

# Chief, top spouse talk families at AUSA

*Elizabeth M. Collins, Army News Service*

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*America's Army is the strength of the nation and America's families are the backbone and source of Soldiers' strengths. Courtesy photo.*

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, Oct. 7, 2008) - The chief of staff of the Army and his wife focused on the Army Family Covenant at the Family Forum during the Association of the United States Army Annual Meeting Monday, saying that major strides have been made, but that the Army still has work to do.

Gen. George W. Casey Jr. and his wife Sheila said that families deserve levels of support commensurate with their service.

"We are Army strong because of the selfless service of our Soldiers, our Army civilians and our families. America's Army is the strength of the nation and America's families are the backbone and source of Soldiers' strengths. Your Army leadership knows that Soldiers can focus on the mission at hand because they know that back at home and around the country, the Army is supporting their families and families are supporting one another," Mrs. Casey said, reminding the standing-room-only crowd of Soldiers, spouses and family-readiness leaders that spouses might not be in uniform, but that they still serve.

"The Army Family Covenant is heartening. It's heartening to know that I'm wanted and that I'm needed. It's heartening to be acknowledged and appreciated. And it's heartening to see the progress," she told the crowd.

"The biggest change is the recognition that there needed to be one," she added in an interview following the forum. We always knew the family was important, but the effort and the resources weren't put there...When people would quit their jobs, they wouldn't be able to rehire them. There'd be hiring freezes. So consequently the ability to use a program would go away. So really in the past few years, it's the recognition of what the families have been going through in the past seven years, what their needs are and doing something about it."

Announced last year at AUSA, the Army Family Covenant is a pledge to improve and standardize

family programs, to increase the accessibility and quality of healthcare, to improve Soldier and family housing, to ensure excellence in schools and childcare and to expand education and employment opportunities for Army spouses.

These are all issues that Gen. and Mrs. Casey found throughout the Army, although Mrs. Casey later said that the top concern among families seems to be healthcare.

"Right now the one we hear the most, every single place we go, is access to medical care. Access to medical care and access to mental health care. There's a mental health care crisis in the United States. There's a lack of sufficient numbers of health care professionals, not only within the service, but outside our gates. Those are issues that I hear every single place I go," she said.

Mrs. Casey is currently the chief financial officer of "The Hill" newspaper in Washington, and in the follow-up interview, she also told spouses that they shouldn't be afraid to build their own careers. Many people only stay in a job for a few years anyway, and like her, spouses may be able to transfer their job when they have to move.

"There are things that you can do and the thing is that you've just got to get out there and do it," she said.

Asking for a show of hands from the audience about the state of healthcare, as well as family programs, housing, schools and spouse employment, the chief found that the Army does have a lot of work to do. About 50 percent of the approximately-400- person audience was satisfied with education for military children, and about 40 percent thought family programs were in good shape. Almost everyone thought healthcare, housing and spouse employment still needed improvement.

Gen. Casey said he wants families to know that he is listening and that he understands their pain. He recalled his own experiences as an Army son watching his father go away to war and eventually losing him.

"I understand. I get it," he said, noting that everyone has to work together to keep the covenant going. Under the Army Family Covenant, the Army has doubled the amount it spends on family programs, devoting \$1.7 billion this year alone, and is working to move the money from supplemental funds to the base budget.

For her part, Mrs. Casey talked about moving 22 times, dragging her children to different schools, missing her husband for four Thanksgivings and Christmas holidays in a row, waiting as her husband's year-long deployment turned into 32 months and trying to maintain some sense of balance and normalcy in her life.

"I struggle to balance my life almost every single day, and most days I lose," she said. "Today, having been at war for seven straight years, Army spouses, and children too, are having a harder time finding balance. Our families are stretched and stressed from the effects of these continued deployments. It's hard when our Soldiers are gone, and it can be hard when they return. We feel the stress and we know that you feel the stress."

She added that it's a partnership, and all partners need to invest in it for to be successful. Leaders

need to know what families need.

According to the chief, the three main areas he thinks the Army needs to work on are getting the word out about what the Army is doing, improving medical appointments and demystifying TRICARE and improving quality of life for single Soldiers. He also said that as the Army grows over the next two to three years, he hoped that Soldiers would be able to spend two years at home for every year of deployment.

"After seven years of war, the Army knows we ain't going back to where we were," said Mrs. Casey.

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