

COMMUNITY CORNER

Army Community covenants represent more than just signatures

By Col. Kevin Brown
GARRISON COMMANDER

Last summer, Fort Riley Soldiers headed out into the communities of the Central Flint Hills Region. With them they took rolled-up covenant posters, some black markers and a banner. While it may not have seemed like much, these implements were the supplies needed to re-sign the Army Community Covenant.

Our Soldiers gathered with community leaders to sign the covenants and reaffirm their

commitment to each other. Our communities have always shown great support to our Soldiers and Families, making the Central Flint Hills Region one of the most military-friendly regions in this country and setting a great example for others to follow.

During this re-signing process, we set the standard for other communities to follow in



Col. Brown

signing their own covenants. Instead of gathering on post, as we did when signing the first covenants, we took the events to the communities.

This tactic allowed our Soldiers and their Family members the opportunity to visit communities they may not otherwise have visited and allowed community members the opportunity to interact with more of our Soldiers.

Each signing occurred during a major community event – K-State Fort Riley Day in Manhattan, Chisholm Trail Days in Abilene – just to name

a couple.

As a wrap up to the signing events, Fort Riley units and community members from the Central Flint Hills Region will gather later this month in Topeka to witness the signing of a statewide covenant and get the final signatures on each of the county covenants.

While many of our Soldiers and Families live on post, an even greater number live in our communities.

With the number of Soldiers in our communities growing as troops return home from deployments, the support

of our communities is even more important to the success of our missions.

To those who live on post, I encourage you to get out into the Central Flint Hills Region and experience what they have to offer. Each of the eight counties within the region has something special to offer.

For those who live in the communities surrounding Fort Riley, get involved. Several of the communities have military councils that act as liaisons between our service members and the community. Contact them to find out how you can

help and what they have to offer.

The Army Community covenants are more than signatures on paper. They represent the commitment the Soldiers, Family members and communities within the Central Flint Hills Region have to each other and promoting the best region we can.

To learn more about the Army Community Covenant and what communities around the nation are doing for our Soldiers, visit www.army.mil/community.

AFAP delegates tackle 88 issues during Super Bowl week

By Tim Hipps
FMWRIC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

ARLINGTON, Va. – The perception of a weeklong meeting of Army wives is one of the greatest misconers about the annual Army Family Action Plan Conference, which opened its 2011 rendition Jan. 31 at the Sheraton National Hotel.

The AFAP delegates consist of active duty Soldiers, National Guard, Reserve – including officers, enlisted, junior and senior non-commissioned officers – Family members of staff personnel, civilian employees and their Family members, as well as retirees – both military and civilian.

"That's the misnomer with AFAP – people think it's only a bunch of spouses," explained Christina Vine, the ACISM program analyst who manages the Army Family Action Plan Conference issues for Headquarters, Department of the Army. "We have full-bird colonels, we have (privates first class), we have BOSS Soldiers, dual military Family members – we have survivors – both spouses and parents of the fallen.

"Technically, you could be a delegate if you're a GS civilian."

Vine then rattled off a roll call of issues that easily could affect folks however loosely they are connected to the military. She said she wishes more people understood the mission of the Army Family Action Plan and all the good derived from the year-round process that culminates annually in Northern Virginia.

"I have an entire slide that says AFAP affects everybody," Vine said. "People ask me all the time why I do this job, and I tell them I'm passionate about this job for many reasons because in this book, every single one of these issues affects me.

"If I look in employment, I'm a DA civilian," she said, while thumping her thumb on the AFAP Conference Workbook, dubbed the voice of the Army Family. "When I look in Family support, I'm an active-

duty Soldier's wife, so the issues about Family readiness groups, they affect me. The issues about Child and Youth Services, I have two small children that use the CDC, those issues affect me. When I look in medical, I use Tricare, it affects me. When I look at Soldier support, my husband is an active-duty Soldier."

Vine and her 5-year-old twin boys also dealt with Dad's deployment last year. "When you talk about the Soldier issues, they all affect my husband," she added. "Maybe by the grace of God, tomorrow he could be a wounded warrior. I never know. People don't realize that the majority of our issues are issues that are Soldier-specific."

Yet, they touch nearly every-one affiliated with the military – one way or another. Although the Army is the only branch that has such a program, more than 60 percent of all active AFAP issues impact all services, she said.

"This is Super Bowl week because these are going to become reality," Vine said. "These are the issues that need Department of the Army resolution. Can you tell that I'm passionate about the program?"

The conference consisted of 95 delegates from around the world, 31 subject-matter experts from the Army staff, 32 workgroup team members and at least 15 conference staffers. Another dozen members of the Army Teen Panel were there to mirror AFAP by dealing with issues of 14 to 19-year-olds from six Army regions, including Reserve, Guard and Accessions Command representatives.

"What I always like to say about AFAP is it's the most democratic process in the Army because you can have a (Private First Class) spouse submit an issue that ends up having to be worked by a three-star general," Vine said with a smile.

