Since the Army Family Covenant was introduced and signed by Army leadership in 2007, incremental increases in funding have resulted in an annual budget of approximately $1.4 billion. In that time funding has been approved for more than 100 new child development centers (CDCs) Army-wide. In addition to the large number of new CDCs and youth centers that have been built already, more than 41,000 military spouses have landed jobs through the Army Spouse Employment Program, and more than 18,000 new or refurbished homes for military families have been provided at 44 U.S. installations through the Residential Communities Initiative since 2007. In addition to new jobs, the covenant has identified the need for more respite care and support for spouses, and the funding of new programs that help families cope with the stresses of having a loved one deployed.

Fort Lewis, Wash., which is in the midst of the joint basing process with McChord AFB, Wash., is a shining example of what the Army Family Covenant can do, from both a funding standpoint and as a grassroots effort at the installation level. As Joint Base Lewis-McChord, the Army is the “supporting” or “lead” service,
and has been working closely with the Air Force over the past few years to try and make the transition and transformation as smooth as possible.

“We have been planning for joint basing for 4-5 years,” explains Bill Harvey, Fort Lewis Director of Family and Morale, Welfare & Recreation (FMWR). “Starting on Feb. 1, 2010, we entered the Installation Operating Capability (IOC) phase of the joint basing process and our Garrison Commander assumed the role as the Joint Base Commander on that date. So, now we are putting our effort into implementing all of the things that we have been planning, and in October we enter Full Operating Capability (FOC).”

MERGING MWR

As a large Army installation, merging MWR programs with McChord AFB is an incredible challenge.

“You would think that with a DoD program it would be the same throughout each service but it’s not,” notes Harvey. “And while there are a lot of things that are similar between the Army and Air Force, there are also a lot of differ-
the Air Force employees who at FOC will convert to Army-employee status,” says Harvey. “As all of these employees are becoming Army, from just a morale factor you want to take care of the people that are going through this stressful transition; so we are trying to minimize any negative impact on anyone.”

BUILDING UP FMWR

Over the past three years Fort Lewis has completed numerous FMWR and quality of life projects, from new CDCs, youth centers, playgrounds and splash parks, to substantial

ences, and that is where we have to focus our attention and time. As we merge these two MWR programs into one we have to focus on the details of where we might be different. The approach that we are taking is that it is not just the Army way of doing things. Our guidance from our joint-base leadership is that we need to find the best way of doing things and try to implement programs that way. The end result for our customer base – whether they are wearing a green or a blue suit – we are trying to make the merger as transparent as possible.”

As the lead service, Army standards and regulations are in place, “but we have a tremendous amount of flexibility as we work on merging our two MWR programs,” notes Harvey. “The Air Force may be doing something better than we do in a particular program area, so we are looking at those things, and we are trying to pick the best way of doing it so we end up with a quality program in the end.

“Joint base leadership has taken the approach and we have in MWR as well – there are no people losing jobs as a result of this merger,” he continues. “That is the position going in. We are not closing any facilities on the McChord side of the base. Over time, years down the road, we will see how things are going and evaluate where we are with each program. Just getting the programs and facilities merged into one is what we need to focus on now. Once we get beyond that, we can look at economies of scale in certain program areas, if needed.”

Harvey points out that one of the potential benefits of the merger is in the programming area. “For example, in outdoor recreation, McChord AFB has a program person and that person will meld into the outdoor recreation program staff that we already have and we will have a bigger and better program as a result,” he points out. “So, it is not just merging the two programs and getting the same end result. By adding the two together I think we are going to see a lot of improvements in the program areas.”

Fort Lewis looked at lessons learned from some other phase-one bases to see how they worked through certain issues and got from point A to B. “Our whole focus on doing this is not to have a negative impact on any of
improvements and renovations to fitness centers, outdoor sports fields, outdoor recreation facilities, pools, the bowling center and more.

“A large part of the driving force behind all of these projects is the Army Family Covenant,” notes Harvey. “All of the additional services and benefits that the Army is providing to families — direct funding kinds of things. For example, 16 hours of respite child care when a servicemember deploys; the respite care for exceptional family members; the additional staffing we got in community services to expand support to families – all of those programs are funded by the Army down to the installation level.”

Harvey points out that Fort Lewis has received approximately $25 million in funding to complete many important FMWR facility improvement projects.

“We also had the bowling center project, which was a $4-million NAF-funded project,” notes Harvey. “We also have used our own local capital-purchase, minor-construction NAF funding to do a lot of other smaller but significant projects, so when you add all of that up we have done between $30-$35 million in improvement projects over the past three years.”

He notes that the Army Family Covenant is not just about increased funding, but about taking a new approach.

