

# It's all about family

## Strong family readiness groups seen as key to unit morale

Spc. Matthew MacRoberts

A strong family readiness group (FRG) may be as important to unit readiness as proper training, according to subject matter experts.

"A family readiness group can make or break the morale of a unit," said Shirley West, advisor to the Ultima FRG at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas. "A bad one can tear apart a unit.

"Having a strong FRG is an important part of a unit's well-being. Knowing their families know where resources are, what the unit's mission is and that they have someone to turn to in a time of need gives the soldiers great piece of mind during deployments. It allows them to focus on the mission instead of worrying about their families," said West.

So, what does it take to build a successful FRG? Holly Gifford, the Deployment Readiness manager for Army Community Service (ACS) at the Army Community and Family Support Center, Alexandria, Va., offers some ideas. First, the commander is responsible for ensuring his or her unit has an operating FRG, Gifford explained. Research indicates families fare better in units that have effective FRGs in place prior to deployment.

In many cases, commanders appoint soldiers to serve as the family readiness liaison from the unit to communicate between the commander and the FRG leader. In addition to acting as an information conduit, the liaison can assist the FRG leader in finding volunteers.

"A commander wants to make sure that his soldiers and families get the information they need and that families' needs are being met by the command," said Leona Ferrell, director of the Family Readiness Center at Fort Campbell, Ky.

The commander or his liaison starts building his group by filling the three key positions: the FRG leader, a newsletter editor and a phone-tree contact person, according to Gifford.

"An FRG leader has to be something you feel. It isn't for everybody. Your heart has to be in it or it is just simply something you could never pull off. It requires selflessness, hard work, commitment and a superhuman understanding of the different types of people and individual needs within a group," said Ferrell, who advises FRG representatives from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault), one of the most deployed commands in the U.S. Army.

An FRG leader has to have a strong personality in order to help people accept news like deployment, extensions of deployment or cancellations of scheduled redeployments. "People expect you to listen and have the magic words to make their pain go away. It's hard to help others when you feel you need help yourself," Ferrell explained.

"It should be someone who is tough enough to not be intimidated by the "green-suit" side of the house but is soft enough to also deal with the family-member side," said Ferrell.

West elaborated on the FRG leader's duties. "A leader should be a delegator," she said. "They should not be the doer

for the whole battalion or brigade. Their role is to supervise and oversee. They cannot be the do all, be all."

A commander should appoint an FRG leader in writing and evaluate that leader every six months.

When selecting volunteers to fill the FRG's leadership positions, the commander should choose the person best qualified for the job rather than based on the rank of their spouse, according to West. Many lower ranking soldiers' spouses are especially good leaders and should be appointed to positions based on their abilities.

Ferrell concurred with West. "Volunteers are too hard to come by to toss them aside for something as menial as how high their soldier ranks," she said.

Even so, that's not to say that senior leaders' spouses don't have a role in the FRG. Senior spouses can fill a vital role by



Photo by Sharon T. Bass

*A soldier of the 3rd Infantry Division's Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, Division Artillery, redeployed from Iraqi Freedom to Fort Stewart gets a warm welcome from his wife and daughter.*

acting as advisors, giving the younger, less-experienced spouses an opportunity to grow and gain experience in leadership roles.

No commander expects a spouse to know everything he or she will need to lead an FRG. Those appointed to key positions may seek guidance on the basics of FRG management at their local ACS. ACS also hosts Army Family Team Building courses that are taught by experienced FRG volunteers. ACS can also offer new leaders the *Operation Ready FRG Leaders Handbook* on CD. The handbook is an invaluable resource for those learning the FRG ropes, according to Gifford.

When building the FRG structure, keep in mind that FRGs are not limited to just spouses, Ferrell pointed out.

“The regulation allows ‘anyone who has a valid interest in the military as a whole’ to participate in the FRG,” Ferrell said. Even local businesses have formed FRGs to help military families, Ferrell said.

