

Calendar

March 2 – SCMC-sponsored AMA Webcast: Creating an Engaged Workforce for Exceptional Business Growth; noon to 1 p.m., Bldg. 2200, Room 106. See TIGER to register.

March 8 – Ribbon cutting for Indoor Simulated Marksmanship Trainer at 2 p.m. at The Basic School, Quantico.

March 14-18 – Lean Six Sigma Green Belt Advanced Training. See TIGER to enroll.

March 16 – Training on Marine Corps Depot Maintenance Workload Distribution; AM and PM classes in Dumfries. See TIGER to enroll.

The Point

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The Point is an authorized publication for the employees and U.S. military service personnel attached to the Command. Contents are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Marine Corps, Marine Corps Systems Command or Program Executive Officer Land Systems.

'The Point' submissions

Each month, *The Point* brings Marines, Civilian Marines and families the latest news in Marine Corps Systems Command and Program Executive Officer Land Systems. Topics include security, safety and features from product groups, independent program managers, deputy commanders, assistant commanders and Strategic Plan Objective Teams. There are also articles about spouses and families. To submit an article for this newsletter, send it to mcscpao@usmc.mil. Submission deadlines are the third Thursday of the month. *The Point* is distributed the first Tuesday of the month. Photographs are not published. Also, be sure to read *Spouses On Point*... [here](#)

Spouses Town Hall a success

Traci Kelley thanks spouses for coming to Marine Corps Systems Command's (MCSC) first Spouses Town Hall on Feb. 1 at Little Hall Theater. She said, "It was a great event."... [full story](#)

Command stands up Product Support

Increasing Marine Corps Systems Command's (MCSC) focus on efficiency and effectiveness, the Command has established the Assistant Commander (AC) for Product Support. Colonel Ed Mays leads the organization that intends to bridge the gaps and interstitial spaces between acquisition, operations and sustainment planning.... [full story](#)

MCSC selects ITSS Program Manager

Steve Cabrian has been selected as the Program Manager for Information Technology Strategic Sourcing (PM ITSS), Product Group (PG) 10, Information Systems and Infrastructure (ISI).... [full story](#)

Re-chartering SPO Team 4.3

Strategic Plan Objective (SPO) Team 4.3 has made strong progress against many of its key objectives and is looking to reinvigorate its operations by inviting any and all interested parties to become new members of the team.... [full story](#)

Gunny receives Spectrum Leadership Award

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Modeling and simulation commands greater role

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Readiness of Enterprise Acquisition Data Symposium

On March 29-30 the Total Life Cycle Management Office in conjunction with Assistant Commander Life Cycle Logistics (AC LCL), Marine Corps Systems Command will present the Readiness of Enterprise Acquisition Data (READ) Symposium at the Grey Research Library. The purpose of the READ Symposium is to educate the workforce at all levels throughout the enterprise on the data essential to acquisition and sustainment success throughout the Life Cycle of the equipment fielded in support of the warfighter.... [full story](#)

MCTSSA launches its 2011-2015 Strategic Plan

Following the lead and experience of Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC), Marine Corps Tactical Systems Support Agency (MCTSSA) has launched its own 2011-2015 Strategic Plan.... [full story](#)

Command stands up Product Support

By Jim Katzaman, MCSC Corporate Communications

Increasing Marine Corps Systems Command's (MCSC) focus on efficiency and effectiveness, the Command has established the Assistant Commander (AC) for Product Support. Colonel Ed Mays leads the organization that intends to bridge the gaps and interstitial spaces between acquisition, operations and sustainment planning.

Simultaneously, Operational Forces Systems Product Group (PG), known as PG 9, has been stood down with all of its programs returned to their originating PGs. The transition to "standup of our nascent and fledgling capability," as Mays described it, is now at Phase 0. Phase 1, initial product support capability should be attained in the near term (i.e., six months or so). However, AC Product Support has already started to engage in many areas with respect to readiness, operations and sustainment issues.

"AC Product Support is part of the Command's staff," Mays said. "Its emphasis is on equipment already fielded with an eye toward readiness and sustainment. Our role is to support program managers (PM), Product Groups (PG) and Program Executive Officers (PEOs) in relation to their Total Life Cycle System Management (TLCSM) and to provide the link to Total Life Cycle Management (TLCM) – becoming the readiness, operations and sustainment focal point at MCSC for operating forces, Marine Corps Logistics Command (LOGCOM) and Deputy Commandant, Installations and Logistics (DC I&L).

Fully operational, AC Product Support encompasses material management, distribution, technical data management, maintenance, training, cataloging configuration management, engineering support, repair parts management, failure reporting and analysis, and reliability growth – the product support approach is not logistics – it is so much more, according to Mays. The approach is multi-competency and will bring the right tools to problem solving (e.g., analysis, modeling and simulation, cost estimation for business case analyses, etc).

"Product Support is vital to both acquisition and logistics," Mays said. "The Department of Defense Weapon System Acquisition Reform Product Support Assessment said, 'Product Support has been treated as the stepchild of both functions. The acquisition community has neglected it, and the logistics community seems mismatched to effectively perform its demanding scope.'"

The rise of AC Product Support, in the Colonel's view, comes at an opportune time. He said the organization will play a large role in providing equipment and sustaining of equipment in Afghanistan, working with PMs, PG Directors (PGD), PEOs and LOGCOM to get equipment to support Marines.

Rebalancing the Marine Corps is also a key factor, according to Mays. "We will participate in forums that require analysis and simulation for decision support. Most recently, I sat in on the Enterprise-Level Maintenance Planning Conference and realized AC Product Support can be value-added. The Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps on a visit to MCSC noted that we as an institution need to reinvigorate strong processes. AC Product Support, working with the PMs, PGDs, PEOs, LOGCOM and DC I&L, can lead to aligned and synchronized operational, acquisition and sustainment processes working together to deliver required and affordable warfighter outcomes.

"AC Product Support, by helping the enterprise make difficult choices for operations and sustainment," he added, "will also support rebalancing the force – meeting the demands of today and those of tomorrow."

MCSC selects ITSS Program Manager

Steve Cabrian has been selected as the Program Manager for Information Technology Strategic Sourcing (PM ITSS), Product Group (PG) 10, Information Systems and Infrastructure (ISI).

PM ITSS is a Program Management Office (PMO) that was established from the reorganization of the Common Computer Resources (CCR) PMO and consists of the three primary programs: Production, Marine Corps Software Enterprise License Management System and the Marine Corps Common Hardware Suite.

"Steve is particularly well qualified to assume this very demanding position," said Brigadier General Frank Kelley, Commander, Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC).

Cabrian is currently serving as the CCR, ITSS team lead. He earned a Bachelor's Degree in business from the University of Washington, a Master's of Science Degree in systems engineering from the University of Southern California and Master's of Science in engineering in from Catholic University. He is also Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act Program Management Level III, is a certified Project Management Professional and he is MCSC Advanced Professional Development Level A certified.

Cabrian is an experienced acquisition professional with previous assignments in Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command and in positions supporting Combat Development and Integration and Headquarters Marine Corps Command, Control, Communications and Computers. He has been with PG 10 for the last four years serving in positions of increasing responsibility.

"We are fortunate to have someone with Steve's qualifications, experience and credentials to take on this challenging assignment in support of our important mission," Kelley said.

Gunnery Sergeant receives Spectrum Leadership Award

Gunnery Sergeant Brian Bond was recognized for his superior performance as the Spectrum Management Chief for Marine Corps Systems Command during the Department of the Navy Information Technology Conference, Jan. 25, in San Diego.

He is assigned to Program Manager, Systems Engineering and Technology, in Systems Engineering, Interoperability, Architecture and Technology.

