

Army Family Covenant delivers programs, services

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Eoin Oravetz and Andre Ross couldn't keep their feet on the ground during an Exceptional Family Member Program Summer Camp held at U.S. Army Garrison Heidelberg, Germany. Army Family Covenant funding was used to organize the first summer camp program for EFMP families there, with 12 children participating in activities such as therapeutic-riding, pottery-making, therapeutic music sessions, and dance and movement classes. courtesy photo.

ALEXANDRIA, Va. - The Army unveiled the Army Family Covenant on Oct. 8, 2007, pledging a commitment to provide Soldiers and Families a quality of life commensurate with their dedicated service and sacrifice to the nation.

Indeed, the Covenant is the service's promise to take care of not only Soldiers, but Family members who also serve side-by-side with them, while providing unconditional support to keep the Army strong.

The Army Family Covenant is comprised of commitments to enhance Soldier and Family readiness. But two years after the initial signing, many Soldiers and Families are still unsure what the program is supposed to provide or the makeup of its content.

Overall, the Army's Family and Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Command is the organization charged with developing MWR policy, plans, strategies and standards; supporting Army commanders to implement Family and MWR programs; and operate and manage assigned MWR activities.

The Family Programs directorate within FMWRC is responsible for developing all Family programs and services within the Army.

And such military Families are resilient, said FMWRC officials; however they require assistance to help them meet their needs.

The Covenant's commitment enhances that resiliency by providing support, training, care and social interaction opportunities through an established and resourced infrastructure. The result? Delivering quality programs and services in a consistent and seamless manner.

"The Army Family Covenant has brought greater awareness of Families and recognition of their service and sacrifice," said Lynn McCollum, director of FMWRC Family Programs. "Families tell us we have great programs; there was no need to create new programs, only to fully fund and staff existing programs consistently.

Therefore, "We have expanded our budget over the previous two years to significantly improve the existing Family programs, pay for these improvements in service and increase the number of people who directly support execution of these services," McCollum said.

"A great example is respite care for Families with exceptional needs," she noted. "For the first time, this program has been fully funded."

These programs and services are critical in Families coping with frequent deployments, stressors resulting from unfamiliarity with Army life or the installation, and the ultimate fear...loss of a loved one.

A major tenet of the Covenant is a commitment to standardize Family programs and services throughout the service. One example: implementing Army Community Service staffing and programs at installations worldwide, resulting in the fully funding of 477 positions needed to meet operational and staffing shortfalls.

"The Army, through the Covenant, has developed numerous programs that are specifically targeted to improve our quality of support and service," McCollum said. "One area where we have invested much time and resources is the ArmyOneSource.com Web site, which provides a single access point to programs and services for Families on Army installations and for those people who are geographically (separated) from a post."

Another notable service the Army has implemented since that 2007 signing: the establishment of Survivor Outreach Services, which is a standardized, decentralized approach to improving support for survivors of fallen Soldiers. It recognized the need to develop survivor support coordinators and financial counselors to improve outreach, referrals, life skills, investment education and estate planning.

Also developed and implemented through the Covenant was the addition of nearly 1,100 Family readiness support assistants within Family Readiness Groups, which are normally comprised of Soldiers' spouses from within battalion- or brigade-sized units who meet to discuss and resolve issues affecting Families such organizations.

And Soldier and Family assistance centers were established at Army communities owning Warrior Transition Units. These centers provide a facility for wounded warriors and their Families to gather for mutual support to aid in the physical, spiritual, and mental healing process. Services provided within the centers include transition support, as well as financial child care and education counseling.

Additionally, the FMWRC Family Plans Directorate has forged greater relationships with the Army's Chaplain Corps, as the Covenant created an additional 33 Family Life Chaplain positions meant to deliver Family ministry, training and marriage enhancement programs.

Similarly, the Strong Bonds program includes a series of marriage and Family skill-building programs designed to increase marital satisfaction, reduce divorce rates, and enhance Soldier and Family readiness.

"We know that strong relationships have been proven to be directly related to increased resiliency. Strong Bonds is a proven method to building those attachments," said Lt. Col. Tom Waynick, FMWRC staff chaplain. "I am proud that we at FMWRC are supporting this great commander-chaplain lead program."

To support Soldiers and Families during the deployment and return cycle, the Army has increased the number of Military Family Life Consultants working directly with Army Community Service, National Guard Headquarters and Reserve Regional Commands. These consultants help Families during reintegration, provide outreach to Guard and Reserve Families, and respond to specific requests for support when there has been a unit death or injury.

There are a myriad of programs and services the Army Family Covenant pledges to provide our Soldiers and Families," said McCollum. "We ensure our communities receive the best possible service; we listen to their concerns to develop and implement programs that address their requirements."

"We want to ensure every Family is provided the resources they need to make them more resilient through difficult or stressful times in their lives," she added. "The Army Family Covenant promises this support. Soldiers and Families deserve the very best and we continually strive to be the conduit that provides the Family programs and services to fulfill that promise."