



Army Strong Community Centers: Serving Army Families

I want every military family living in small-town America to have the same support as if they were living on an installation.

Laura Stultz¹

Introduction

In the first decade of the 21st century, the Army Reserve has transformed from a strategic to an operational force. Repeated demand for Army Reserve support has caused more than 193,000 Army Reserve Soldiers to deploy—often multiple times—since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. This significant new role has required different approaches to supporting geographically dispersed families to ensure that, along with Soldiers, families are equally prepared for deployment. One of the Army Reserve’s priorities is to “provide Citizen-Soldiers and their Families with the training, support, and recognition to sustain a cohesive, effective fighting force.” As this indicates, Army Reserve leaders have learned the positive effects that a flexible and responsive Soldier and family support structure have on enhancing mission readiness.

Nine years of war have resulted in an incredible strain on both active and reserve component Soldiers and their families, all of whom face hardships when their Soldiers deploy. But unlike active component families who can turn to their local installation for assistance when needed, Army Reserve families often live far from an installation and may not know of the resources and services available to them. **To fill this void, the Army Reserve has opened three Army Strong Community Centers (ASCCs) to assist family members of deployed Soldiers living far from a military installation.**

Background

The primary function of an ASCC is to connect geographically dispersed families with support resources in their own community. The centers support the military community by providing military members, retirees, veterans and their family members with



responsive and relevant programs and services. The ASCC concept was launched in response to feedback from families and studies like the Army’s Geographically Dispersed Task Force study, which set out to answer the question: “How can the Army provide comprehensive and equitable support services to meet the diverse needs of Soldiers and family members regardless of their location or component?”

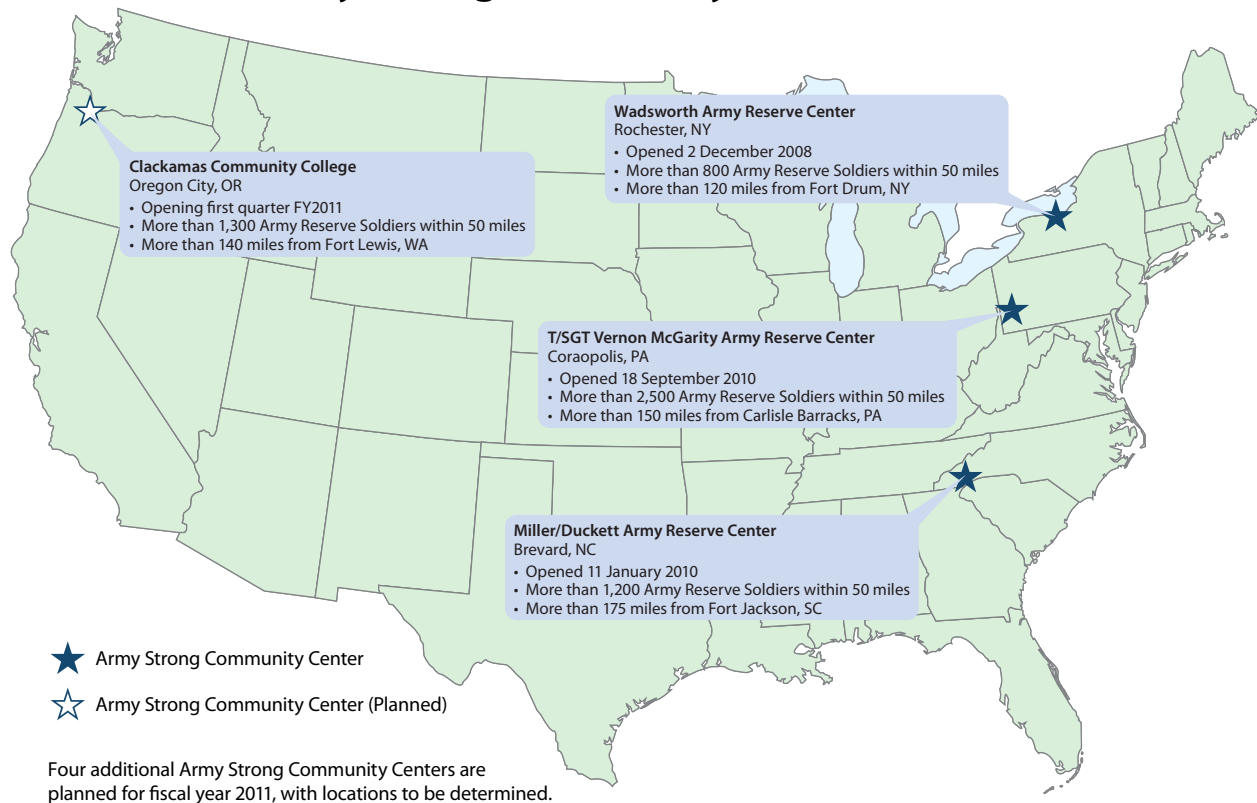
The study, which began in June 2008, was conducted by a task force whose goal was to understand the impact of geographical dispersion on families. According to Dr. Lynn Heirakuji, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Personnel Oversight, “We intuitively understood that geographic dispersion creates challenges, but we did not know the degree [of the challenges] and how the geographic dispersion affected knowledge of, access to and use of services.”² To thoroughly evaluate the situation, the task force:

- examined previous studies to gather lessons learned;
- conducted site visits at 68 locations;
- assessed Soldier and family member perceptions of awareness, accessibility and use of 32

¹ Wife of LTG Jack C. Stultz, Jr., Chief, Army Reserve/Commanding General, United States Army Reserve Command.

² Stated at AUSA Family Forum I at AUSA’s Annual Meeting on 5 October 2009, <http://www.army.mil/-news/2009/10/07/28460-out-of-sight-but-not-forgotten-study-looks-at-geographically-dispersed-soldiers-families/>.

Army Strong Community Center Locations



services (including health and medical services; child, youth and school services; family readiness groups; family assistance centers; financial and legal assistance; reintegration activities; and employment assistance);

- collected information and feedback from more than 6,000 Soldiers and family members;
- engaged all Army components and maintained ongoing involvement of key stakeholders; and
- convened two strategic working groups with key stakeholders in February and August 2009.

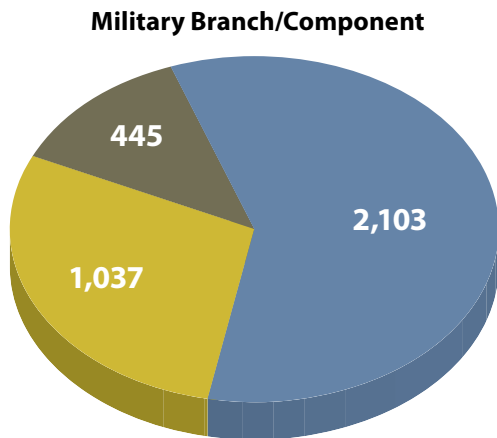
Based on the information gathered, the study confirmed that the Army offers a wide range of quality and mutually-reinforcing services, and identified Soldier and family member awareness of and ability to access services as a crucial factor. The study concluded that the majority of family members garnered only minimal assistance through online and automated systems that were often overwhelming and vague to information seekers. The majority of participants in the study therefore preferred to discuss personal information on a one-on-one, confidential and personally-targeted basis. These findings indicated that the Army must provide an adequate structure and delivery mechanisms for information about available resources.

Army Strong Community Centers

On 2 December 2008 a pilot ASCC opened in Rochester, New York at the Wadsworth Army Reserve Center. This location was selected for the pilot program because of the significant number of Army Reserve Soldiers and families living in the area, the community's history of support for military members and their families and its distance from the nearest military installation (Fort Drum, New York, is more than 120 miles away). Its mission was to enhance readiness, retention and quality of life by providing members, retirees, veterans and family members from all branches and components of the U.S. military with support from trained, qualified, skilled staff members.

From assisting family members on topics ranging from new military identification cards and TRICARE to coping with the loss of a loved one in combat, the Rochester ASCC has proven to be a valuable asset. During its first full fiscal year in operation (FY 2010), the center's staff responded to more than 3,500 requests for assistance and also fielded 764 referrals from community partners such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Red Cross. In addition, ASCC Rochester has developed partnerships with 314 businesses and schools and local, state and federal government agencies that are prepared to provide services and support to military personnel and their families.

Clients Served by Army Strong Community Center – Rochester¹

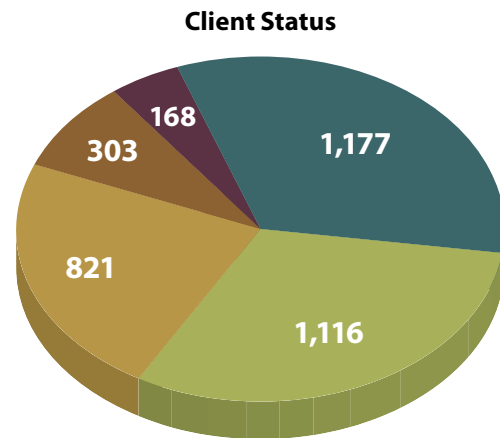


Army Reserve 2,103 (59%)
 Army 1,037 (29%)
 Other² 445 (12%)

Clients served 3,585

¹ Numbers are from fiscal year 2010

² Navy, Air Force, National Guard, Marine Corps and Coast Guard



Servicemembers, Reserve 1,177 (33%)
 Family Members 1,116 (31%)
 Servicemembers, Active Duty 821 (23%)
 Retirees 303 (8%)
 Veterans 168 (5%)

Clients served 3,585

Capt. Arthur J. Arieno: I am a better Soldier because of the support my family receives

ROCHESTER, N.Y. — Capt. Arthur J. Arieno was reluctant to follow his commander’s suggestion to visit the Army Strong Community Center here. It was just two days before he was to deploy, and he was making an appointment for him and his wife, Mayra, to meet with Marianne Sernoffsky, one of the center’s staff members.

