

Fort Polk FMWR

TAKING ARMY FAMILY COVENANT TO HEART



Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation (FMWR) professionals at Fort Polk, La., have been quite busy since the Army Family Covenant was signed by Army leadership back in 2007. Following the covenant's promise to provide greater support for soldiers and their families, Fort Polk has completed numerous quality-of-life projects, from new child development centers (CDCs) and playgrounds to renovations at the fitness center and bowling center to new equipment, programs and services across the board for soldiers and their families. Fort Polk is a wonderful example of an installation that has taken the Army Family Covenant message to heart, and was recently recognized by the Army with an award for Excellence in Marketing of the Army Family Covenant in 2010.

"Our intent from the beginning has been to let the community know what FMWR is doing for the families and the soldiers," notes Fort Polk FMWR Director Loretta L. Nale. "So we did posters in all of our different facilities, and we made sure that they were unique to Fort Polk. We had a commu-

nity family corner that we did to reach out to families, and we had articles written on the covenant focusing on what was available to families and soldiers here at Fort Polk. These are just some of the many things we did here as a community to follow through on our commitment to soldiers and their families."

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Nale points out that the Army Family Covenant is “all-encompassing,” and Fort Polk tries to incorporate every element of FMWR into its efforts. “That includes Army Community Services, Warrior Transition Units, libraries, outdoor recreation, fitness, child and youth services, business operations — everyone participates in all of these events, which is why we are so successful in getting the Army Family Covenant message out to more of our soldiers and their families. Everyone is on the same page and we all have the same focus.”

Because the installation is located in West Central Louisiana, a rural area that is 50 miles to the nearest restaurant, the importance of not only having quality FMWR programs and facilities, but also getting the word out is vitally important.

“We were just recognized this past year as being remote and isolated, so our challenges are even greater than a normal installation because there are very

limited assets outside the gate,” says Nale. “So we have to offer enough FMWR opportunities for our families and soldiers in order to provide them the quality of life that they deserve.”

One important resource that Fort Polk used to find out what soldiers and their families want and need most is the Leisure Needs Survey. “We try to tie in what we found in the survey with what we can provide,” notes Nale. “We are also very involved in the Army Family Action Plan (AFAP) process. So we use a lot of resources to garner what the families are looking for.”

She says that all of this would not be possible without the great support from Army leadership, especially Installation Management Command (IMCOM) Southeast Region Director Dave S. Tindoll, Jr., SES, and Southeast Region MWR Chief Richard Combs.

“The Southeast region is very supportive, as is our commanding general Brig. Gen. James C. Yarbrough, USA, and our current Garrison Commander Col. Francis B. Burns, USA,” adds Nale. “They are very supportive and always looking to the next thing that we can do.”

IMPROVEMENTS AND UPGRADES

In addition to new programs and support services for not only soldiers but their family members, there has been a lot of new construction and renovations at numerous facilities at Fort Polk. With new CDCs and playgrounds, a new Soldier Family Assistance Center building and improvements at many locations all over Fort Polk, including the bowling center, Wheelock Fitness Center, golf course, library and the Toledo Bend and Alligator Lake Recreation Areas, the Army is making a comprehensive effort to improve the quality of life for all at Fort Polk. In addition to all of the completed projects, there are many more projects on the books for FY2011, including a new splash park, mini-golf course and go-cart track.

The addition of three new CDCs at key locations at Fort Polk has been a big plus for families living on the large

installation.

“We got three new childcare facilities, and we intentionally located one of the facilities near the Wheelock Fitness Center,” Nale points out. “We have expanded hours so that the families can use that childcare facility, which shares a parking lot with the Wheelock Fitness Center. And that was a conscious effort that we take care of our families and their physical well-being.”

The new CDCs each have their own playground, and the base also recently added a boundless playground, which features new playground equipment from Playworld Systems, Inc., purchased through Planet Recess. The boundless, fully accessible playground allows children and parents of all abilities, even those in wheelchairs, to move around and enjoy the playground. It also has rubberized mats for safety and a huge fall zone.

“We were funded for that at the end of the fiscal year a few years ago, and it is phenomenal,” notes Nale. “It features the LSU colors and is over by the Louisiana Park, which is a beautiful area. It is great because the intent is for children, and for soldiers with disabilities, to be able to play together.”

An outdoor fitness area and playground was also added at the Siegfried Youth Center. The playground and fitness equipment was purchased from Miracle Recreation Equipment Company and is



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used by the middle school and teens.

