

# “Virtual Installations” Bridge the Gap for Military Families

By Donna Miles,  
American Forces Press Service

A new “virtual installation” concept that helps families who live far from a military base get information and tap into services available for them during their loved ones’ deployment is expected to begin rolling out next month.



Plans are being laid to open several “brick and mortar” pilot sites by April 23, Laura Stultz, wife of Army Reserve Chief Lt. Gen. Jack C. Stultz, told American Forces Press Service.

Focus groups are under way to identify where to put the first three to five sites, he said.

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General Stultz acknowledged that all spouses face hardships when their loved ones deploy — regardless of whether they're active-duty, National Guard or Reserve. But he said his wife reminded him that unlike [most] active-duty families, who can turn to their local post for help if they need it, Army Reserve families often live far from an

Army post and don't know how to tap into available services.

"She said, 'If I am living on an installation, I have Army Community Services, child and youth services, legal support, medical support, the Red Cross. I can go to Army Emergency Relief if I need to get help,'" the general said. He paused, then continued his wife's point: "But if I am in Pocatella, Idaho, who do I turn to?"

As Laura Stultz sees it, the gap is as much cultural as geographic. Active-duty families tend to live on or near a military post, know each other and know where to go for assistance, or at least who to ask how to get it, she said.

Reserve families often don't. A single Reserve unit can draw members from a 10-state area, and families may have had no past exposure to each other or to the Army system overall.



Friends and family members watch as U.S. Navy Sailors man the rails of guided-missile destroyer USS Chafee (DDG 90) prior to pulling out of Naval Station Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, Jan. 30, 2008. Chafee departed Pearl Harbor as part of USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class James E. Foehl) JCCC/SINGH

That quandary led her to come up with the virtual installation concept. As she envisions it, it not only will fill a gap for reserve-component families, but also will benefit the many active-duty families who leave their post for their hometowns during their loved one's deployment.

Each site to open next month under the pilot program will be slightly different; one may be a kiosk in a local shopping mall, another may be an office in an Army Reserve center or National Guard armory.

"We'll try different approaches of going into the community and see what works best," Laura Stultz said.

Military family members will be able to walk into the sites to talk to someone about their questions or needs. A trained staffer - most likely a military or veteran volunteer - will know the answer or be able to pick up a phone or go online to get it.

The general's wife said she envisions people from the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other veterans as well as community groups manning the sites.

"They keep asking what they can do and saying that they want to help, so I am giving them a job to do," she said.

In addition to providing personal service to military families, the brick-and-mortar sites will serve as visible signs of a broader community outreach effort,



U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. James Bell, from Marine Wing Headquarters Squadron 2, greets his family on Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., Jan. 23, 2008, following a 12-month deployment to Iraq. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Alison L. Martinez) JCCC/SINGH

Laura Stultz said. Volunteers who staff them will help make inroads into local businesses, churches and other groups to remind them that members of their community are deployed, and that they and their families need support, she added.

The sites will represent the first step in a two-pronged effort designed to reach out to [military families] who are nowhere near installations and the full range of support services they offer to active-duty families, she said. In addition to physical sites, the new concept calls for a Web-based virtual installation that families can tap into from their computers for information and support. That site is expected to go live later this year.

Once it's operational, users will be able to navigate the streets of a simulated Army base with a click of their computer mouse, stopping wherever they wish, Laura Stultz explained. They'll be able to "stop" at the military identification card

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desk to find out how to replace a lost card, the Tricare office to check on their medical benefits or the family assistance center for other support.

"You'll be able to navigate down the street just like in a video game and get the information you need," she said.

Families also will be able to enter their ZIP codes into the site to find the nearest place to get help or services or to contact the nearest family readiness group.

Stultz cited the "Fort Family" website launched by the 108th



U.S. Navy Ensign Ben Milton, assigned to the guided-missile cruiser USS Vicksburg (CG 69), shows a Jacksonville Beach Elementary School first-grader various equipment in the ship's pilothouse in Naval Station Mayport, Fla., Feb. 26, 2008. The students toured the ship to meet with Sailors and to learn about various shipboard evolutions. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Patrick J. Cook). JCCC/SINGH

Training Command as an example of the virtual installation's potential. That site links families with local military and civilian resources. It also offers a virtual volunteer program for people seeking ways to help local soldiers and families.

The Web initiative and other programs promoting family wellness and readiness earned the unit honors in the Defense Department's 2007 Reserve Family Readiness Award program.

Laura Stultz praised the 108th Training Command for taking the lead in helping make the virtual installation concept a reality.

"It's a wonderful program," she said. "It's a smaller model of what we will take and then add to."

Among additional services she hopes to offer is a chat room for children of deployed troops.

While Stultz never has served in the military herself, she said she's had lots of experience holding down the homefront far from the nearest military post when her soldier-husband deployed.

She recalled his deployments to the Persian Gulf and the Balkans in the 1990s, when she had four young children at home and couldn't make the two-hour drive to a family



A U.S. Marine from Marine Wing Headquarters Squadron 2 greets his family on Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., Jan. 23, 2008, following a 12-month deployment to Iraq. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Alison L. Martinez).

readiness group meeting for help and support.

"So I know what it's like to be out there and not know where to turn," she said. "I understand."

Laura Stultz said she feels a personal responsibility to make things smoother for other [military] spouses who keep the home fires burning during deployments.

"Their soldiers are putting their lives on the line just like everyone else, so they deserve and need the same help and resources available for active-component families," she said.

General Stultz called the virtual installation an important step toward taking better care of [military] families. ●