Arieno, who deployed to Iraq as a medical advisor with the 7207th Medical Detachment, Webster, N.Y., said his doubts were quickly dispelled by Sernoffsky’s understanding of his concerns about leaving his wife and three children alone.

“She made my wife aware of military-sponsored kids’ camps, baseball games, and other family events,” Arieno said.

Mayra Arieno said at first she had trouble finding someone who could relate to the challenges she was facing. “Marianne is a military spouse: It’s good to know that I’m talking to someone who’s been through what I’m going through,” she said.

The Courageous Children’s Summer Camp is just one example of the programs the Arieno family learned about through the center, and it’s just one result of the partnerships with the community that center staff members have formed.

The ASCC worked with Monroe Community College in Rochester to organize a camp for children of deployed or recently deployed military members. “It gave children an idea of what their parents were going through,” said Sernoffsky.

Mayra Arieno agreed. “My kids loved it!” she said. “They had a military person come in every day to talk about what their dad might do in the military, a psychologist there for group activities, and they got to make dog tags.”

For Capt. Arieno, knowing his family was in good hands made it easier to focus on his mission. “Nothing makes a Soldier happier than knowing his or her family is being taken care of when they can’t do it themselves,” he said. “I’ve always felt my deployment is my family’s deployment. It is harder on them than it is on me. I am a better Soldier because of the support my family receives.”



ASCC Rochester Top Client Topics

- TRICARE health insurance
- Child and youth programs/services
- Post-9/11 GI Bill/GI Education
- Retirement
- Legal issues
- Donations from businesses and organizations
- United Concordia dental insurance
- DEERS/ID card
- Discounts and/or memberships
- Use of center computers
- Employment assistance/resume
- Veterans Affairs benefits/pay

Tracie Chappell: A place to turn to

ROCHESTER, N.Y. — Tracie Chappell's introduction to life as an Army spouse was abrupt and isolating.

For the 24-year-old newlywed, a honeymoon seemed as far away as her husband would be as he boarded a plane bound for Korea. She left the Rochester, N.Y., airport with a tear-streaked face and more questions than answers.

"I had no military background, so originally I was scared," Tracie said. She was hours from the nearest military installation and had no idea where to go for an ID card or how to begin the command sponsorship process to join her husband in Korea.

Not knowing where else to turn, Chappell went to a local military recruiting office. Fortunately for her, the Army recruiter she visited sent her to the Wadsworth Army Reserve Center where she discovered the Army Strong Community Center.

ASCC Rochester staffers took care of Chappell's immediate needs with a military identification card and a detailed explanation of military health insurance benefits. During the weeks that followed, they worked to gain sponsorship from her husband's command that allowed her and her son to join him in Korea.

Chappell was so impressed with the center that she wound up as a volunteer helping other military spouses.



As predicted by Army Reserve leaders, the center filled a gap for active-duty families who leave their installations and return to their hometowns during their Soldier's deployment. At the same time, the Rochester pilot demonstrated that the centers can also help the services stay in touch with and provide better support for Gold Star Families—those who have lost loved ones in combat.

The success of the Rochester ASCC led the Army Reserve to open two additional centers in Brevard, North Carolina, and Coraopolis, Pennsylvania, in 2010. Both centers took immediate action to demonstrate support for military families in the area, such as assisting family members with travel to meet Soldiers returning home.

The Way Ahead

The positive, tangible results rendered by the first three ASCCs have demonstrated the need for such facilities. Currently, Army Reserve plans for fiscal year 2011 include five additional centers in a variety of locations and venues, with the aim of learning what best serves military members and their families. The centers support the Army Reserve's strategic initiative to sustain its force and acknowledge the Army Community Covenant, which recognizes that a Soldier's strength stems from the strength of the family. Army Reserve leaders also believe that ASCCs have large implications for all branches of the military in terms of readiness, retention and recruiting, primarily because a Soldier's decision to reenlist often depends on the support available to family members during the servicemember's deployment. Expanding to a total of eight ASCCs is one more step along the path to ensuring that every military family throughout the nation has support comparable to that which they would receive while living on a military installation. Continued support from Congress and the Department of Defense is critical to the future of this initiative during war and for years after hostilities cease.