

[Print This Article](#)

By Denise Etheridge
Staff writer

Conference on health of military families

Winn Army Community Hospital's Chief of Behavioral Health, Maj. Chris Warner, patiently explained the meaning of PCS, TDY, ACS and other Army acronyms to a sea of civilian social workers gathered Friday at the Coastal Georgia Center in Savannah. Warner and other mental-health professionals from Winn joined the Clinical Social Work Association of Savannah for the 24th annual Julius Hornstein Professional Conference last week. The conference, titled "Challenges on the Home Front," equipped providers with practical information and treatment options to help them work more effectively with service members and their families.

CSWA-S members learned about the unique challenges faced by soldiers and their dependents. Conference participants explored such topics as soldier resiliency, reintegrating soldiers after deployment, suicide, post traumatic stress disorder, stress of deployments on military children and helping new spouses transition to military life. "It's such a pertinent issue," said CSWA-S President Dr. Cathy McRae. "Our members requested this." McRae said the association's 200 members wanted training specific to the needs of military members and their dependents. Most mental-health providers who attended the conference were "masters level or above," the association president said. "There is a demand on their part and a desire on our part" to work together, Warner said. The major said the goal is to provide soldiers and their families the best mental-health services possible, whether it is received on or off post. Winn is striving to interact with area providers and draw more of them into the TRICARE network, he said.

"We have 137 providers in the TRICARE network now," Warner said. "But we always want more." Conference keynote speaker Dr. Teresa Arata-Maiers, a clinical pediatric psychologist and coordinator of Child and Family Programs for the Warrior Resiliency Program at Brooke Army Medical Center, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, discussed the advantages of military family life and its particular stressors.

Military families enjoy such benefits as housing and free medical care, and often have the opportunity to travel, Arata-Maiers said.

She pointed out military families bond with each other, forming "supportive extended families." Soldiers and their dependents also tend to be patriotic, Arata-Maiers said.

"They're working on a mission they believe in," she said.

Arata-Maiers listed stressors unique to military life including frequent relocation, absent parents, soldiers' heavy workloads and dangerous occupations, isolation and community ambivalence.

The child psychiatrist said prolonged deployments and more frequent deployments increase the risk for child abuse and neglect, spousal abuse and increase mental-health diagnoses in military spouses.

Arata-Maiers said there has recently been an a shift in American society's attitude toward the military, and the military has changed its perception of the military family. "I think the fact we're at war heightens the understanding that families are impacted," Arata-Maiers said. "Families serve, too. That's important to realize." The child psychiatrist said the Army now recognizes military spouses and dependents that are

resilient in turn make soldiers more resilient, so they can better serve the Army's mission.

"Supporting families is the key to soldier retention and soldier readiness," Arata-Maiers said.

She pointed out the Army has recently indicated its newfound respect for military families by capitalizing "Family" in its written communications and, more importantly, by creating the Army Family Covenant.

Arata-Maiers spoke about how the military family has changed. Families are more non-traditional today, with many single-parent soldiers now serving, she said.

Warner, responding to a question following Arata-Maiers' speech, said soldier parents are required to form family-care plans when they deploy. Single-parent soldiers especially are encouraged to make their plans early, and are offered resources to help them make those plans, he said.

A panel of Winn representatives fielded questions from association members after Arata-Maiers' presentation.

In addition to Arata-Maiers, panelists included Winn Army Community Hospital clinical social worker Sharon Bullard, Susan Domine with the Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield Family Advocacy Program and Dr. Alan Baroody, executive director of the Mary Lou Fraser Foundation for Families in Hinesville.

Panelists, and Warner, agreed more outreach and networking is needed between the military and health-care providers off post.

<http://www.bryancountynews.net/news/article/5449/>