But FRGs don’t have to be built from the ground up. Department of the Army Pamphlet 608-47, *Guide to Establishing Family Support Groups*, recommends checking with other local unit FRG leaders, who may have similar requisites and can offer advice based on what works and doesn’t work for them.

No matter what special considerations an FRG might have, the one constant among all successful FRGs is open communications.

“As long as the information is correct it’s very important to communicate,” said West. Everyone must receive the information in the FRG and no one must feel left out.

“The FRG newsletter is a major form of communication between the command and FRG leadership,” said Gifford. This is especially important for Reserve and National Guard units in which most of the spouses are geographically spread out, and where even the soldiers only see each other one weekend a month.

Newsletters are one of the most effective ways to ensure that all family members get the most accurate information. In fact, many FRGs are now minimizing printing and distribution costs by sending their newsletters via e-mail.

However, the units don’t expect FRG volunteers to furnish a home office. In fact, the Army Research Institute that offers guidance for FRG leaders states on their Web site that FRGs will have access to Army facilities such as chapels, dayrooms, dining facilities and theaters. FRGs may also use Army-issued or leased copy machines, file cabinets, desks and chairs, according to the Web site (<http://www.ari.army.mil/frg/>).

Debbie Thelen, the Fort McCoy (Wisconsin) NCO Academy FRG leader, headed up a project to convert a barracks into an

FRG office. Their facilities include three children’s playrooms, along with offices and meeting rooms.

“A lot can be done if you persevere,” Thelen said. “If you have an idea, run with it. As long as you have the family in mind, it will be successful.”

“I believe if we have enough functions and – most of all – fun, we’ll help to keep the families’ morale and overall well being positive,” she said.

And, happy, well-prepared families usually leads to happy well-prepared soldiers, according to Ferrell.

*(Editor’s Note: Spc. Matthew MacRoberts is a journalist assigned to the Fort Bliss (Texas) Public Affairs Office.)*

## Operation READY assists Army families with deployment challenges

By Jamie Danesi

Recent media attention has been focused on the military family and what kind of support family members are receiving from the armed services.

Preparing soldiers and families for deployment — and supporting families during the deployment and subsequent reunions — is an ongoing priority for the Army. Operation READY is the tool the Army uses to meet that mission.

Operation READY, or “Resources About Deployment and You,” is a training and information resource which was developed after the Persian Gulf War from lessons learned in deployment, according to the Army Community Service Web site. The program covers all phases of the deployment and is available to all soldiers and families.

The training materials include videos, handbooks and checklists and cover such topics as coping with separation, financial planning, reunion stress, resources for Army Reserve and National Guard families, setting up and running a Family Assistance Center and FRGs.

For younger family members, Operation READY has activity books for children ages 3 through the teens to help them manage the stress of a parent’s deployment. There is also a guide for the returning soldier with suggestions on ways to help the children have a more positive reaction to his or her return.

Materials are available through installation Army Community Service centers. Reserve Component soldiers and their families can access the materials through their Army Reserve Family Readiness Program staff or state Family Program coordinators.

Family members who may not have access to an installation, can access Operation READY materials online at the ACS Web site, <http://www.goacs.org>.

*(Editor’s Note: Jamie Danesi writes for the Forces Command News Service)*

**Nine steps to starting an FRG**

To start a FRG, the Army Research Institute (ARI) Web site, <http://www.ari.army.mil/frg1/index.asp>, lists nine steps in its *Family Readiness Group Leader’s Online Handbook* to help get a FRG off the ground.

1. Become a leader
2. Get command support
3. Find volunteers
4. Establish the structure
5. Raise money
6. Set up accounting systems
7. Find appropriate facilities
8. Arrange transportation
9. Print and disseminate information

ARI lists FRG leaders as being considered federal employees with respect to:

- On-the-job injuries
- Care of unit equipment
- Standards of conduct

FRG leaders are required to report violations of the law that they observe or hear about to the commander.