Bond appeared via video teleconference from Afghanistan to accept the John J. Lussier Electromagnetic Spectrum Leadership Award presented by Department of the Navy (DON) Chief Information Officer Terry Halvorsen and Colonel Jim Dillon, Headquarters Marine Corps C4.

The Gunnery Sergeant was honored for the dedication and leadership he has demonstrated educating program managers and project officers in spectrum management techniques and procedures. His efforts have significantly improved the Marine Corps' spectrum certification process. Bond provided guidance and training to engineers on how to generate equipment certifications mandated by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. He also implemented a process that helped identify the standard data required to complete these certifications, which told the vendors what information was required up front.

Additionally, Bond ensures that as programs develop their initial program support plan, they include a spectrum supportability risk assessment, which allows the program manager to see what possible interference their system may

cause or receive from existing equipment. His contributions have made a lasting impact on the Marine Corps acquisition community and the Fleet Marine Force by helping more systems gain certification before being delivered, which enhances the warfighters' ability to train as they fight.

The John J. Lussier Electromagnetic Spectrum Leadership Award is named for the former DON Principal Deputy Chief Information Officer who lost his courageous battle with cancer in June 2009. Lussier was an advocate for protecting the DON's equities in the electromagnetic spectrum and advanced the DON's strategic vision for spectrum. This award is presented to an individual who demonstrates superior achievement in Navy and Marine Corps electromagnetic spectrum management and use.

Re-chartering SPO Team 4.3: Seeking new members

Strategic Plan Objective (SPO) Team 4.3 has made strong progress against many of its key objectives and is looking to reinvigorate its operations by inviting any and all interested parties to become new members of the team.

The team's mandate is to find ways to increase administrative efficiencies in Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC). This includes driving toward a paperless environment and any other streamlining initiatives that would speed processes and reduce or eliminate redundancies and rework.

During 2010, the team put a great deal of effort into successfully reworking materials for New Hire Orientation into a more concise and easily-accessible format and formalizing the process with a policy and manual. These materials were officially handed over in October 2010 to the Workforce Management Directorate as the process owner for orientation and have been in use ever since. To support the paperless environment initiative, the orientation binder is also available electronically on TIGER at the Human Resources Knowledge Center.

More recently, the team has turned its attention to the challenges of the Defense Travel System (DTS) and the to the Command's tasker process. In each case, sub-teams are conducting a thorough process review to look for inefficiencies and leverage points.

Liz Taylor from the Financial Management Directorate has been leading the effort on DTS and, based on her group's review, will be developing new educational and training components to better support the workforce in the effective use of the travel system.

The tasker review, under the leadership of Angel Huertas of PG-11 and Lieutenant Colonel Michael Nichols from Reserve Affairs, has engaged the services of Lean Six Sigma black belts to make sure no opportunities are missed in improving this time-consuming process. They have just started this work and expect to spend the next couple of months enthusiastically digging in. The entire 4.3 team is looking forward to hearing about what they learn.

As a result of all this progress and other changes around the Command, the team lead for SPO Team 4.3, Colonel Peter Reddy, has decided it is time to consider re-chartering the team to refocus the team's efforts in 2011 and beyond. Do any of the following descriptions apply to you:

- You have ideas about improving the Command's administrative effectiveness;
- You would like to have a hand in defining the direction of this team; or
- You have been looking for an opportunity to get more involved with the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

As Brigadier General Frank Kelley, MCSC Commander, indicated in both his Town Halls, the Command has the opportunity now to improve its processes and efforts to best respond to the changing environment to include the Commandant's Planning Guidance and Under Secretary Ashton Carter's efficiency guidance. As discussed by Colonel Reddy at a recent SPO4.3 team meeting, "While this external guidance and challenges more apply to the Command's broader acquisition mission in support of the Marine Corps as an expeditionary force in readiness, efforts made to improve the Command administrative and support functions can have a broad impact across the entire workforce and enhance the mission of equipping the warfighter."

The team plans to conduct a re-chartering session in April and would welcome ideas and attendance from any interested personnel within the command. If interested, contact Colonel Reddy or Angel Huertas and plan to attend the re-chartering session in the latter part of April.

Modeling and simulation commands greater role

Modeling and Simulation (M&S) has been used by military units since ancient times. As far back as the Roman Empire, commanders used sand tables with abstract icons to represent soldiers and units in battle in order to visualize and become familiar with the battlefield. Additionally, they could share their ideas with their subordinates, evaluate multiple avenues of attack, or practice the processes they would use to command their legions. In short, basic M&S concepts were used to support the planning of their combat operations. The use of M&S tools by the military continues to this day.

As technology has increased, specifically computer technology, the use of digital M&S tools and applications has expanded exponentially across the Department of Defense (DoD). M&S is not only used to support military planning, but is used extensively across six other domains to include training, acquisition, analysis, experimentation, testing and intelligence. Each of these seven domains shares a common need for understanding M&S technology and science that can be applied to meet their specific user requirements. As a result, DoD in general, and the Marine Corps specifically, has recognized the need to develop M&S professionals whose common understanding of the discipline enables them to reach across all seven domains, industry and academia to advance the M&S state of the art so that it can continue to evolve and help address the complex issues our country faces.

To better leverage the myriad of M&S activities occurring across all the services, DoD reorganized the governance structure related to M&S activities in 2006. A Modeling and Simulation Coordination Office (M&S CO) was designated and established in October 2006. In August 2007, DoD established the Modeling and Simulation Steering Committee (M&S SC) as the governing body for M&S activities and investments through DoDD 5000.59. To align with this new DoDD M&S management structure, Marine Corps Order (MCO) 5200.28-Marine Corps M&S Management – was published in 2008. MCO 5200.28 establishes the Marine Corps M&S Management Office (MCMSMO) and establishes the seven communities enabled by M&S as defined in DoDD 5000.59. These communities include acquisition, analysis, experimentation, planning, testing intelligence and training.

The seven Marine Corps communities enabled by M&S comprise the Marine Corps M&S Integrated Product Team (IPT). MCMSMO chairs the IPT and coordinates M&S across all the Marine Corps M&S communities seeking to reduce duplication of effort and leverage existing technologies across multiple communities. MCMSMO also serves as the Marine Corps' point of contact on all M&S matters to include coordination with other service and DoD M&S organizations. MCMSMO reports to the Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC) Senior Analyst, who is the overall Marine Corps lead for M&S.

The supporting organizations for each community are listed below.

M&S Community

Acquisition
Analysis

Experimentation
Planning

Testing
Training

Intelligence

Marine Corps M&S Community Lead

Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC)

Operations Analysis Division (OAD), Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC)

Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory (MCWL), MCCDC

National Plans (PLN), Plans, Policies, & Operations (PP&O) Department, Headquarters, Marine Corps

Marine Corps Operational Test and Evaluation Activity (MCOTEA)

Training and Education Command (TECOM), MCCDC

Intelligence Plans and Policies (IPP) Department, Headquarters, Marine Corps

Each of these communities has dual responsibilities in helping to manage Marine Corps M&S. First, they are responsible for maintaining an understanding of the unique requirements their community has for M&S in support of their missions. As a part of the Marine Corps M&S IPT they help to identify opportunities to leverage existing Marine Corps M&S resources, tools and data to meet mission requirements. Second, they are the Marine Corps' primary interface and representation to their corresponding DoD M&S community. In this capacity they represent Marine Corps M&S interests and equities and maintain an awareness of what their DoD M&S community is doing. For example, the Marine Corps acquisition community, led by MCSC, participates in the DoD Acquisition M&S Working Group (AMSWG) forum led by OSD AT&L. This forum acts as the governance body for the acquisition community and the prioritization of their M&S requirements at a DoD level.

The MCMSMO point of contact is Brett Telford at 703-784-0432. The MCSC M&S point of contact is Michael O'Neal at 703-432-4373.

