

Families Also Serve

by Sara Graves

Leslye A. Arsht has served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy since February 2006. In this role, she is responsible for policy, advocacy and oversight for all community support to service members and their families. This includes quality of life issues; state liaison initiatives; child development and military personnel; tuition assistance, the Morale, Welfare

and Recreation program; defense resale for commissaries and exchanges; transition assistance for separating service members; and family violence prevention and intervention.

AmeriForce Families Magazine asked Ms. Arsht to reflect on her time in office, and to share her thoughts on how the DoD is reaching out to support military families today. Here's what she had to say:

AmeriForce: *In 2006, you became the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy. Prior to that, you were part of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness team, and were appointed to Iraq's Ministry of Education to aid in the reestablishment of Iraq's primary and secondary schools. What was one moment or incident in Iraq or in the States that has left a lasting impression upon you and why?*



Ms. Arsht: When I was recruited to go to Iraq, I felt I'd been preparing my whole life to help rebuild that school system – having worked in public affairs, community relations, corporate giving and for more than a dozen years in education reform at the national, state and local level. And I thought it would be the most important work that I would ever do. It was life changing, but as with many life choices, it opened yet another door – to work every bit as compelling and rewarding here at DoD supporting military families.

My work in Iraq gave me my first experiences with the military – and my first awareness that military parents, like most parents, worry about their children and want their children to have safe, secure places to grow up and learn and be nurtured. It was readily apparent how important their families were and how proud they were of them. It was the beginning of my understanding that “families also serve” in our military.

Iraqi parents also worried similarly about their

children; I watched them take their children to school and pick them up. Iraqi parents worried whether their children were being graded fairly, and whether their teachers would be able to catch up with the outside world. They needed schools to open and return a sense of normalcy. This is one of the many things we have in common.

I am very proud to be a part of our nation's efforts. During my time in Iraq, our military members worked side by side with civilians re-establishing the school system, protecting the sites where national tests were given, rebuilding water and sewer systems, or simply handing out treats.

I was continuously struck by the need for partnership in order to achieve success. No one sector – the armed forces, the aid workers, the Iraqi Ministry and government, could have re-started the Iraqi schools – alone.

It took all of us. Everyone wanted the schools reopened and operating effectively. The need to reach out to, and depend upon partners, is just one of the many career and life-affirming lessons from my time in Iraq. In my work at DoD, I am ever mindful that government must be energetically seeking the appropriate partners to help us be successful in our mission – whatever that happens to be.

AmeriForce: *During your tenure serving the military community and directing family policy, you've been instrumental in furthering a number of initiatives, including the 24/7 1-800 family assistance service (1-800-342-9647). What other recent initiatives have positively impacted military families. What new initiatives are in the works to further address the needs of the military family?*

Ms. Arsht: Support services provided by *Military OneSource* (<http://www.militaryonesource.com>) were initiated in October 2002, two years before I became part of the Military Community and Family Policy office. Since then, the program has grown significantly and today, supports all Services in all components regardless of activation status. Our tagline, "You name it, we can help 24/7!" is more than a motto, it's what we do.

Military OneSource is the cornerstone of our communication with service members and their families and has quickly become a trusted source for information and assistance. The areas most frequently addressed are deployment related, parenting, child care, financial management and permanent change of station issues. Counselors are available 24/7, toll-free at 1-800-342-9647.

Military OneSource also provides counseling referrals to a network of civilian providers for one to six sessions within 30 minutes driving time of the individual requesting service.

I would encourage readers to explore the many Military OneSource resources that include discussion boards, moderated chat rooms, news, and a new tool, Webinars.

MilitaryHOMEFRONT (<http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil>) is the official Department of Defense Website for reliable quality of life information. It's designed to help service members and their families, leaders, and service providers.

To augment existing military support services, we established the *Military Family Life Consultant* program to provide non-medical, short term, situational, problem-solving counseling services. This non-medical counseling support, which began in 2004, was designed to help service members and their families

cope with the normal reactions to stressful/adverse situations. The counseling is intended to meet emerging needs for the active duty and Reserve Component service-members and their families through the cycles of deployment and reintegration back to their families and communities. Consultants provide outreach/rotational counseling support on and off military installations both here in the U.S. and overseas, on-demand counseling support and psycho-educational presentations primarily for drill weekends and family events for the National Guard and Reserve Component.

