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Dedicated to the home front

Family Readiness Groups assure information flow

By David Ruderman

104th Area Support Group Public Affairs Office

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series on the role of Family Readiness Groups.

When soldiers deploy, those who stay behind bear the burden of the mission as well. Family Readiness Groups, sometimes called Family Support Groups, keep those on the home front informed and in touch with their soldiers downrange. They also help family members negotiate the everyday obstacles that can arise.

"My main focus basically is to make sure families have the information they need, making sure they know where to go for information," said 222nd Base Support Battalion community outreach and deployment coordinator Bridget Sanders.

Sanders and her colleagues across the 104th Area Support Group work out of Army Community Service offices in the base support battalions. They train FR liaisons, unit soldier representatives, and FRG leaders, spouses who organize information networks and group activities. They are the first line of support to family members, raising awareness of resources available and nurturing a support network.

"FRG liaison is the link between commanders and families," said Judy Joyner, outreach coordinator with the 414th BSB. Spouses turn to them for help with sick children, car repairs, housing problems and dozens of other contingencies. Sometimes it's a question of helping wives through pregnancy and birth. "We're talking about a lot of different things," said Joyner.

"Knowledge is power – the aim is to know how to get their needs met at the lowest possible level," said Bob Williams, outreach program manager with 221st BSB ACS. FRGs are partly educational networks and partly extended families, their nucleus comprising FRG leaders, liaisons, rear detachment commanders, senior spouse advisers and commanders, he said.

The stronger that network in the rear, the fewer distractions there are for the deployed soldier, said Joyner. "They're more able to concentrate on their mission if they know there are people there to support their families."

"FRGs really kicked off in the Desert Storm/Desert Shield time," said Williams. "Over 600 FACs [Family Assistance Centers] were set up. A lot of support came from that. They established FRGs as part of the military mission. Every unit is required to have a system like that set up. Commanders realize this is part of mission readiness. They are part of life, the glue that holds things together."

Training for mission

ACS training runs the gamut of everything from navigating the maze of social services that families may require to understanding the guidelines for fund-raising activities. "We try to have it at least once a quarter, but if we get a request we bring them in and train them," said Williams. "We talk about the roles of the FRG and the key components."

FRG leaders learn from those already on the job. "We shared information with the other spouses who were there," said Tess Jackson, FRG leader with the 159th Medical Company in Wiesbaden, who took the training last summer. "You get good ideas from the other companies."

"We have our meetings once a month," said Jessica Caires, FRG leader for Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 5-7th Air Defense Artillery in Hanau. "The battalion has their meeting and then the batteries have their meetings so everybody can get the right information out."

"It's mostly family problems – kids missing their fathers," said Judy Ybay, a Battery B, 5-7th ADA spouse. "But we get a big support from our FRG. We get together every week. It's mostly somebody to talk to, and that's when people

mostly pull together. It works because you've got nobody to call to and you're here by yourself."

While operating in the background all the time, FRGs come to the fore when units prepare to move out. Caires, Ybay and their colleagues were on hand at Fliegerhorst Fitness Center Nov. 19-20 during Predeployment Processing for soldiers of 5-7th ADA, 19th Maintenance Company and elements of other units.

"They usually get the family members together and invite ACS and the other agencies so the soldiers know what's available for them when their family member is gone," said Tony Berry, plans and operations specialist for the 414th BSB S-3.

Soldiers' medical records were screened and shots administered as necessary at a dozen stations around the gym area. Legal specialists helped soldiers write or update wills and complete powers of attorney. Personnel service soldiers updated records, bank representatives made financial arrangements, and transportation and housing office agents arranged for the storage of POVs and other goods. In the center of it all were ACS and FRG members, making sure soldiers knew where to turn for information or help.

"I did seven of these in the last two months, five for the 4th Brigade alone," said Berry. "It's been busy." (Editor's note: Part two of the series will focus on the role of family liaison soldiers during deployments.)

Keeping it together during deployment

FRG liaisons play critical role

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No one ever joined the Army to become a Family Readiness liaison. Vital as the role may be to coordinating communication among deployed soldiers and their families at home, it's one of those "extra duties as assigned." So who gets tapped for the job?

"That's a command decision," said Judy Joyner, outreach coordinator with the 414th Base Support Battalion Army Community Service. "They're actually on orders from their commander. What I'm hearing all the rear detachment folks say is, it's the toughest job they've ever had."

"It was nuts, I'm telling you. It was a trial by fire," said 1st Lt. Erik Archer, commander of 3rd Platoon, 127th Military Police Company, in Hanau. Archer served as the company's rear detachment commander during its peacekeeping deployment to Kosovo earlier this year.

Vital issues arise

"Pregnancies were a huge thing," he said. When one pregnant wife was allowed a few extra days in hospital after birth, Archer found he had to explain to other mothers why they couldn't have that extra time as well. "You had to diffuse a lot of situations. It was mostly trying to keep the peace," he said.

Other major issues were spouse abuse and rumor control, he said. "What are you going to do when you hear a spouse has been abused? Unfortunately it's very reactive. We try to be proactive." A couple of spouses had to be sent back to the United States during the deployment, one for her own protection, said Archer.

When news media reported that peacekeeping posts were under threat of imminent attack, the phones rang off the hook back home. "The biggest thing we were afraid of was that rumors would get out of hand. You need to have a couple of people who did it before come in and talk to you," he said.

Not all FR experiences are as tough. When most of Hanau's 709th Military Police Battalion deployed to Kosovo for six months this year, many liaison roles fell to Sgt. Richard Olofson, the battalion's rear detachment NCOIC. Only a handful

of soldiers remained in the rear. There was no formal FR liaison and matters were handled on an ad hoc basis, he said.

"There were one or two small instances, such as lost ID cards - only two or three in the whole time. It was so easy, though granted for them it was traumatic," said Olofson. What helped him most were good contacts with local support services and FRG members who knew where to turn for assistance, he said.

"It takes someone who is, I guess you would say, empathetic," said Sgt. Rosalinda Hernandez of Company A, 127th Aviation Support Battalion, in Hanau. "All of us being in a different country with a different language and in different stages of life, you have to make some sound judgments."

Hernandez returned at the end of November to her position as a helicopter mechanic after serving 20 months as the company's FR liaison, which included a peacekeeping deployment to Kosovo in 2001. A lot of her job was facilitating communication and handling crises as they arose, she said.

"Fortunately we didn't have a whole lot," said Hernandez. "We found we had a lot of ladies who had trouble or needed assistance with their pregnancies." She coordinated transportation and communication among family members, the hospitals and the command.

Not just families

"We also helped the single soldiers in cases of hospitalization and things like that. It's not just the families. The liaison is an integral part because the command has so much more on their plate, that when something comes up it's important they have somebody who's dedicated to handling it," she said.

"Making sure the soldier's squared away - that's what I do," said Staff Sgt. Brad Moses, an infantry squad leader in Baumholder until being tapped as the FR liaison for 2-6th Infantry. "Most of it is just people calling for information, needing to get in touch with their soldier for information."

"We do what we can within the guidelines," said Hernandez. "I think it's important that the commanders take the role of the liaison seriously - to have that centerpiece."

"It's rewarding personally," said Moses. "The people who know are very thankful. It's great to be there to help them, not just leave them hanging. It takes a special kind of person."