Readiness of Enterprise Acquisition Data Symposium

As the Marine Corps has pursued conflicts over the last five years or so, there has been an increased awareness that data accuracy and availability is key to rapid responses to taskings, acquisition and sustainment. Yet, there is little appreciation for the systems, methodology and attention to detail necessary to maintain the data critical to successful response time, efficiency and detail.

On March 29-30 the Total Life Cycle Management Office in conjunction with Assistant Commander Life Cycle Logistics (AC LCL), Marine Corps Systems Command will present the Readiness of Enterprise Acquisition Data (READ) Symposium at the Grey Research Library. The purpose of the READ Symposium is to educate the workforce at all levels throughout the enterprise on the data essential to acquisition and sustainment success throughout the Life Cycle of the equipment fielded in support of the warfighter. The goal is to reach three tiers of leadership. This can have significant impact on the Principal End Item (PEI) acquisition data systems quality as well as the supply system supporting them. Just as equipment readiness determines combat effectiveness, so data readiness determines acquisition and sustainment effectiveness.

By walking a PEI through the process of induction into the systems that maintain and pass on the data through other Marine Corps systems, the symposium will provide a better understanding of the process, enable leaders to monitor progress and educate stakeholders on how to manage and correct the data.

A playbook will be built with a data flow chart and a quad chart format of information about each system discussed. Information will include such things as system title, system purpose, points of contact, challenges and resources such as URLs to locate the system Helpdesk, Training and Data Dictionaries.

Watch TIGER for event announcements and information. You can help shape the event. Use the link: <http://www.marcorsyscom.usmc.mil/survey/TakeSurvey.aspx?SurveyID=m412664> to take the survey asking for suggested topics and concerns to be considered for inclusion in the symposium presentations and workshops. Information captured from the survey and during the symposium such as ideas, questions and comments will be evaluated and used to build proposals for possible requirements as systems change requests, funding, personnel and training. For further information or registration e-mail the functional mail box: READ_SYMPOSIUM@usmc.mil

MCTSSA launches its 2011-2015 Strategic Plan

Following the lead and experience of Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC), Marine Corps Tactical Systems Support Agency (MCTSSA) has launched its own 2011-2015 Strategic Plan.

“Our timing was purposeful,” said Colonel Alan M. Pratt, MCTSSA’s Commanding Officer. “Our team has meticulously crafted our strategic plan so it is entirely supportive of MCSC’s Strategic Plan in look, feel, and substance – but different in that it addresses MCTSSA’s unique planning path and needs. The timeline we chose, however, allowed us to benefit and exploit lessons learned from MCSC’s launch and its initial implementation a year ago.”

Even with the benefit of using MCSC’s lead, creating the MCTSSA Strategic Plan was complex and not easy to achieve. Initially, an outside consultant was used to provide a generic overview of strategic plans. Discussion groups were held to garner data points and vision. Eventually, under the direction of Colonel Pratt and MCTSSA’s Strategic Plan Officer, Susie Alderson, principal stakeholders were identified and a Strategic Plans Integrated Product Team was formed.

Then – over the course of many months of brainstorming and consulting – the plan took shape as many possible courses of action were developed and vetted. Eventually, after much review, discussion, and fine-tuning, those possible courses were distilled into a narrative and table of goals and objectives with “champions” and “team leaders” – employing the same format MCSC is using to track its plan’s progress.

“Just like MCSC, we have published MCTSSA’s Strategic Plan into a high-quality, 20-page brochure reflecting the important message it contains,” said Murray Roe, who has been tasked to lead MCTSSA’s implementation of the plan. “That brochure – along with supportive internal communication efforts including a series of commander’s briefs to the entire workforce by Colonel Pratt – are all designed to cultivate the competencies, means and expectations for what we are endeavoring to achieve and sustain with this plan.”

Simply said, MCTSSA is looking back to enhance the future.

“MCTSSA has provided support to the Warfighter for over 40 years,” Colonel Pratt said. “My predecessors had to lead MCTSSA without the benefit of a long-term plan forming continuity and direction. That strategic tool wasn’t available. Our plan, just like MCSC’s, coincides with Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025 and is designed to look forward, optimize and transform the broad, expansive experience MCTSSA has acquired and developed over the decades into a long-term roadmap well beyond the five years covered in the plan. Our vision is to be the Marine Corps command of choice for MAGTF C4I systems integration, testing, and certification – including support of these systems with technical expertise once they are fielded.”



Spouses Town Hall a success

Dear Spouses,

Thank you for coming to our first ever Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC) Spouses Town Hall on Feb. 1 at Little Hall Theater. It was a great event. We watched a video from the Commandant and Mrs. Amos about the hardships spouses and families face today. This video was right on target – we need to take care of ourselves and our families and search out resources in our base community and Command.

We also learned about our Command and how we support the Marine warfighter in so many important ways. We received our very own "Spouses On Point" magazine (that was created just for us) to take home and enjoy. We then learned about new communications in our Command and provided our emails to receive future news and family event invites. When all was said and done, we got to enjoy some yummy refreshments and wonderful conversation. You missed it if you weren't there, and we missed you.

Keep your eyes and ears open for new family events. We have a lot of new ideas ahead. Thank you, spouses, for making this day such a success. I truly enjoyed seeing each of you there.

Remember, we are on a mission to collect emails of all spouses in all states where our Command families live. Please keep sending in spouse email addresses. We have a fantastic team of families scattered all over the United States, and we want to hear from you. Let's jump start communications to and among all of our families. This is a very important first step in bringing our families closer together.

Also, be sure to check out our new MCSC webpage at <http://www.marines.mil/unit/marcorsyscom/command/Pages/Spouses/default.aspx>. There you can read our "Spouses On Point" special issue magazine, watch our Spouses Town Hall video and also find important numbers and information for families. Visit our link often; it's for you.

Traci Kelley

Spouses Informational Fair set for March 22

Marine Corps Base Quantico will hold a Spouses Informational Fair from 9:30-11:30 a.m. March 22 at Religious and Family Services Annex at 3019 Embry Loop. This is a great opportunity to learn about the programs and services offered at Quantico. Informational booths from Recreation, Education, DEERS, TRICARE, Human Resources and staff will be on hand to answer questions.

Childcare will be provided. Call 703-784-0674 to preregister children. For more information, call 703-784-4961 or 703-784-2659.

Marine Corps Community Services Quantico offerings

Marine and Family Services offers a variety of resources and opportunities that support and enhance the quality of life for all active-duty service members, retirees and family members. The development and growth of the Marine Corps Base Quantico military community is in a large part due to support from quality Marine Corps Community Services programs and services.

Striving to improve quality of life is their mission, and customer service is their top priority. They want to ensure that your needs and the needs of your family are met every day to promote both personal and family stability and give you peace of mind about what is important in your life.

For more details and programs, go to <http://www.quantico.usmc-mccs.org/MarineFamilyServices/index.cfm>.

