Building a Resilient Army COMMUNITY

Story and photos by Cindy Ramirez

Spc. Alejandro Seguritan, 23, left, who was injured and burned during combat in Iraq in May 2009, talks with Spc. Fredy Guzman, 20, who is battling an autoimmune disease, in the kitchen area of the Warrior Family Support Center at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

Resiliency — the ability to bounce back from adversity — is not just important to keep Soldiers healthy and strong. It's a personal strength needed among families, health care workers, civilians and others who support those Soldiers to build and maintain a strong Army community.

Armywide, installations are working to provide resiliency training, programs and centers aimed at maintaining holistic health and strength — body, mind and spirit.

This is especially important when suicide and divorce rates among those in the military are at an all-time high, children are seeing their parents deploy more often and for longer periods of time, and health care workers are providing services to an increasing number of patients, Army officials said.

In fact, though strictly voluntary, the Army is working to encourage families to become involved in resiliency programs. To this end, the Army has recently launched several actions to help improve behavioral health among families in communities.

- Army Family Readiness Groups and spouses are being provided with suicide prevention training.
- TRICARE Assistance Program offers online behavioral health resources to service members and their families.
- Army leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the Army Family Covenant first signed in 2007, which promises to take care of not only Soldiers, but also their families. Army News Service reported the service's investment in family programs and facilities has doubled to $1.5 billion over the past two years, with funding creating 36 Warrior Transition Units and 72 child development center construction projects, increasing access to health care and establishing the Army Spouse Employment Program.

Other programs, such as Battlemind for Spouses, were created to help improve families' mental well-being by providing them skills to cope with pre- and post-deployment issues. Strong Bonds, a chaplain-led program, helps build resiliency by strengthening the family through offsite retreats where single Soldiers, couples and families learn to maintain strong relationships.

The Families Overcoming Under Stress, or FOCUS, program aims to help highly stressed children and families cope with the challenges of multiple deployments by providing them with resiliency training. Recently established at Fort Lewis, Wash., FOCUS has been in operation at several installations nationwide and is among the hundreds of suicide prevention and resiliency programs being assessed for their effectiveness.

While preventing suicides is one of the goals of resiliency programs, "behavioral health is the overall objective," said Brig.

Gen. Richard W. Thomas, Office of the Surgeon General, speaking about Comprehensive Soldier Fitness during the 2010 Nominative Sergeants Major and Senior Enlisted Advisors Conference.

"CSF prepares, sustains and enriches the force, from its Soldiers to its families to its providers," he said.

CSF focuses on five dimensions of health: emotional, social, spiritual, family and physical.

Finding Solace

Among the most notable programs that are garnering attention for addressing these dimensions of health are the Warrior and Family Support Center at Fort Sam Houston and the Fort Hood Resiliency Campus, both in Texas. The programs offer communities a place find solace and support to help them find their inner strength, directors said.

The Resiliency Campus mirrors the CSF goals, and has been an instrumental component of Fort Hood's Behavioral Health Campaign, said campus Commander Col. William Rabena.

"The campus developed from the need to take better care of Soldiers and their families at all times, not just following deployments," Rabena said. "With the establishment of the Behavioral Health Campaign, it's become increasingly important."

Above: A technology lab at the Warrior Family Support Center offers computer courses to Soldiers and families.

Right: Master Sgt. Darin Schartner walks through a tranquility pond at the center, which will soon include a putting green.

A Home Away From Home

The Warrior and Family Support Center first opened as a 1,200-square-foot office at Fort Sam Houston in 2003. Through $5.6 million in community donations, the center was expanded to 12,000 square feet in December 2008 and features a family room with a big-screen TV, a video gaming room, a computer lab, kitchen and dining area and an outdoor patio and garden. Information and referral services are also offered at the center.

"It's a great place to come and get out of the barracks, to feel like you're still living your life," said Spc. Alejandro Seguritan, who is being treated at Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam Houston for major burns he received in Iraq in May 2009.

The center primarily serves Soldiers who are being treated at BAMC, allowing family members to be involved in their rehabilitation by providing them a "home away from home," said Judith Markelz, the WFSC program manager.

"These families didn't ask to come here," Markelz said. "They're scared and they're frightened and they need every bit of help they can get."

Sandra March, whose husband, Staff Sgt. Jason March suffers from traumatic brain injury after being hurt in Iraq in 2006, said going to the center "is like coming home. Everybody greets you. Everybody knows your name."

The staff sergeant, who retired in July 2009, was a patient at BAMC for three years and is now in a vocational rehabilitation program in San Antonio. March said she and her husband considered the center a "safe place" where they could relax and relate with other wounded warriors and their families. She now "pays it forward," she said, helping teach a mosaic tile art class.

"It's always nice to go back there and get a mental check that there's still people behind us who need this service," she said.

Spc. Fredy Guzman, 20, who is being treated at BAMC for an autoimmune disease, said he's touched to learn the WFSC is supported by donations.

"Absolutely, it's quite a gift," Guzman said.

The center has 100 volunteers — and a waiting list of 40 more — who teach computer, art and other quality-of-life courses and offer a Soldiers and their families a shoulder to lean on.

"This has definitely humbled me," said Master Sgt. Darin Schartner, one of only nine paid staffers. "It's not just about a nice building. The warriors themselves — no matter if they're an amputee, or sick or a burn victim — are the ones who inspire us. They come in here unsure of why they're here, but in short time you see their spirits lifted, and there's no greater feeling."

Tranquility Room at BAMC to help fight compassion fatigue

Health care providers often need to have their spirits lifted. Referred to as "compassion fatigue," secondary traumatic stress disorder is common among health providers.

In 2006, the Army mandated that all medical commands assess the level of secondary trauma among their staff and provide training to increase their resiliency.

Last spring, the U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research at Fort Sam Houston's Brooke Army Medical Center opened its Tranquility Room, a relaxing getaway for caregivers.

Intended to help caregivers reduce stress and fatigue, the room is part of the Provider Resiliency Program at the installation's Army Medical Department Center and School.

Equipped with a massage chair, the room incorporates lighting, sound and movement to create a tranquil atmosphere through aromatherapy, music and a waterfall.

"The outcome of taking care of the caregiver is to decrease compassion fatigue and burnout, while increasing compassion satisfaction," said Col. Kathryn Gaylord, director of the Provider Resiliency Program, in a recent press release. "Research has demonstrated that providing a better work environment will increase retention, decrease burnout and increase patient care and satisfaction. The long-term goal is better patient outcomes."

To contact Cindy Ramirez, e-mail cindy.ramirez1@us.army.mil.