The *Coaching Young Families* program is a one-year pilot program that offers enhanced support to military families in high deployment areas. The program is being implemented at approximately 15 locations requested by the military services and National Guard and Reserve Components. The specific services provided vary. In the Air Force, the program offers outreach

Our quality of life programs address a full range of services, including assisting non-U.S. service members in their desire to gain citizenship. For many, this is often a life-long goal that also provides a stepping stone for members of the family to become citizens. My office continues to work closely with the Department of Homeland Security's Citizenship and Immigration Service to expedite citizenship applications for non-U.S. citizens who serve honorably in our Armed Forces. Since 2002, more than 35,000 service members have obtained citizenship and the average processing time has been reduced from nine months to less than 60 days. In August, CIS launched a special toll-free military helpline - 1-887-CIS-4MIL (1-877-247-4645) - to make it even easier for non-U.S. military members and their families to obtain citizenship.

Another innovation that will benefit service members from all components is *TurboTAP* (www.TurboTAP.org), the new interactive website that provides lifetime

support to separating servicemembers. The portal provides a single online source for all resources available for all service members transitioning out of the military. The portal integrates pertinent resources from the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Labor, and Defense in a user-friendly tool. It was created as a special outreach effort to serve the needs of all transition-

ing service members - Active Duty, Guard and Reserves, but in particular, to address the unique needs of those serving in the National Guard and Reserve.

TurboTAP is available and accessible to transitioning service and family members for life. Each service member is able to create an individual online portfolio which

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to and programs for expectant and new fathers. In the Army, the program provides support to surviving spouses and children of deceased soldiers. For those serving in the National Guard and Reserve Component, the program provides intensive outreach and deployment support (before, during, return, and reintegration) to families with children and outreach to isolated, hard-to-reach families.

electronically holds his or her own documents and transition plan. Partner organization databases containing the information transitioners need have been incorporated into the site and are presented via user-friendly interfaces. *TurboTAP* also connects users to a variety of local community resources. Main features include:

- A 30-second, multimedia tutorial explaining how to use *TurboTAP*
- Downloadable pre-separation and transition guides, checklists and other resources.
- An employment hub with job search capability by career field and geographic region.
- Two job banks
- An online résumé tool
- VA Benefits hub with a focus on health issues
- *eNewsletter* subscription, benefits updates and alerts

As this *AmeriForce* issue goes to press, DoD is publishing a new regulation that will limit the impact of predatory lenders.

The final regulation, published on August 31st and which goes into effect October 1, 2007, places limits on three kinds of short-term credit: payday loans, vehicle title loans and tax refund anticipation loans. The limits, established in the Military Lending Act, cap the annualized charges for these loans to 36 percent, require all charges (with few exceptions) are included in this cap, and preclude the use of checks, electronic funds transfer and use of vehicle titles to secure these loans. The regulation also prohibits mandatory arbitration and ensures service members and their families receive the protections provided by state laws.

This regulation is the Defense Department's first iteration, and we intend to continue monitoring the use of credit and the credit market to determine how best to use the regulation to protect service members and their families. We have had the benefit of the expertise and experience of the federal regulatory agencies in developing the regulation, and we plan to continue these relationships in the future to assist the Defense Department in finding appropriate solutions.

We know that financial needs sometimes arise unexpectedly – cars need tires and appliances need to be replaced. We are working hard to create a culture that encourages financial planning,



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reduced dependence on credit and routine saving for both short-term emergencies (like new tires) and achievement of long-term goals such as retirement through the Thrift Savings Plan. We equate financial readiness with mission readiness. Ultimately, we want to ensure that service members and their families are prepared to deal successfully with their finances, are protected from financial predators, and are motivated to achieve financial readiness.

AmeriForce: *This March, you discussed how the DoD is designing a regional joint family support model to improve methods of providing support to*

both active duty as well as Guard and Reserve families that live off base. What is the status of these efforts to improve support/assistance centers? If successful, when can military families reasonably expect to see direct results of such improvements?

AmeriForce: *With repeat deployments and PCS moves taking their toll on the military family, what has the DoD done to show its commitment to boost support for those living on military installations?*

Ms. Arsht: Being able to communicate with family and friends continues to be a huge morale booster for members of the military community. At our installations, we have computers with free Internet service at Family Support Centers, libraries, youth centers and other locations. In deployed locations, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the military exchanges provide commercial Internet service and low-cost phone service. Morale, Welfare and Recreation – MWR – as most people know it, also operates low-cost Internet cafés and military computers and phone lines are available on a not-to-interfere basis. Thanks to the generous public, free phone cards are widely distributed through the many non-profit and veteran service organizations.

Physical fitness activity is a major factor to balance stress and enhance mission readiness. Installations have comprehensive fitness and sports programs with long-term plans to modernize these facilities. Eighty fitness center construction programs are currently programmed from FY 2007 through FY 2013.