Leaders outline healthcare, Family Services improvements

WASHINGTON, Feb. 18, 2011 - The Defense Department has taken a number of recent steps to improve health care and family support services for military members and their families, the department's two top leaders told a Senate panel.... [full story](#)

DOD strives to strengthen, empower military families

WASHINGTON, Feb. 17, 2011 – From education opportunities to spouse employment, Defense Department officials are expanding military family support programs to better meet families' current needs, as well as to empower them for the challenges that lie ahead, the DOD official who oversees military family programs said today.... [full story](#)

Officials invite spouses to share employment ups, downs

WASHINGTON, Feb. 14, 2011 – Defense Department officials are inviting military spouses to air their state licensing issues and concerns as part of an overall effort to boost spouses' education and career opportunities.... [full story](#)

Leaders look to protect best MWR programs

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9, 2011 - The leaders of the services' morale, welfare and recreation departments today pledged to sustain military families' best programs while searching for ways to deal with inevitable budget cuts.... [full story](#)

DOD takes steps to combat childhood obesity

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9, 2011 - The Defense Department has joined forces with the nation to combat a childhood obesity epidemic that not only is a matter of health or nutrition, but also is a national security issue, a Pentagon official said.... [full story](#)

Army wife deals with stress, helps others

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9, 2011 - Sheri Hall is the wife of a career Army officer. She and husband, Jeff Hall, were married after high school, and she knew the Army would be their life together.... [full story](#)

Women learn to fight stress from home front

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9, 2011 - During a week in which the White House pledged a vigorous, whole-of-government approach to supporting military families, 11 women worked diligently a few miles away to learn to cope with the stresses of their husbands' multiple deployments and the post-traumatic stress that affects many of them when they return home.... [full story](#)

Government unites to improve child, youth programs

WASHINGTON, Feb. 2, 2011 - The government's new military family support effort will have a resounding impact on resources and programs for military children and youth in the months and years ahead, a Defense Department official said.... [full story](#)

First Lady, Dr. Biden to launch troop-support campaign

WASHINGTON, Feb. 28, 2011 – First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, plan to launch a campaign in March that's designed to rally citizens, businesses and nonprofit organizations to provide support for U.S. service members and their families.... [full story](#)

Leaders outline healthcare, Family Services improvements

By Lisa Daniel
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 18, 2011 - The Defense Department has taken a number of recent steps to improve health care and family support services for military members and their families, the department's two top leaders told a Senate panel.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee about several areas of improvement during a hearing about the department's fiscal 2012 budget.

Gates said he has made quick implementation of the shift to electronic medical records for service members and veterans one of his top priorities. The issue is important enough, he said, that he and Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki met one-on-one two weeks ago to discuss how to push the change faster. They will meet again in March and follow up with a staff meeting in April on the issue, he said.

"I have found with these huge bureaucracies, whether it's DOD or VA, that things don't move very fast unless they get high-level attention," he said. "We're committed to getting fast progress on this. We've made a lot of progress, but it's not fast enough as far as Secretary Shinseki and I are concerned."

Officials also have stabilized programs, particularly in mental health and family support services, by removing them from the supplemental war funding budget to the base budget, Gates said. In the past three years, he added, "we've moved virtually all of it to the base budget; so long after the war funding ends, we'll still be able to sustain these programs."

The Defense Department has improved the delivery of mental health services by hiring 6,000 mental health care workers since 2001, when the department had only about a thousand, Mullen said. "There have been extraordinary efforts to address this within the services," he said, noting that civilian health care also is short of mental health practitioners.

Because of that and education and outreach campaigns, officials have a better understanding of problems like post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries, the chairman told the senators.

"Early on, there was a great deal of focus on spouses in terms of their stress, but there's been an increasing awareness and understanding to address the whole family, including kids," he said, noting that today's military children have had parents at war most of their lives.

Public awareness campaigns such as the one President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama announced last month about the health of military families also go a long way in helping service members and their families, Gates said.

The White House campaign "is a huge step forward in giving this visibility in a way we just haven't had before," he added.

DOD strives to strengthen, empower military families

By Elaine Wilson
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 17, 2011 – From education opportunities to spouse employment, Defense Department officials are expanding military family support programs to better meet families' current needs, as well as to empower them for the challenges that lie ahead, the DOD official who oversees military family programs said today.

"It's not just about providing fish -- it's teaching to fish as well," Robert L. Gordon III, deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy, told an audience of politicians, spouses and service organization leaders during the Congressional Military Family Caucus Kickoff in the U.S. Capitol building here.

The caucus' goal is to educate Congress members and staff about the unique challenges — including mental health, wounded warrior care, health care, education and disability — service members and their families face.

The military community is diverse and vast, Gordon said, with more than 2 million service members, 1.59 million military-connected children and nearly 800,000 spouses. "The question is: How do we look at that community and address their needs, but also empower them for the future?" he said.

The nation is an era of "fiscal austerity," Gordon acknowledged. However, he added, families continue to have the same needs and concerns, including education, behavioral health support, employment and community reintegration.

Gordon called for an increase in DOD partnerships to bolster family support in the years ahead. The department must continue to foster relationships with nonprofit and military spouse groups and the commercial and entertainment sectors, he added.

Leadership also is "absolutely key" when addressing the military community's most-pressing issues and concerns, he said, but it will take more than just Defense Department leaders to do the job. Government and nonprofit group leaders and senior military spouses, Gordon said, must be "focused like a laser beam on the issues and concerns of our military community."

Families have a plethora of support programs available to them, but leaders must ensure those programs are effective and adequately address needs, he added. Toward that end, Gordon touched on a few of the programs and initiatives the department is looking at to increase education and career opportunities.

The Defense Department, for example, plans to conduct an education review to ensure a "world-class" education for military children. Of the 1.2 million military-connected children in schools, roughly 85,000 are in DOD schools, about 70,000 are in public schools on military installations and the rest, Gordon noted, attend off-base public schools.

The 172-day review will look at science, technology and engineering, math, early child education and languages, he said, to ensure all 1.2 million military children are being adequately prepared for 21st-century demands.

For younger children, Gordon said the department is working to expand the number of child care slots within communities. The Defense Department has 923 child development centers with 200,000 young children needing care and a shortfall of about 30,000 slots, he said.

To alleviate the shortfall, Gordon said, DOD officials have partnered with 13 states to increase military family access to community-based, quality child care. This focus on community care makes sense, he noted, since roughly 70 percent of families live off base.

"We have to have partnerships where we provide those sorts of resources where the communities are," he said.

Officials also are focused on improving spouse employment opportunities, Gordon said. Of the 800,000 military spouses, about 77 percent would like work, he said. However, he acknowledged, spouses are hindered by frequent transitions and deployments.

The department is engaging in a spouse education and career opportunity initiative to alleviate some of those employment challenges, Gordon said. The initiative includes expanding the Army Spouse Employment Program into the Military Spouse Employment Program so all spouses can benefit, he said. The Army's program helps connect spouses with opportunities in Fortune 500 and Fortune 100 companies.

These are just a few of the programs the department is working on, Gordon said, noting many others are outlined in the White House report, titled: "Strengthening our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment." This report describes the sweeping interagency effort under way to better support military families. Federal agencies, he added, have made nearly 50 commitments in terms of family support.

Moving ahead, Gordon said it will take a mix of innovation and creativity to meet military families' needs, while ensuring they're empowered "to be the best they can be."

Officials invite spouses to share employment ups, downs

By Elaine Wilson
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 14, 2011 – Defense Department officials are inviting military spouses to air their state licensing issues and concerns as part of an overall effort to boost spouses' education and career opportunities.

The department has created a discussion board where spouses can describe their experiences – both good and bad – with state licenses and certifications as they move from state to state.

"We'd like to eliminate barriers that would enable spouses to pursue their goals, and licensure is a major barrier to spouses as they seek careers," Aggie Byers, senior policy analyst with the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program, told American Forces Press Service.

One-third of employed military spouses are in career fields that require a state license, such as some health care professionals, teachers, accountants, pharmacy technicians and medical billers, explained Ed Kringer, director of state liaison and educational opportunity for the Pentagon's office of military community and family policy.

Officials often encourage military spouses to pursue portable careers, since they may offer easier paths to employment in new locations. However, spouses are running into some issues as they move from state to state, Kringer acknowledged.

A license that's valid in one state isn't always valid in another, he explained, rendering spouses unable to work until they can complete the licensing requirements for their new state of residence.

Compounding the issue, some states have stringent application processes or the board may only meet once every three to four months. If spouses miss one board, they'll potentially have to wait months for another. In worst-case scenarios, some states don't endorse another state's license at all, leaving those spouses back at square one in the licensing process, Kringer said.

