

Commandant: Now's time for our agile, adaptive mindset

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Maj. Gen. John Kem urges agility and adaptability, patience and kindness in a Facebook live event, April 8, about health security, academics, fitness and more.



Garrison Commander Lt. Col. Courtney Short anticipates dependable Commissary operations with layered measures for the health protection of employees and patrons.



Lt. Col. Jennifer Saenz, commander of the Dunham Army Health Clinic, leans into describing the actions and planning of her health team.

In a virtual townhall, Maj. Gen. John Kem led the third Facebook-Live event as part of the command effort to be transparent and open to dialogue. USAWC commandant and senior mission commander, Kem was joined by Garrison Commander Lt. Col. Courtney Short and Dunham Army Health Clinic commander Lt. Col. Jennifer Saenz, April 8.

“In many ways, the initial shock – the churn – is over,” said Kem. Day to day, we were getting guidance from DoD, from Pennsylvania, literally changing by the hour. That has slowed down in the last few days as the changes have ratcheted up across the country.

“The hard part is probably coming next. The uncertainty about how long it’s going to last weighs on all of us. It’s uncertain when we’ll return to normalcy, if and when that will happen. The novelty of the churn and kids

not having school – that's worn out. Now we're getting into the marathon part of it.

Now's the time for our agile and adaptive mindset to kick in. That's a cultural part of the Army and the military. We pride ourselves on being agile and adaptive. We talk about our kids being so resilient because they can change schools and fit into another community. And we think of ourselves as role models in society for that. Now is the time for that -- being agile. That's true for both American students and faculty and international students who brought their families to the United States and have been very adaptive this year.

It's never easy but now's the time to think about being agile and adaptive day to day. We'll need the best of that now, both in our personal life and our community lives and it's going to take a lot of patience because now that the initial churn over and with the uncertainty about when it all ends, that's the hard part for all of us -- so I ask you all to think about that," said Kem.

The DoD and Department of Army guidance on masks has come out. If you can't maintain social distancing, then you're expected to wear a mask. As we're here in Bliss Hall there's ... eight other people in this very large [Bliss Hall] space and we all have masks.

"If you see somebody in close proximity, and you think they ought to be wearing a mask and they're not maintaining good distances, I encourage you to go talk to them in a professional, nice way," said Kem. "Just go up and gently say it 'cause you're much more likely to get a good response if you do it that way.... Try not to use social media to complain after the fact. That doesn't actually address the behavior of the people who aren't doing it at all....

"I encourage us, particularly on post where it's our community, to go talk to people in a nice, professional way."

About planning our way out of this 'new normal'

"We have to be wary about questions about, 'When does this end? What are the statistics that allow that?' We've been trying to plan: What are the conditions that would cause us to ratchet back down to a different [Health Protection Condition] level. We have no matrix, no perfect spread sheet that would cause that [decision] to happen.... We have to be wary about what you see in the media every day: chasing a curve flattened for a day, chasing that the statistics today are slightly different than yesterday. The

area under the curve matters in a big way also - not just whether the curve is going up or come down a little bit. If the area under the curve stays the same, it does help the medical establishment in terms of the sheer volume of people hitting the hospitals but there's still a lot of people who can get sick and some very seriously, and a small number will get very sick and die.

"Data in a direction for a day or two does not materially, necessarily, change options for planning what should be a change of behavior after a very short-term trend. Two days is not really a trend in this current, uncertain model....

"It's hard to say what causes a dramatic change over time. And that's what we're all looking for --looking to our health professionals, the CDC, the governors who are all wrestling with it. So, I encourage all of us, don't run after the numbers too much."

A time for inspiration and encouragement

"It's hard to be patient when you're tired and frustrated, in close quarters == and there are not enough things to do. Continue to be kind to each other," said Kem. "It's really important.

We're thinking ahead, tempered by prudent risk, to get to some normalcy over time, he said. "There is no perfect model to do this. The most important thing is to inspire and encourage each other.

If you do see challenges, problems, questions – please, help your neighbors.

