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## Consultant Program Supports Troops, Families

By Elaine Sanchez  
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, July 27, 2011 – With portable, flexible care, the Defense Department's Military Family Life Consultant program has become a critical component in service member and family support, the director of the Pentagon's office of family policy, children and youth said.

Through the program, behavioral health specialists deploy around the world to offer short-term, nonmedical counseling and life coaching to military families dealing with everything from deployment and reintegration issues to natural and manmade disasters.

This immediate care can prove invaluable to a family member in need, Barbara Thompson told American Forces Press Service.

"We're at the prevention end of the spear," she said. "We can help families cope with the challenges they're facing before these issues escalate, before they require more intensive treatment."

The Defense Department launched the program in 2004 in response to the stressors of an increasing deployment pace and unexpected tour of duty extensions, Thompson explained. Officials saw the value of augmenting family center staffs to better meet the needs of families.

"To have that professional mental health specialist be available to help guide staff as they work with families and children has just been a real godsend," Thompson said.

Since its inception, the program has exploded, with officials embedding consultants in family centers, military child and youth programs, summer camp programs and in schools, both on and off installations, with a high level of military participation.

"We recognized early on that children were manifesting behaviors as they coped with the separation from a parent, and we wanted to make sure the staff was totally prepared to meet their needs," Thompson said.

To address the needs of geographically separated service members and their families, consultants are sent to many Guard and Reserve reintegration events -- about 100 events a week -- she said. As word spread about the program, so did the demand. Army officials, for example, requested a life consultant be embedded in every brigade.

Recently, with the program's flexibility and portability in mind, officials began to surge consultants into areas affected by natural disasters, such as tornados and earthquakes, and to military communities dealing with stressors of a different kind, Thompson explained. For example, officials sent 35 counselors to Fort Hood, Texas, after the November 2009 shooting spree there, and to Japan this year in the wake of a massive earthquake and tsunami.

Consultants typically embed in a location from 30 to 90 days, or for a semester when dealing with child and youth programs and schools. On average, they meet with families about four times.

"We want to be sure we are providing access to someone you can talk to, whether it's communication with your kids, marital issues or trouble in the work environment," Thompson said.

These sessions are kept confidential, she added, unless there's a "duty to warn" situation, such as domestic violence or a suicide risk.

Officials hope this confidentiality encourages people to seek help without the perceived stigma of seeking mental health care, she added. "We want people to have the opportunity to talk to someone, to problem solve and figure out the next steps for themselves and their families," she said.

All consultants are licensed clinicians with a master's or doctorate degree. But while on duty, they're wearing a nonmedical counseling hat, Thompson noted. The program is meant to complement military treatment facilities and mental health care programs, she explained, not replace them. Consultants will recommend further treatment if the situation escalates to a higher need.

"It's problem-solving and coaching, not therapy," she said.

With a years-long track record of success, Thompson said, she believes the program will continue to be in demand for some time to come, even with the troop drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Our gut feeling is that the issues are going to be around for a while, regardless of downsizing," she said. "Psychological issues and challenges of reintegration take time."

The program provides a stable opportunity to work through those issues, Thompson said. "This program is supporting one component of the spectrum of psychological health," she added. "It's a critical component for family support.

Service members and their families can find a life consultant by contacting their local family support or child and youth center.

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8/12/2011 10:24:53 AM

Thank you! I have a daughter and son in law that is in the Army they have both served in Iraq. My daughter was at the border when they first declared war and was with the Medics . She crossed the front lines and went through to Bagdad, She saw more then at the time a 19 should ever have to experience. However she did it with pride and for her country. She never has rregretted one day of her time with the Army. She has had a lot of tough times but with the help she has to reach out to has become a stronger solider and mother of a beautiful 7 yr old daughter herself. I thank not only Helath Net but every one that supports our troops. God Bless you for the support that is offered to the Military and families. I know first hand how tough it is and what they sacrifice. I am one of the fortunate ones that have had my family returned home safely from the war. I always remember with out great people that serve our country where would we be. Thank God for all!

- Marlena Payne, Sun Center Ranchos Cordova CA

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