"The process can be confusing, time-consuming, expensive, and can leave spouses out of the job market for long periods of time," he said. "We realize that a spouse may only be [in a state] for two to three years, and will be missing six months or more of work."

This lack of employment can have a snowball effect, he noted. States often require people to demonstrate reasonable competency, which entails expertise gained on the job. A spouse, for example, may be required to have worked two out of the past four years in a career to obtain a license. But military spouses who lived overseas for several years, or in a small town with limited career opportunities, may not be able to meet this requirement, he added.

To counter these issues and others, Defense Department officials are working with states to streamline processes and eliminate licensing barriers, Kringer said.

Officials have focused past efforts on easing the transition process for registered nurses and teachers. For example, Kringer said, officials have worked with states over the past several years on a licensure compact that will ease state-to-state transitions for registered nurses. For teachers, he added, they've been asking states to accept one specific certificate across the board rather than requiring a new certificate in each state.

However, only about 11 percent of working spouses are registered nurses or teachers, according to the current population survey, Kringer noted, so officials are working to minimize the challenges facing spouses in all portable careers.

Efforts to institute change already have paid off, he said.

Colorado, for example, passed an endorsement bill last year that's speeding up the licensing process for military spouses, Kringer said. Colorado has a regulatory agency that oversees 77 different careers that require a license. The legislation gives the agency's director authority to grant endorsements without board approval, eliminating sometimes lengthy waits for a board to meet. Additionally, the state now accepts continuing education units in lieu of experience, he added.

More than 25 other states have similar regulatory agencies, he said, and officials are hopeful they'll pass similar bills once they learn of Colorado's success.

Also last year, Florida passed a bill that enables military spouses with a valid license from another state to automatically obtain a temporary six-month license, Kringer said. This gives spouses the opportunity to seek employment while filing for their permanent license, he explained.

The state also has developed a process to expedite the required background check. Rather than several weeks or months, spouses can have their background checks done in a week.

But despite these efforts, Kringer said, officials know they may be missing an issue or potential solution. "We don't know if we're doing it perfectly," he acknowledged. "We made educated guesses that helped frame these initial efforts, but now we need to hear from spouses."

Kringer encouraged spouses to use the discussion board so officials can better direct their efforts. They'd like to hear what problems spouses are facing or have faced, he said, and they're hoping to learn from success stories as well.

The discussion board, he added, also can serve as a source of information to others. Spouses can learn from someone else's lessons learned, for example.

Although officials hope for extensive input, Kringer cautioned that spouses shouldn't expect personalized responses. The discussion board isn't intended to fix individual issues with states, he explained, but rather is an opportunity to offer feedback to ensure officials are moving in the right direction. "This isn't going to be a quick process, but over the years we should make good headway," he said.

Leaders understand how disruptive frequent military moves can be to a career, Kringer noted.

"There are benefits, but it's disruptive," he said. "And no matter how well we work this, we can't make it so it's not disruptive. But we want to minimize that disruption as much as possible."

This effort is part of an overall, interagency effort to increase spouse employment opportunities, Byers explained, noting that spouse employment was one of the key issues identified in a White House report released last month titled "Strengthening our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment." The report not only identified key issues military families face, but also presented the programs and resources government agencies plan to launch in the coming months to address them.

For example, the Treasury and Defense departments are working together to release a report on licensing and credentialing practices faced by military spouses.

"Spouse education and employment matters because it leads to their fulfillment," Byers said. "If they feel fulfilled professionally ... they'll have a greater chance to thrive while serving the nation."

People can find more information about spouse education and career opportunities, including free career counseling, on the Military OneSource website.

Related Sites:

Discussion Board <<http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=182288077661&topic=44824>>

Special Report: Strengthening Our Military Families <http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2011/0111_initiative/>

Military OneSource <<http://www.militaryonesource.com/>>

Leaders look to protect best MWR programs

By Lisa Daniel
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9, 2011 - The leaders of the services' morale, welfare and recreation departments today pledged to sustain military families' best programs while searching for ways to deal with inevitable budget cuts.

"As we are focused on efficiencies, we will take care of our most valuable asset: our service members and their families," Robert L. Gordon, the Defense Department's deputy assistant secretary for military community and family policy, told a congressional subcommittee.

Gordon appeared before the House Armed Services Committee's military personnel subcommittee to discuss morale, welfare, and recreation programs, along with leaders of each of the service MWR programs.

Results from the first survey of MWR program patrons conducted in 2009 shows the programs are fine, but could use improvement, especially in outdoor and recreational facilities, Gordon said.

Rich Gorman, executive director of the Army's Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command, said MWR programs are important to help soldiers maintain physical fitness and alleviate stress, and support families.

"Everything we do every day is designed to support our soldiers," he said. "MWR serves soldiers everywhere they serve."

Gorman added that support is equal for families. "Mission accomplishment is directly related to soldiers' knowing their families are safe and happy," he said. "The Army has long recognized that if we don't retain the family, we simply won't retain the soldier."

Rogers Patrick, acting director of the Navy's Fleet and Family Readiness Programs, said his department has streamlined costs through its Quality of Life models to improve on-base housing, community centers, and galleys.

Those savings have helped to fund 30 more child care centers, allowing for 7,000 more openings and a waiting list of no more than three months, he said.

"Whatever the need, whatever the location, our patrons know they can count on MWR to give high-quality programs," Patrick said.

Charles E. Milam, director of Air Force Services, said his office has "stretched the traditional programs of MWR to meet the constantly changing needs of airmen."

Air Force Services has enhanced warrior and survivor care, outreach programs, and the dignified transfer services of fallen service members, Milam said. "We will not lose sight of our core function of allowing for mission-ready airmen" as he and others develop next year's budget, he said.

Timothy R. Larsen, director of the Marine Corps' Personnel and Family Readiness Division, said the Corps increased funding for the programs by \$10 million this year as part of a multiyear effort to transition programs such as the Exceptional Family Member and Quality of Life programs into the Personnel and Family Readiness Division, noting the programs' importance to the resilience and readiness of Marines.

Gordon and the others said they are focused on how to preserve the best programs while finding cost savings in ones that are less effective or valued.

"Our services have done a very good job assessing the programs for the degree to which they provide effective quality of life for service members and their families," he said. Program leaders will continue to focus on what military families want and need, he added.

"This notion of focusing on our human element ... is absolutely essential," he said.

The officials said non-appropriated funds programs supported partially by fees and revenue -- such as child care centers, commissaries and post exchanges -- are critical for sharing resources with other programs, providing benefits of reduced costs to families, and building a sense of community among service members and families, at least 60 percent of whom live off base.

DOD takes steps to combat childhood obesity

By Elaine Wilson
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9, 2011 - The Defense Department has joined forces with the nation to combat a childhood obesity epidemic that not only is a matter of health or nutrition, but also is a national security issue, a Pentagon official said.

"When the nation as a whole lacks in this issue, it's pervasive," Barbara Thompson, co-chair of DOD's working group to combat obesity, told American Forces Press Service, noting obesity's impact on everything from recruiting to the nation's health system.

Today, First Lady Michelle Obama marked the one-year anniversary of her "Let's Move" campaign, a nationwide initiative to promote making healthy food choices and increasing physical activity within homes, schools and communities. The aim, Obama has said, is to solve America's childhood obesity epidemic within a generation.

"The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake," Obama said at the Let's Move launch last year.

America's childhood obesity rates have tripled in the past 30 years, according to the Let's Move website. Today, nearly one in three American children and about one in four military children are overweight or obese. This issue has a tremendous impact on the health system, and from a military standpoint, it can affect everything from recruiting and retention to the force's ability to fight, said Thompson, who also serves as the director of the Pentagon's office of family policy, children and youth.