Summer -- Permanent Changes of Station (PCS) and Distance Education Courses

The Summer PCS planning remains dynamic, said Kem, referring to Army Senior Leader planning. The Army is trying to figure out which PCS need to occur for a must-fill position. In general, the hope is that in the backlog from April and May, there may be some moves that can be delayed a year, he said. "For more senior officers and NCOs, that gets harder. It's more complicated. If you're in a command billet ... a key staff position ... If replacing a J3 or G3 who is supposed to leave to come to a senior service college, for example, the hope is that most of those will occur.

"For our purposes, we should be planning to leave as scheduled," he said even as he noted the interplay among relevant factors. Even with orders, that doesn't mean the moving companies will be ready with enough crews

– making it a dynamic situation beyond any one person’s ability to plan, he said. “I’d put this back to the military model, that we plan things, and we plan for branches and sequels. There are going to be a lot of branches and sequels compared to a normal summer.”

In terms of the normal guidance from BBC about vacating quarters, this is guidance that IMCOM has given to the privatized companies. But if PCS timelines change, we’ll work everything on a case-by-case basis, said Kem.

“Keep planning cycles in mind to leave at a normally scheduled time and, as things don’t happen, then we’ll adjust.

Exceptions to policy, grooming standards, and the fitness-gym connection--

In response to questions about National Guard officers in the resident class who have reason to return to a different location on a temporary basis while continuing remote work. Their duty location is here, in most cases PCSed here, and if there’s need to temporarily work from a different location, they should contact their faculty advisor and formally request consideration. “We’ll consider it. That’s done on an individual basis, traveling on their own, and at some time they’ll be recalled back to the place of duty here,” Kem explained.

He addressed questions he’s received about grooming policy, given that barber and beauty shops are closed. After quoting the Army grooming regulation that, “Soldiers will present a professional image at all times and will continue to set the example both on and off duty,” he continued – “I don’t need to be formal about a for a change in grooming standards in a place that’s mostly senior officers who know what reasonable is,” he said, about haircuts. “If it gets out of hand, try to do what you can do. Males will keep their faces clean shaven when in uniform and women till requires a conservative professional appearance.”

Reserve Component officers comprise the majority of those in the Distance Education class – which includes a resident phase in mid-June and mid-July for the First and Second Resident Courses, respectively. “SRC and FRC have not been rescheduled. The Distance Education Dept is working out the details of alternate modalities and we’ll make each decision about 4-5 weeks prior to the scheduled start date,” he said.

“We talk about the gym – every other day. We don’t go more than 48 hours before readdressing. We know there’s a readiness need to open them up.

There's a need to get away from current routine and have access to cross fit and other [fitness equipment] that you don't have at home. We want to do that as soon as possible," said Kem.

Lt. Col. Short addressed the question about making gym equipment available out of doors: "No," she said. "The health risk component of that would be the same as if we had ym openso it doesn't negate some of the concerns that have led us to continually assess the gyms."

Garrison services ... Commissary ... Security

Safety and security for all who live and work on the installation drives our decision-making, and providing life-sustaining essential services is a part of that, said Short.

"The commissary is an important, life-sustaining, essential service. It is absolutely our intent to keep the commissary open," she said. "To do that, of course, we have a ton of mitigation measures. These include mid-day closures for cleaning; DOD ID card checks to reduce the number of people in the store; DeCA-wide policy requiring masks for employees and patrons; among other policies and recommendations.

Asked about a resident's perception of more police patrols than usual, "There isn't any security issue to know about it. We're doing same number of police patrols; operations as normal," said Short. "We have new graduates from the Police Academy so you may be seeing additional personnel."

Her team is reviewing the security posture of the Meadows. "We are seeing what we can do to help that housing area have a little more control, with signage and other ways."

While some services are suspended, others remain vital, e.g., appointments for those who are separating or retiring. "With telework and distancing we're trying to support telephonically, said Short.

Lt. Col. Saenz committed to case-by-case attention to the medical requirements or those who will separate or retire in the next 30-60 days. Call ahead, she urged.

NOTE: Each of the commanders addressed the possibility of a higher Health Protection Condition level, of planning for medical screening at gates to protect the community, and the report-trace-clean responses should there be a COVID-19 case on base. SEE the Dunham, Carlisle

Barracks, and health protection article, linked here.

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