We understand that professional entertainment is another effective morale booster. Armed Forces

Entertainment, in partnership with the USO, conducted 118 tours with 1,433 tours in 25 countries. Back home, the Spirit of America Tour has provided almost 80 free concerts at military installations, providing family members welcome respite from the challenges of lengthy deployments.

One of the realities of military life is mobility – our families are on the move. To ensure they get the help they need, we developed *PlanMyMove*, a new online relocation tool to assist service and family members as they prepare to move to their next duty station.

The site (<http://www.military-homefront.dod.mil/moving>) provides a fully customizable three-month calendar and 'to do' list which links individual moving tasks with installation information and important points of contact. It puts your new duty station information, including phone numbers and maps at your fingertips. The new site helps with arranging household goods shipment, organizing arrival and departure checklists, finding information about the new installation – including those overseas, and locating child care. In addition, *PlanMyMove* provides reliable sources of information outside the installation to include finding local schools, employment and even the local DMV.

Almost half of military service members and Department of Defense civilian employees have children and many of those children are within the kindergarten to 12th grade age range. Approximately 12 percent of those children attend Department of Defense Education Activity schools worldwide. The DoDEA is recognized nationally and internationally for its high student achievement rate, rigorous curriculum, and high standards for quality education. During times of family separation and deployments, schools become the stabilizing factor in family life. Deployments of parents have spawned counseling and support



groups in many schools to help students cope with the realities of deployment. Teachers and counselors may also receive training on helping students to cope.

Keeping the lines of communication open between schools, parents and students is crucial during times of deployment. DoDEA schools communicate with deployed parents via e-mail and encourage students to do the same. Regular communication between school and the deployed parent provides feedback on a child's progress and facilitates cooperation between home and school to help all students achieve their highest potential.

To better serve children of *all* military personnel, including those attending schools outside the gate, DoDEA has created an Educational Partnership Directorate to share its expertise with local education agencies by offering support in areas such as professional development, distance learning, and curriculum assessment. This directorate's work will become very important in the coming years in light of military transformation issues by ensuring a quality education for all military children and facilitating their transition into and between public schools. Initial efforts are under way with school

systems being affected by BRAC. Two installation-based initiatives – *Baby Sign*® and *Reach Out and Read* – focus on developing communication skills for the very young. Research shows that infants and young children can communicate long before they have the physical ability to speak words. This research-based program teaches infants and toddlers to use simple gestures for communicating with their parents and caregivers. The program is available at many Child Development Centers and Family Child Care/Child Development Homes at Army, Marine, Navy, and Air Force installations. Today, approximately 80 installations offer this program.

Reach Out and Read (<http://reachoutandread.org>) is another program for families at military installations. The national non-profit organization promotes early literacy in pediatric exam rooms across the nation. Children receive new books and parents receive advice about reading aloud to their children.

These are only a few of the initiatives designed to fulfill our social compact with military families. I encourage readers to visit *Military HOMEFRONT* and *Military OneSource* often.

AmeriForce: You said that daycare services are being provided to help parents/caregivers/guardians of geographically dispersed military families through a program called Operation Military Child Care. In addition, the Army has joined with community agencies “to support the ‘suddenly military’ Reserve Component children and youth before, during, and after the deployment of a parent or loved one. How can members of geographically dispersed military families take advantage of such valuable benefits?

Ms. Arsht: The availability, affordability, and access to high quality programs for children and youth are critical elements of support for military families. Several initiatives are in place to address the unique needs of families who don’t live near an active installation.

Operation Military Child Care is a comprehensive program implemented to ‘buy down’ the cost of childcare for Reserve Component families and geographically dispersed active duty military families while the service member is deployed. Care is provided in state-licensed or regulated family childcare homes or childcare centers in the local community. Operation Military Child Care also provides childcare assistance for 60 days while the non-military spouse is looking for work. The program is administered by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies). Information about this program and other initiatives for military families can be found at www.naccrra.org/MilitaryPrograms .

Operation Military Kids – OMK – is the Army’s collaborative effort to support ‘suddenly military’ Reserve Component children and youth before, during, and after the deployment of a parent or loved one. OMK teams in 39 states locate and serve Reserve Component youth living in the local community using community support networks such as the American Legion and local Veterans’ service organizations, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, county 4-H agents and local clubs, the Military Child Education Coalition and state and local schools, and the National Association of Resource and Referral Agencies. The teams work together to increase the community’s capacity to support youth when the service member is deployed. In Fiscal Year 2006, more than 29,000 youths participated in OMK activities. To locate information about OMK in a specific state, go to http://www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/comm/4h_military.htm