Thompson cited a report called "Too Fat to Fight," which states that 75 percent of Americans ages 17 to 24 are unable to join the military for various reasons, with being overweight or obese the leading medical cause.

"When you take into account that 50 percent of military youth enter the military or consider entering the military, that's a huge pool we need to be focused on," Thompson said.

Spurred on by the first lady's efforts, the Defense Department formed a childhood obesity working group in August, with a committee of nearly 30 helping professionals from a variety of military backgrounds and expertise, Thompson said. The group includes pediatricians, family medicine physicians, dietitians, nurses, public health professionals, military and civilian personnel experts, family and child and youth professionals, and representatives from the Defense Commissary Agency, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and morale, welfare and recreation.

To tackle a daunting task, the group divided into four subcommittees: nutrition and health for children from birth to age 18, the Military Health System, food and fitness environments and education and strategic communications.

The committee then set out on a mission to improve the health and nutrition of military families, Thompson said.

"We're developing a strategic action plan that cuts across the DOD's food environment," she explained. "We have to look at our food courts, our school menus, how physically friendly is the installation so children can walk to school and bike to school to increase their physical activity, for example.

"It's a very comprehensive look at what we can do as a department to help our families make the right choices for their families," she added.

They've already made considerable progress, Thompson noted. With the Army taking the lead, officials are creating standardized menus for child development centers to ensure the centers are meeting children's nutritional needs. They're also working with vendors who supply the centers' food to ensure they're getting the freshest vegetables, lower-fat cuts of meat and less processed food laden with fats, salt and sugar.

Since children receive about two-thirds of their daily nutrition requirement while in military child care centers, these efforts are poised to have a significant impact, Thompson said, also noting that military youth and child development centers serve about 700,000 military youth on any given day.

"It's a wonderful opportunity to impact the way they think about healthy lifestyles," she said.

Additionally, the committee is working to develop community gardens, healthy cooking classes and classes on the relationship between finances and food. Eating at home, for example, generally is less expensive than eating out, Thompson said.

Thompson also cited progress within the civilian sector that the military can adopt. The first lady is working with a major "super store" chain to reduce the number of products high in fat, salt and sugar and to boost the number of fruits and vegetables it offers, she explained, and commissary officials are looking into this as well. Commissaries already have increased the sales of fresh fruits and vegetables, she noted.

Additionally, the department is working to offer more healthy choices in vending machines, schools, dining facilities, clubs, bowling centers, food courts, and any other on-base locale that offers food, she said.

These changes not only will affect children in the short term with better stamina and well-being, but also will have a significant impact on their long-term health, Public Health Service Cmdr. (Dr.) Aileen Buckler, working group co-chair and TRICARE population health physician, told American Forces Press Service.

When a child is overweight or obese, particularly obese, she explained, they're at a much higher risk of cardiovascular risk factors such as high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol, as well as increased blood sugars, which can lead to higher rates of Type 2 diabetes at younger ages than what was seen in the past.

Weight issues often follow children through the years, Buckler noted. Studies show that about 85 percent of children ages 10 to 15 who were overweight became obese by age 25, she said. And children who are obese before age 8 are more likely to have more severe obesity as an adult, which can lead to greater risks of cardiovascular disease, stroke, certain types of cancer, osteoarthritis and even infertility, she added.

To keep these health issues from snowballing, Buckler's Military Health System subcommittee is taking action within health care offices nationwide. Members are working on a policy memo aimed at helping pediatricians, family physicians and civilian health care providers properly diagnose overweight and obesity in children, track trends and offer parents ideas of how they can help at home.

They're also evaluating civilian and military toolkits on childhood obesity so they can develop a standardized toolkit for military and civilian providers, she added. This will ensure they reach the widest scope of children, including those of National Guard and Reserve families.

Along with new initiatives, the committee is taking current, effective programs into account, Thompson said. The committee has gathered an inventory of current service programs to learn from effective practices with an aim to expand those programs across the department, she said.

But the department can't accomplish this alone, Thompson noted. "It takes a village to make good change," she said. "We need to bring the message to the important adults in their lives. And as adults, we need to be good role models for our children."

Thompson summed up a healthy family goal with the aid of a few numbers: five-two-one-zero. People, she explained, should aim for five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, two hours or less of screen time, one hour of physical activity and zero sugary drinks.

About 40 percent of children's calories are empty ones, she noted. "That is a real concern that they're not getting enough vitamins and fiber," she said.

The working group is factoring in the additional challenges military families face, Buckler noted, such as multiple deployments and frequent moves. During a deployment, for example, the at-home parent may find it more difficult to find time to shop for healthy foods or take children to physical activities such as soccer or basketball, she said.

"It probably makes eating healthy and getting activity into your life harder," she acknowledged.

But military parents can take smaller steps toward change to start, she noted. They can choose skim milk instead of whole or reduced-fat milk or take a family walk or bike ride after dinner rather than turning on the TV.

"You can go play kickball or throw a ball around," she suggested. "The goal is to get out of the house, get moving and away from the television."

Thompson said she's optimistic about the changes that have occurred and what is yet to come.

"The committee's members are very passionate and committed to making positive changes," she said. Thompson said the group plans to publish a full report with the group's progress and recommendations in the spring.

Meanwhile, for more information on a healthy lifestyle, people can visit a service health and wellness facility, check in with a base fitness center or visit the Let's Move campaign website at <http://www.letsmove.gov> or Military OneSource at <http://militaryonesource.com>.

Army wife deals with stress, helps others

By Terri Moon Cronk
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9, 2011 - Sheri Hall is the wife of a career Army officer. She and husband, Jeff Hall, were married after high school, and she knew the Army would be their life together.

They have two daughters, ages 17 and 18, who have been around a country at war for the majority of their young lives.

Sheri served as a co-facilitator of the Significant Others Support Group that met here the week of Jan. 24, sponsored by the Defense Health Clinical Center at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

When Jeff returned from his last deployment, Sheri noticed something different about her husband.

"I knew the second he was home," she said of his post-traumatic stress symptoms. Yet, she said, they both suppressed the issue for two and a half years.

"He was so strong, and he gave up on everything," she recalled.

Although Jeff had some physical injuries, his post-traumatic stress symptoms were mostly anger-driven, Sheri said. He began to isolate himself from social events, she added, and didn't want to bring his problems up with the Army.

"He was combat soldier," she said, "and he said he couldn't let the cat out of bag. I felt like a total failure. I didn't know where to go to get help."

Jeff became suicidal, she said, and one day, everything came to a head.

"He hit the brick wall at 1,000 mph overnight," she recalled. "The day he crashed, I got really scared. He said he didn't want to live anymore and wanted to be alone.

"Several times, he told me to pack up, leave, and never come back," she continued. "I watched him sleep, because I was afraid he would get up and do something to himself. I said, 'You've got to make the decision to get help, because I can't explain to your children why you've taken your life, or your parents, when I can't answer that question for myself.'"

A light bulb went off, she said, and Jeff decided to get better for the girls, who already knew their father was ill. Jeff and Sheri saw a doctor at Fort Polk, La.

"You need more help than I can give you," the doctor said. He referred them to the Defense Health Clinical Center's Specialized Care Program at Walter Reed, Sheri said, noting that she attended the three-week session with him, at his request.

At the end of the first week, Jeff already was turning around, Sheri said, and the communication between them was improving.

"Jeff was striving," she said. "He knew what he needed to do to get better."

Sheri attended the women's group to share her experiences, and was named a co-facilitator.

"I saw amazing strength; this group was rejuvenated," she said of the Significant Others Support Group, which met for the first time last month. "These 11 women now know they're not alone. They're with others who understand what they're going through."

