anecdotally, but don’t actually know,” she continued. “We hope we can gain a better understanding of what the issues really are. That understanding will enable us to better serve families.”

Whether feedback is gained online or in person, “The goal is to hear from whoever wants to share,” Kress said. “This is a wonderful opportunity for hear from our servicemembers and their families.”