

# Covenant continues to provide for Army children

*Kevin Crouch, FMWRC Public Affairs*

## **Army Family Covenant continues to provide for Army children**

ALEXANDRIA, Va. - The goal of the Army Family Covenant is clear-cut - take care of not only Soldiers, but also Families who have endured eight years of hardships as troops deployed downrange numerous times.

That promise also includes supporting the service's youngest members: sons and daughters of Soldiers.

"Since the Army Family Covenant signing two years ago, our Child, Youth and School Services directorate has focused on improving and standardizing existing programs, as well as ensuring we can support Families ... when our Army is at war," said M. A. Lucas, director of the Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command's CYS Services.

Moreover, Lucas noted, "We are committed to ensuring excellence in these services, no matter how large or small the Army installation may be."

A notable deployment-cycle-support initiative the Army implemented after the Covenant signing in late 2008: providing increased assistance to Families during a Soldier's deployment as well as to Warriors in Transition Families. Currently, the Army provides 16 hours of respite childcare, per child per month, at no cost for Families of deployed or wounded/fallen Soldiers.

The Covenant also provides these Families free childcare during medical appointments; reduced child care fees during other times; and has eliminated fees for children to participate in four CYS Services instructional classes and two individual sports during a unit's deployment cycle.

Overall, the Army ensures all installation CYS Services are Department of Defense certified, which is the military equivalent to meeting state licensing requirements, and that all Child Development Centers and School Age programs are accredited by national professional accrediting agencies.

According to a 2009 National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies report, DoD

ranks at the top of two lists tied to state standards and oversight criteria - with no single state appearing on both lists. "DoD stands alone as a model," the report stated.

And while the Army is certainly concerned with providing quality programs, it also strives to ensure quality facilities exist as well.

"The Army provided funds for construction of 72 child development centers and 18 youth centers in fiscal year 2008 alone," said Lucas. "Between now and fiscal year 2014, the Army has programmed for 59 additional child development centers and seven additional youth centers."

Such centers certainly help in stretching a Soldier's paycheck.

A prime example of how CYS Services helps Army Families financially is the elimination of initial registration fees and reduction of program charges.

"It is critical to the financial wellness of many Families to have affordable and readily available CYS Services," Lucas said. "There are many dual-working parents or single-parent households who rely upon us to provide quality childcare and youth services when (an adult) isn't home."

Additionally, CYS Services programs operate beyond an installation's gate to serve activated Guardsmen and Reservists, as well as geographically dispersed active-duty Soldiers.

"Regardless of the location or the component, we must be able to reach all children and youth of Army Families," Lucas said.

For example, Operation Military Child Care and Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood are childcare fee assistance programs for geographically dispersed active-duty and activated Reserve Component Families. These programs serve children 6 weeks to 12 years of age and are available in all 50 states and Puerto Rico.

Operation Military Child Care services are available during the Army Force Generation cycle in licensed care settings. Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood is available during continental U.S. duty assignments in nationally accredited community care settings.

The Army Family Covenant has also delivered community-based outreach services in 49 states and the District of Columbia to children and youth of all deployed Soldiers (active, Guard or Reserves) through Operation: Military Kids, which provides youth program opportunities for school age, middle school

and teenaged youth by connecting them to support resources near where they live.

Operation: Military Kids has its own Web site, [www.operationmilitarykids.org](http://www.operationmilitarykids.org), to provide extensive information on various child and youth programs and services.

A popular initiative offered through Military Kids is Hero Pack, a knapsack filled with donated items from partner agencies and given to military youth in gratitude for sacrifices they make while parents are deployed.

Another enterprise is Speak Out for Military Kids, a youth speakers bureau that advocates for military children affected by deployment. Plus it raises community awareness of issues faced by geographically dispersed military children, and allows for military youth to gain leadership, research, organization and public-speaking skills.

The Army Family Covenant has also re-emphasized school support. The service placed 40 additional school liaison officers at highly impacted installations, ensuring students receive the benefits of the Secondary Education Transition Study Memorandum of Agreement, which is meant to assist military children who move frequently. Today, more than 400 school districts are signatories to the agreement.

Furthermore, in 2008 the Interstate Compact on Education Opportunity for Military Children was signed and has now been adopted by 26 states. The program seeks to remove barriers to educational success that military children might experience because of frequent moves and deployments.

Both the Secondary Education Transition Study Memorandum of Agreement and the Interstate Compact address four categories of educational concerns to military Families: eligibility, enrollment, placement and graduation.

Plus Army children now have access to 24/7 online interactive tutoring through a CYS Services program, Study Strong, that ensures CYS Services homework centers and technology labs are equipped with curriculum materials and educational software to support academic success.

"We intend to sustain our commitment to the principle established in the Army Family Covenant," stressed Lucas. "We will ensure that excellence in programs and services for military children and youth is our top priority."