Lt. Gen. Rick Lynch, commanding general of Installation Management Command and Assistant Chief of Staff for In-

stallation Management, helped launch the weeklong conference.

"The Army leadership is committed to fulfilling the Army Family Covenant," Lynch said during opening remarks. "Both the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army have routinely said we're not going to fail to fulfill the Army Family Covenant, so I don't want you to think reduced resources is going to affect Families because it's not."

AFAP begins at the installation and local level, where about 90 percent of AFAP issues are resolved, according to Maj. Gen. Reuben Jones, commander of the Army's Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command. Handling issues at the local level results in ongoing community improvements. Issues beyond the local level are raised to command-level conferences and then to Army headquarters, where delegates from across the Army determine which will be selected for resolution by Army staff and Department of Defense agencies.

"The issues that make their way to Department of the Army Headquarters all begin at a garrison or tenant unit, such as 5th Group or an MI brigade that belongs to Intelligence and Security Command, or maybe an engineering company that belongs to the Corps of Engineers," Vine explained. "They all create these issues."

The issues are vetted at the local level and those issues that cannot be resolved at that garrison are forwarded to their mid-level commands like Forces Command, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army Europe and Eighth Army, to name a few.

Those 17 entities have their own conferences, where the issues are prioritized again. In addition to the mid-level commands, two special-interest groups have their own symposiums – the Army Wounded Warrior Program and Survivor

Outreach Services.

"At those conferences, their issues all deal with things affecting them," Vine said. "All 17 send their issues that cannot be resolved at their level up to Headquarters (Department of the Army) and they come to me. We had 103 issues submitted. We tasked them out to the Army staff – such as Army G1, Army Civilian Personnel and the Surgeon General's Office – and they tell me which issues they are a proponent for."

According to Jones, AFAP alerts local Army leaders to areas of concern so they can resolve issues at home.

"In some cases, we had great news stories, and it turned out there already was a fix in place that the commands just weren't aware of – so that's how we went down from 103 to 88," Vine said. "We didn't even need AFAB because there was a resolution. That's great because some people had a fix in place already."

The remaining 88 issues will be considered this week by eight work groups, which are divided into subject areas: Education and Awareness, Employment, Family Support I and II, Medical Issues I and II, and Soldier Support I and II.

"It's one week here at Headquarters DA, but it's always going on," Vine added. "It's a year-round process. If you go right now to www.armyone-source.com, you can submit an issue that can go to that garrison 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Vine has been working the AFAP Conference for seven years, but says she never really

knows which issues will make the final cut. She does, however, have a couple of favorites this year.

One will be handled by the Soldier Support II work group – tax-free active-duty Soldier retention bonuses.

"Right now, if you re-enlist in the Army and you are not deployed, you have to pay taxes on those, and some of those re-enlistment bonuses are like 10 grand," Vine explained. "If you are deployed, then that's all tax-free, so think about the tax savings that you're getting on that. So there are some Soldiers who know that they're due to re-enlist who are happy to deploy because that means they are going to get that chunk of change. So that's one that I think will be an interesting conversation."

Another issue is social security numbers usage as the only way to identify troops – to help Soldiers battle identity theft. Single parent accession deals with the fact that single mothers are allowed to enlist in the Army only if they give away parental rights to their children.

"Most people, when I bring that up, say, 'What?' Vine said. "The Army will only enlist you if you're married or married with dependents. They won't allow you as a single parent to enlist. And the reason why is readiness. 'What are you going to do with your kid?' It makes sense from their standpoint, but a lot of people are then making, in this economy, choices that are irrevocable."

And the list goes on and on and on – 88 issues that will be reduced to 16 that will be sub-

mitted for resolution Feb. 4.

"The mission for this week is to elevate for senior leader consideration 16 issues that will radically improve the quality of life of the Army Family, whether it's a civilian, a Soldier, a retiree or a Family member," Vine said. "It's all about improving quality of life."

Recent AFAP successes include legislation authorizing surviving children to remain in the Tricare Dental Plan until age 21 (or 23 if enrolled full-time as a student); online tutoring for military connected students; subsidized off-post child care for geographically dispersed active component and deployed Reserve component Soldiers; and more than 400 new Unit Ministry Team positions (chaplain and chaplain assistant) in the active, Guard and Army Reserve.

More than 660 issues have been identified during the past 27 years, leading to 133 legislative changes, 172 Army or Department of Defense policy changes and 192 improved programs and services, according to Jones.

Lynch also shared statistics gathered from a 2010 survey of Army Families that revealed 67 percent of spouses would be satisfied if their Soldier made the Army a career – up from 62.8 percent in 2004 to 2005. More than half of spouses (59 percent) are satisfied with the kind of life they can have in the Army – up from 54 percent. More than half (58.8 percent) said they coped well during their Soldier's absence – up from 52 percent in the prior survey.

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