Sheri said she thinks all the women in the group have dealt with anger, the stress of taking care of children, and forgetting to tend to their own needs. "We learned it's OK to stop and take care of yourself," she said.

Jeff is better and calmer now, she added. "He knows when to step back, take a breath and go back with a different mindset," she said.

Though their future looks promising, Sheri said, she acknowledged that she isn't sure what lies ahead, as her family is beginning a year-long transition as her husband prepares to retire.

"The Army has been our life," she said. Meanwhile, she added, she has a goal in mind -- a way she can make a difference for military spouses and families, based on what she's been through. She's working toward her social work degree and wants to put her advantage of understanding the military to work.

"It's hard to find a provider or counselor who completely understands the military," Sheri said. "I want to work with those families -- the parents, the kids, ... all of that. I want to give back."

Women learn to fight stress from home front

By Terri Moon Cronk
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9, 2011 - During a week in which the White House pledged a vigorous, whole-of-government approach to supporting military families, 11 women worked diligently a few miles away to learn to cope with the stresses of their husbands' multiple deployments and the post-traumatic stress that affects many of them when they return home.

Ten military wives and a fiancée met in a quiet place the week of Jan. 24 without the distractions from ringing phones, kids' schedules and work projects. They learned coping skills through resilience training. They learned meditation, tried acupuncture, talked, laughed and cried.

The "significant others," who found out first-hand that post-traumatic stress affects entire families, came to the support group with more questions than answers. But they left armed with a battery of tools to cope with the everyday stresses of military life in a time of war.

The Significant Others Support Group is an offshoot of the Specialized Care Program their husbands completed following a diagnosis of combat stress or post-traumatic stress, or because they had difficulty readjusting to home life after war. Both programs are based on resilience and strength-building education conducted by the Defense Health Clinical Center at Walter Reed Army Medical Center here.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has called post-traumatic stress "the military health issue of our era." He and his wife, Deborah, are well-known advocates of taking care of the military family, taking every opportunity to make it known they want war veterans and their families to get all the help they need to cope with war's invisible scars.

For five days, the Significant Others Support Group charter class studied family roles and relationships, how combat affects service members, how to raise children during a stressful time in a lengthy war, and how to communicate about and deal with control issues when the deployment is over. They also learned the how to take care of themselves, an often-overlooked need.

"We don't 'cure' people here," said Dan Bullis, director of administration and operations at the clinical center. "It's the start of their journey to cope with symptoms."

Because it affects the entire family, efforts to confront post-traumatic stress must be include a family care plan, he said.

"[It's] is not a level playing field for them," Bullis said, adding that he believes the support group will become even more successful as word spreads to new attendees and sponsors.

"In a weeks' time," he said, "12 to 14 [significant others] are equipped with tools to cope with life. It's their lesson plan to take home so they can deal with the chronic symptoms. They're so overwhelmed."

The idea, Bullis said, was spawned from the husbands in the Specialized Care Program who began saying, "If only my significant other could get this support." A pilot program that launched with five or six women progressed to the charter class of 11 last month, he added.

Thanks to a \$35,000 donation by the nonprofit Walter Reed Society, the 11 women were brought to Walter Reed on per diem travel, housed in a nearby hotel, and attended the training and education, all expenses paid.

Designing the support group for women came from a tried-and-true approach.

"We had a lot of input through the years from service members to help their families and significant others," said Victoria Bruner, the center's director of clinical education and training, who also is a social worker and expert in traumatic stress, with a background as a registered nurse. "Whether it's a mother, brother, sister or adult child, we built the group on the basics of what helps people heal."

A holistic approach, Bruner said, is important in an environment that promotes comfort, healing and peacefulness.

"The [significant others] need a sense of safety to feel comfortable to tell a story, and to connect to other people so they know they're not alone," she said. "It's important to be in a safe environment, where people are assured their stories are honored and respected, so they can go as far as they want about their situation, or not."

Late in the morning on their final day together, Bruner conducted a session with the women, seated in a circle in a comfortable room adorned with plants, a wall quilt and subdued lighting.

"What has this week been like for you?" she asked. Answers circulated in a flurry of optimism from the participants, whose identities are not included in this article to protect their privacy.

"I feel less isolated, I made close friends," one of the women said. "We understand each other."

"I feel empowered, refreshed -- a partner with my partner," another said. "I'm inspired to work as a team."

"It's refreshing," said a third. "I learned skills to regain my energy. I feel whole again."

Bruner said the women in the support group see signs of strength in themselves to keep going -- to bounce back and realize they're not "crazy." They learn how to practice patience, be more tolerant and supportive of their military family in a balanced manner, she added.

Bruner, who lost her husband in Vietnam, said it's critical for the women "to get the support they need, to reduce the cost of war."

Post-traumatic stress is not new -- it's just another name for a phenomenon that's been recognized since the Civil War. "Melancholy," "shell shock" and "battle fatigue" are among the names it's had when it's been observed in service members in past conflicts.

Bullis, a former Army medic who served in Vietnam, said that during and after the Gulf War deployment in 1990 and 1991, 100,000 service members complained of what became known as "Gulf War syndrome."

"It came from out of nowhere, and they had symptoms similar to chronic fatigue syndrome," he said. Eventually, with no real medical cause found, it was called "medically unexplained physical symptoms." And service in the Gulf War, he added, was never linked to it.

Bullis added that 20 percent to 30 percent of those deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan can develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress, but treatment can be successful if it is caught in its early stages. And medical staff members at military clinics worldwide are catching signs of the disorder at a rapid pace through routine screening, he added.

Yet, the average time it takes a service member to seek help after the onset of symptoms is a staggering 12 years, Bullis noted.

"It's an invisible wound," he said, "and it's always a part of war."

The Significant Others Support Group provides sessions on topics such as "Dealing with Adrenaline Overload," "Understanding Triggers" and "Dealing with Things You Can't Control." It also provides relaxation and focus classes featuring Yoga Nidra, QiGong and acupuncture, as well as a massage donated by a local spa.

Robin Carnes -- a local mind and body skills instructor who teaches relaxation tools to the Significant Others Support Group -- said the techniques can be used at home in five minutes a day. Her methods teach the women to relax and refocus by "putting back life energy and storing it," she said.

"If you want to change your life," she added, "change your practice. It's a healthy addiction if done every day."

The charter class of 11 significant others gathered one last time on the final day in a small ceremony. As they received certificates of completion, some quietly said, "Thank you." But one Army wife, also a veteran, dropped to her knees, tearfully gesturing to the group, thanking everyone for the support she now has, and for her husband's success in the Specialized Care Program.

"This program," she said, "gave me my husband back."

Government unites to improve child, youth programs

By Elaine Wilson
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 2, 2011 - The government's new military family support effort will have a resounding impact on resources and programs for military children and youth in the months and years ahead, a Defense Department official said.

"It is earth-shattering," Barbara Thompson, director of the Pentagon's office of family policy and children and youth, said of the new initiative. "Never before have we had the full force of the federal government behind taking care of families."

Last week, President Barack Obama unveiled a new, whole-of-government approach to military family support, with agencies uniting to create new resources and support programs for military families worldwide. The government has made 50 commitments to improving families' quality of life, which are outlined in a White House report, "Strengthening Our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment."

Although the nation's top leaders rolled out the report, the government relied heavily on family members' input to identify challenges and develop possible solutions, Thompson noted. Officials talked to leaders and service members, spouses and caregivers in a number of venues, including a national leadership summit, family readiness conference, listening sessions and a number of surveys. The White House also brought in spouses to discuss their top issues.

As a result of feedback, about half of the report is devoted to the well-being of military children and youth, with one section devoted to increasing child care availability and quality, and another dedicated to ensuring excellence in military children's education and development. The report outlines specific programs and initiatives agencies plan to work on together to better meet families' needs.