“Our garrison commander at the time of the signing of the covenant in 2007 was Col. Cindy Murphy, USA, who was a great family program supporter, and really took to heart the Army family covenant pledge of changing things locally. She is the one who approved a lot of this Sustainment, Restoration and Modernization (SRM) funding for a lot of the projects that we were able to complete. The current Joint-Base commander Col. Tommy Brittain, USA, has continued the same level of support since he arrived in July 2009.”

In the area of fitness, a lot has been done to pump up fitness centers, from approximately $2 million in new fitness equipment (bulk buy-program funded fitness equipment, plus non-bulk buy items purchased using local funds) to fitness center upgrades and renovations at McVeigh fitness center ($3 million) and Soldier’s Field House ($1.7 million). Fort Lewis did a complete renovation of McVeigh, transforming an underused indoor tennis facility into a expansive fitness-equipment area with cardio, strength and free weight areas. In addition, three racquetball courts were converted into a more functional-fitness workout space, which supports the Army’s effort to
improved sport fields at Soldier’s Field House, and redid the 40-meter track at Cowan stadium.

In the area of recreation, the Nelson Recreation Center is in the final stage of $3.4-million SRM renovation project, which includes rewiring and electrical upgrades to turn the facility into a high-tech Army recreation center.

“We’ve done a lot of high-tech activities in our recreation centers and we’ve gotten a great response from soldiers in our Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers (BOSS) program,” notes Harvey. “Internet gaming, computers, video game systems, large screen TV areas – this is the Hi-tech stuff the single soldiers want.”

Fort Lewis also put a lot of money into improving facilities at American Lake, where it has a marina, a Northwest Adventure Center for equipment rental, a travel camp, RV storage, a beach and more. Outdoor recreation added some new slips to the marina, added three new cabins, as well as an additional 100-space RV storage lot, which has already been maxed out on capacity, notes Harvey.

In the area of outdoor adventure trips, Fort Lewis runs an extensive program, with close to 50 trips and outings planned just in March and April alone, from kayaking and fishing to whitewater rafting and bungee jumping. Fort Lewis was also one of the pilot sites for the Army’s Warrior Adventure Quest (WAQ) program, which provides high-adrenaline activities for soldiers returning from deployment.

“One of our biggest challenges in the Army right now and integrate more combat-specific or functional workouts into its traditional facilities.

As part of the family health and fitness concept at Fort Lewis, Jensen Gym converted two basketball courts into a parent workout area complete with childcare.

“Parents, such as spouses of deployed soldiers, can come and workout with free childcare,” notes Harvey. “It has worked out really well.”

In addition to the fitness center upgrades at Fort Lewis, the Yakima Training Center, where the majority of the large unit training occurs, received an upgrade and expansion to its fitness center.

State-of-the-art fitness equipment was distributed throughout all fitness centers, including the latest and greatest from Life Fitness, Precor, Hammer Strength, Ivanko, Concept2, Power Systems, Rogue, LeMond and Schwinn.

Fort Lewis also completely renovated Memorial Stadium, improved sport fields at Soldier’s Field House, and redid the 40-meter track at Cowan stadium.

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“One of our biggest challenges in the Army right now and
here at this installations is we have over 17,000 soldiers deployed and most of them are coming back this summer between May and September timeframe,” says Harvey. “This will be a big challenge for our programs, our family and child and youth programs, as well as our outdoor recreation program in support of WAQ.

Because Fort Lewis has a large wounded warrior battalion, support for wounded warriors is a big priority, and FMWR staff works with the battalion to help with any additional programming or facility needs. There is also a recreation person who works as part of the wounded warrior battalion staff.

CONSTRUCTION CONTINUES

One area that continues to be a focus for the Army is childcare, and Fort Lewis has completed about 10 childcare projects in the last few years, including a 60-capacity child care facility for wounded warrior support. Also in the works is a $20-million project to renovate the big three main CDCs on post. A $2.5 million ballfield construction project for CYS is also in the works.

In addition to all of the new child care spaces, there have been numerous improvements to the post’s three indoor pools, as well as the addition of a new splash park, which just opened in May. Provider of equipment for splash park equipment was Nirbo Aquatic inc. and it was installed by NW Recreation/Oregon playgrounds.

“We also got some funding from our qualified recycling program to extend this park-like area around the spray park and playgrounds and connect it to some existing things that we did last year with memorial stadium upgrades,” notes Harvey. “So, we are creating this greenbelt strip between some of our different facilities on the installation.”

Some other future projects include a new Warrior Zone “hi-tech” Recreation Center, improvements to the golf course entrance, a lodge renovation, some additions to Russell Landing at the Marina and a $3-million American Lake community center upgrade.