

‘Virtual Installation’ Comes to Life

by Janine Boldrin

Three years ago, Lt. Gen. Jack C. Stultz, Commander of the U.S. Army Reserve, told AmeriForce about his wife Laura's idea for a virtual installation for reserve component service members and their families. Today's Army Strong Community Centers are helping to make that vision a reality, bringing services and support to military families who live far from traditional military installations.



Laura Stultz (in pink), wife of Lt. Gen. Jack C. Stultz, chief, Army Reserve, cuts the ceremonial ribbon during the grand opening of the Army Reserve's Army Strong Community Center located in Brevard, N.C. Photo by Sgt. First Class Mark Bell.

With more than 371,000 Reservists activated in repeated and prolonged deployments since September 11, 2001, the demand for one-on-one support services for these service members and their families has skyrocketed. But the biggest challenge has proven to be the distance between where the majority of reserve component families live and the nearest military installation where those support services are available.

In response to this issue, the Army Reserve began establishing Army Strong Community Centers (ASCCs) within communities where there is a high demand for the services required by military families. The role of the centers is threefold: they provide services to geographically dispersed military families within their own communities, they connect service members to the right resources at the right time and they help to mitigate the negative effects of mobilization on families.

“The message from our families is loud and clear. They are saying ‘do not give me another 1-800 number or a website. I need a personal touch,’” said Sonia Wriglesworth, Army Reserve Family Programs Director, when describing the growing need for personalized service and support within the Reserve military community over the past decade.

“A lot of our Army Reserve families are brand new to the military lifestyle and wake up to it when their spouse is mobilized to deploy,” said Wriglesworth. “We needed to reach out and create a responsive initiative that provided support to our families.”

Closing the Gap

For geographically dispersed families, like many in the Reserves, the ease of access to the services they require for military life is based on their proximity to a major military installation, according to a June 2008 study done by the Army's Geographically Dispersed Task

Force (GDTF). The study also found a preference to face-to-face contact rather than more web-based solutions in closing the services gap. Study participants said they could be overwhelmed by the number of web sites available and found the glut of information confusing; some said they were unable to solve the issues they were looking to resolve via web-based solutions.

“A challenge for our families is the access to support for our Reserve Component,” said Laura Stultz, wife of the Chief of the Army Reserve, Lt. Gen. Jack Stultz. “The Army Strong Community Center is an attempt to bring the services and support that soldiers and their dependants enjoy living on or next to military installations to our deserving soldiers and families in communities across hometown America.”

Lt. Gen. and Mrs. Stultz have been strong advocates for the opening of the

centers as part of their effort to help better serve Reserve families.

Personalizing Service

ASCCs serve as a single point of service where military families can get personalized information on military life, access services essential to their well-being and connect with others who may be experiencing the same issues that they are as they adapt to post-9/11 military life.

The top services and topics with which clients of the centers want assistance include: TRICARE, child and youth programs and services, education, and finances. Staff at the centers can also assist with such things as retirement questions, finding resources for legal issues, DEERS and military identifications, and employment. They also



Family members listen to Maj. Gen. Bill Gerety, commanding general of the 81st Regional Support Command speak during the grand opening of the Brevard, N.C., Army Reserve's Army Strong Community Center. Photo courtesy U.S. Army Reserve Public Affairs

work to connect families with additional services available to them within their own community, military discounts and memberships, and can help to establish connections with other military families who are experiencing the same situations during mobilizations.

"We have a lot of information we can share," said Marianne

Sernoffsky, Community Support Coordinator for the Rochester ASCC. "But it is that one-on-one passion we give to our families that they are really looking for."

Sernoffsky added that many families come to the centers looking for a sense of support and belonging within the military community. They want someone who talks their language when they seek help for navigating such issues as deployment and retirement paperwork, medical and dental insurance, and seeking out counseling.

Serving all Families

Since September 2009, there have been approximately 31,689 contacts and people served by the four centers that currently are open. And Reserve families are not the only ones looking for help.

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According to Wriglesworth, approximately one-third of the service members and families who come to the centers are Active Duty; a number that may be due to families returning to their hometowns during a spouse's deployment. Additionally, officials say all branches are welcome into the centers, along with retirees and even those who are not immediate family members of the military member.

"We see anyone that the service member considers part of their family," said Sernoffsky. "[A service member's] spouse and children may carry the identification card[s] but their parents or siblings do not. And they go through different emotions about going through military life."

There is a great need for extended family members to have information regarding military life—especially in the case of many wounded warriors.

"Our frame of mind used to be that if you had an identification card, you're a family member," said Wriglesworth. "But more and more we have to think that 50 percent of our soldiers are not married."

The centers have also maintained a strong connection to Gold Star Mothers and serve as a place where family members of the fallen can get information and gather together to support each other.

Growing Support

The support ASCCs receive to provide their services not only comes from military sources but also from the local community businesses and individuals neighboring the centers.

"The community has had open arms," said Sernoffsky. "Once the word got out letting them know what we are all about, they asked how they could help."

Army Strong Community Center Locations

Wadsworth Army Reserve Center Rochester, NY

Officially opened September 2009

Miller/Duckett Army Reserve Center Brevard, NC

Officially opened May 2010

T/SGT Vernon McGarity Army Reserve Center

Coraopolis, PA

Officially opened September 2010

Clackamas Community College Oregon City, OR

Grand opening planned for May 2011

Through their visibility in the communities, centers can give those who want to help military families the ability to connect with them. During the holiday season, offers of care packages for soldiers and baskets for families in need flooded into the Rochester center. The centers create a database of resources that can be used to help match family members with resources in the community in a timely fashion.

"We are very confidential and we protect our families," said Sernoffsky. "We don't [just] give a number and email address. And we physically go out there and meet [with] the organizations that volunteer. It is a relationship that is built together."

Building Better Lives

The response by the families who have received support through the centers has been overwhelmingly positive, according to Wriglesworth, who related the story of a local Air Force retiree who came to the Brevard center trying to get a military identification card for his autistic son.

"He had been trying to get the ID card for 10 months to a year," said Wriglesworth. "He was never able to get the right answer to help him navigate through what he needed to do. And then we opened the center and it was the person in the center who took the family by the hand to get that ID card for that [young man]."

The locations of ASCCs are based on a formula but, in part, they are determined by the population of soldiers in an area and the services available to them with 50 miles.

Officials also look at nearby installations, what other service resources are available in the area and what the community is like, said Wriglesworth. Then they pay a visit and walk through the community to get a pulse and sense if there is a need. And, if all things fit, they engage the community.

The future of the initiative includes a continuation of partnering with communities and local entities for the establishment of additional centers. The original plan included the opening of six pilot centers in the United States as part of the Virtual Installation Community-Based Pilot Program. The fourth location, in Oregon City, Ore., will have its official grand opening in May, 2011.

"We've had a very overwhelming response," said Sernoffsky. "Service members needed to know that their family members were taken care of while they were gone. Families wanted a one-stop location for all of the resources. And they have told us, 'What took so long and don't ever leave us.'" ●

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