In addition to the boundless playground and three new CDCs, a new CDC has been approved for the North Fort area, where there are a lot of families and a big need. A new School Age Services building will also be placed in the North Fort area.

Another big family support project that is set to be completed by this summer is a new splash park, which will feature splash park equipment from Rain Drop Products. Located near the new boundless playground, the splash park will be another great attraction for family fun.

"The splash park is also close to the CDCs and the library, and when we made that decision, we put it in an area where we thought it would benefit children who can't get there because their parents work," Nale explains. "Three of the CDCs are within walking distance of the boundless playground and the splash park."

The Wheelock Fitness Center has also benefited greatly from improvements, which included the addition of an indoor track, a lot of new fitness equipment and expanded aerobics and fitness programs. "Our intent is to make it family and soldier friendly," says Nale. "The indoor track is great and we have parents who take the strollers on the track, as well as take advantage of expanded programs that are open to families and spouses of those deployed."

Wheelock features fitness equipment from Life Fitness, Hammer Strength, Precor, Body Masters and Nautilus.

Wheelock has also begun work on some additional renovations. The \$4.4 million energy-efficiency project will include the redoing of all of HVAC and the electric lighting to make it energy efficient, as well as the addition of new showers and bathrooms. The project is being completed during a time when many soldiers are deployed.

Fort Polk also opened a new fitness center at North Fort, which features a full fitness center with new equipment and a gymnasium. Recreation centers are also available and provide free access to the Internet and free WiFi.

"I think that it is important to note that fitness is not only physical fitness, but also emotional and mental fitness, and

we have a lot of programs that support the families," notes Nale. "The childcare piece is really a big part. It is so critical that the families have these releases and places to take their children and know they are going to be safe in a controlled atmosphere."

Fort Polk has some other great plans to create another cluster of family-friendly facilities, including a 20-car go-cart track located by the newly renovated bowling center, which features a new Cosmic Bowling System that has been a big hit with families. Right next to the go-cart track will be a 27-hole miniature golf course. Both projects are funded and should be completed by the end of FY2011. The bowling center is located in the footprint of the barracks and has free WiFi, which is very popular.

Outdoor Recreation has received a boost as well, at both the Alligator Lake and Toledo Bend Recreation sites. Both sites added a new RV Park, and Toledo Bend has some yurts from Pacific Yurts, and three new cabins from Athens Park Homes.

There has been a big push to provide more inclusive recreation, and Fort Polk added a new handicapped-accessible fishing dock and boat dock, which were installed by Cherokee Floating Docks and Water Ventures. New equipment includes motorized kayaks from Makai, Inc., handicapped-accessible golf carts from Solo Rider, as well as handicapped accessible fitness equipment at Wheelock. There are a number of different boats, kayaks and other water sports equipment that can be rented out for use.



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The pool has a lift as well and is used by the hospital for physical therapy. The base has a bubble that is placed over the pool during the winter for year-round use.

PROGRAMMING BOOST

In addition to all of the new facilities and renovations, FMWR has added some new programs and expanded on or improved existing ones. For example, the new paintball program has been a big hit since it was introduced last year.

“We have a shooting range where we

have skeet and trap, rifle and archery ranges and we now have paintball at the same location,” notes Nale. “It is used a lot by our Warrior Adventure Quest (WAQ) program and has been successful.”

The installation also added a portable rock climbing wall and mountain bikes to bolster what is available for the WAQ program, which gives soldiers returning from deployments the adrenaline rush they need through extreme recreation.

FMWR also organizes events such as the Toledo Olympics and an Amaz-

ing Race, both of which feature a lot of outdoor recreation events.

“One thing that we have tried to do is tie the library into several events,” notes Nale. “For the Amazing Race event they had to go to each MWR facility to get a clue, including the library, and they had to do it by the GPS coordinates. Everyone loved that and we had prizes. We also did a multi-event challenge at Alligator Lake.”

FMWR is also working on a trip to the world-renowned Christmas Festival of Lights and Parade at Natchitoches, Louisiana’s oldest town, established in 1714. And the Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers (BOSS) program does a lot of trips, such as SCUBA trips to Florida, skydiving and tickets to events, sports games and concerts. FMWR is even planning a cruise.

“These are the types of things we do, and because we are so remote and isolated FMWR programs are so critical,” says Nale. “Right now we have a lot of our soldiers who are deployed, which is why it is so important that we provide this for our families. It is a comprehensive effort and it can only get better, and we are always striving to improve. This is what the Army Family Covenant is all about: the Army taking care and executing on the promise it made.” **-GRF**