"We recognize we need partners, not just from the federal government, but nonprofits," Thompson said. "We've learned over these years of war how important those partnerships are, to really leverage the programming and the expertise and to augment what we're doing in the DOD."

The Defense Department has a "wonderful social-support system" already in place, but will now have the avenues to expand and grow its efforts to the benefit of military children, Thompson said. "We weren't sure what doors to knock on before," she said. "But now we have carte blanche to experts in the field and how to connect to those state resources."

Thompson highlighted several joint efforts under way that already are having a positive impact on child care and children's well-being.

She cited a new liaison program as one example. DOD officials are working with the National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies to create new child care liaison positions in 13 states, she said. The states were chosen based on military population, deployment impact, the strength of the state's quality rating improvement system and level of support from joint family support assistance teams.

The liaisons will partner with the defense state liaison office to improve the level of licensing standards throughout the state and to find providers willing to participate in quality improvements through technical assistance and training, Thompson explained. They'll also sit on the state's Early Childhood Council, she added.

The goal is to create more community-based child care spaces as well as to improve the child care quality for military parents who don't have access to or aren't located near a military installation, Thompson explained. As an added bonus, by improving the care for military children, the other children in the program benefit as well.

"We're very excited about this," she said. "It's a wonderful opportunity to really make a difference, not just for military children, but for all children."

DOD officials also will look to other agencies, including the Health and Human Services Department and the Administration for Children and Families, to tap into state resources, and to the land-grant university and cooperative extension systems for technical assistance in training child care providers.

Officials also are working to increase the availability of on-base child care with new and expanded facilities, Thompson said. Construction projects in 2009 and 2010 yielded nearly 8,000 child care spaces. And an estimated five projects are in the works for 2012, she said.

Along with availability, the Defense Department is focused on flexibility of care, she said. To that end, the Navy and Army have created child development facilities that offer round-the-clock care for service members who may need support for night or early shifts. And for those in need of drop-in or respite care, DOD subsidizes 16 hours of care per child per month for families with a deployed loved one.

Additionally, some YMCAs offer respite care, Thompson said, adding there's a full list of participating centers available on the Military OneSource website.

Thompson also highlighted DOD's longstanding partnership with the Agriculture Department's 4-H group, which is projected to expand in the coming months, according to the White House report. The 4-H is the youth development program of the nation's cooperative extension system.

Each service, Thompson explained, has agreements with 4-H to provide activities and programming to youth centers.

"What we're trying to do is to harness the capacity of the cooperative extension and the land-grant university system to really have some initiatives that will ... highlight what is effective and tap into those resources that are in every county," she said, citing nutrition, financial readiness and gardening as just a few of the available programs.

"The land-grant university system has a myriad of support mechanisms that support the citizens of their state," Thompson said. "We really want to tap into what they can provide at the local level for military members and their families."

Thompson said she's also excited about a joint DOD and land-grant university initiative to map where all military children live. Officials can use that information to focus initiatives and programs, she said, particularly for children of the Guard and Reserve. "We want to make sure we can find them and tap into their needs," she said.

Many of these projects will bear fruit in the long term. For now, Thompson said, DOD is focused on developing a communications plan, with a heavy emphasis on social media, to get the word out about new programs and resources as they roll out. And as time passes, she added, agencies will be held accountable for their progress. All are required to report back to the White House periodically.

Although the effort is in its early stages, Thompson said, she's already encouraged by the light that's been cast on military families.

"It's gratifying to see the commitment and the concern and the recognition of the sacrifices that military families make from people who are not affiliated with the DOD," she said. "Everybody really stepped up to the plate to say, 'This is important for me as an American. This is important for me in my leadership role in my federal agency. This is the right thing to do.'"

First Lady, Dr. Biden to launch troop-support campaign

By Elaine Wilson
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 28, 2011 – First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, plan to launch a campaign in March that's designed to rally citizens, businesses and nonprofit organizations to provide support for U.S. service members and their families.

Obama and Biden previewed the campaign Feb. 28 during the National Governors Association meeting at the White House.

"We're very excited about this initiative because we think that this will not only help our troops and their families, but it will help us as a nation link together and be even stronger," the first lady said.

The campaign, Obama explained, will focus on four main areas: employment, education, wellness and public awareness.

"We're going to be working with businesses and nonprofit organizations to improve career opportunities for veterans and military spouses," she said. "There are a lot of wonderful models, companies that are already doing great things. We want to raise up those models and encourage other businesses to find a way to do the same."

They'll also work with education groups to better accommodate military children, Obama said, and encourage Americans to "simply step up as individuals."

It's evident that Americans care for the nation's troops, she said. However, "Oftentimes we just don't know what to do. And our hope is that through this public awareness campaign, we can funnel that energy, we can galvanize it, and we can direct it in a way that's going to be most helpful for our military families."

The first lady praised sweeping efforts already under way. President Barack Obama unveiled last month a new whole-of-government initiative to support military families. Federal agencies have made nearly 50 commitments to improving military families' quality of life, she said.

It's an important step, she noted, but military families' needs can't be met by government efforts alone.

Families need employers willing to hire them and who understand the unique employment issues that military spouses face, she said. They need schools that recognize there are military children in their midst and understand how to address their unique needs as they cope with multiple deployments and moves.

And, "They need communities that show gratitude for the sacrifices they're making -- not just with words, but with deeds," the first lady said.

The first lady acknowledged the additional challenges National Guard and reserve families face, particularly those who live far from bases or communities with built-in resources and support networks.

"It takes a special effort to reach out to these individuals and their families," she told the governors. "And that's why we want to work with all of you -- the governors of our states and with people and organizations within your states -- to help us find ways to better support military families, to keep raising awareness and making these families an important part of all of our common agenda."

Stepping up to help military families doesn't have to entail large-scale efforts, the first lady noted. People can help out with simple acts of kindness, such as mowing a lawn or shoveling snow off of a driveway. And local businesses and professionals – ranging from lawyers to mechanics – can offer military family discounts.

"However folks choose to help, the idea here is very simple," she said. "It's about doing everything we can to keep military families in our hearts and on our minds."

"It's about showing our gratitude to that very small group of Americans who make such a tremendous contribution and sacrifice to this country," she added. "And it's about serving the people who sacrifice so much to serve us."

Biden said she knows from personal experience what a difference it can make when someone, whether an individual or group, reaches out to support troops and their families. She cited her experience as a military mom – her son, Beau

Biden, is a captain in the Delaware Army National Guard – and her work with the grassroots organization, Delaware Boots on the Ground.

"Where a military family in Delaware has a need, we try to meet it," she said, describing the organization's mission. "Whether it's physical labor or repairs around the house, a fun night out for the kids, or other simple ways individuals, businesses and groups can support a family through a deployment."

Small groups like "Boots on the Ground" are making a difference across the country, Biden noted. A Minnesota-based organization, for example, collects hockey equipment for military children, she said, and a group of barbecue lovers in Ohio provides meals for military family events across the state.

As an educator, Biden said she's also pleased to hear how schools and teachers are supporting military children. She highlighted the efforts of a teacher working near Fort Stewart, Ga. The teacher sets up parent-teacher conferences over the Internet so deployed parents can take part, she said.

"There are so many great and inspiring stories which demonstrate that every American can take their time, their expertise and their passion and use it to support and thank a military family," Biden said.

Biden said she and the first lady often talk about the ways that Americans can support troops and their families. "And now we are trying to encourage all Americans to join us in this effort," she said.

Obama said the true mark of the campaign's success will be in its longevity.

"This isn't just a campaign for today. This is a campaign for every day, all day," she said. "This is going to outlive me and Jill and Joe and Barack. This is something that should be a part of what we do here in America."