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Army Family Action Plan delegates discuss family concerns at Europe conference

U.S. Army Installation Management Command-Europe Public Affairs Office

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- Fifty-eight delegates from garrisons in Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Germany met at the 2009 Army Europe Army Family Action Plan Conference earlier this month to tackle problems that impact U.S. military communities throughout Europe.

Of 85 issues discussed during the weeklong event in nearby Weinheim, Germany, 14 were forwarded to a steering committee scheduled to brief Gen. Carter Ham, commander of U.S. Army Europe, on July 17. Ham will then approve issues to be sent to the Army-level AFAP General Officer Steering Committee for final review and possible implementation Armywide.

Conference participants -- who are at the heart of a process that pinpoints problems and proposes solutions -- included a mix of active-duty Soldiers, Family members, civilian employees and retirees who have participated in AFAP programs at their home garrisons.

“They are the ones at the forefront of ensuring Soldiers and families obtain and keep the standards of living they have earned by sacrificing so much,” said Bonnie Thomas, conference coordinator and a community life specialist with Installation Management Command-Europe.

During the conference, delegates split into five work groups, focusing on health care; force support; community and family support; employment; and consumer services.

Ham addressed the delegates before the work groups got down to business.

“Your challenge is to prioritize issues ... from all Army communities in Europe, and developing recommendations for their solutions,” the general said. “I ask you to be thoughtful, deliberate and resourceful in making your collective decisions.”

Each issue examined at the conference arrived via a garrison AFAP program and an installation commander’s steering committee. Under the AFAP concept, any problem not

resolved locally -- depending on its scope -- could be forwarded to an overseeing major command for further assessment.

The number of issues discussed at the installation level ranges from a handful to several hundred. For example, community members at U.S. Army Garrison Stuttgart submitted 260 quality-of-life topics for its AFAP conference this year.

“It’s really a grassroots effort to (make) changes,” said Felice Procaccio, a Stuttgart civilian employee and AFAP delegate.

Whether at the installation or region level, when concerns are reviewed, conference delegates are supported by subject-matter experts and issue managers such as Sherry Davenport of USAG Wiesbaden.

“We are here to bring reality and experience,” said Davenport, an 11-year veteran of AFAP. “We ensure the delegates have a clear understanding, to get (the issue) where it needs to go.”

The subject-matter experts and other participants such as facilitators and issue managers bring years of experience and keep conference attendees on track by detailing what can and can’t be achieved through the process, said Thomas.

Besides reviewing 85 issues brought to the 2009 Army Europe conference, delegates were asked to rank issues and areas that have been previously pushed up the AFAP chain or other quality-of-life programs. The three main areas and rankings were:

Most critical active AFAP issues at service level:

- *Distribution of Montgomery GI Bill benefits to Family members
- *Inferior shipment of household goods
- *Convicted sex offender registry at overseas installations
- *Medical entitlements for college-age Family members
- *Minimum disability retirement pay for medically retired wounded Soldiers

Mobilization/deployment challenges:

- *Dwell time use for training and exercises
- *Increase in suicide rates
- *Soldiers charged leave for Rest and Recuperation breaks
- *Vehicle storage during deployment
- *Slow processing of Veterans Affairs claims

Mobilization/deployment strengths:

- *Landstuhl Regional Medical Center
- *Rest and Recuperation
- *Warrior Transition Units
- *Additional pay and benefits during deployment
- *Medical care in theater

*Army Community Service

“This additional tasking is another way to let leadership know what people are concerned about,” said Thomas. “It allowed the delegates to further highlight the concerns of communities they represent.”

She also noted that 2009 is AFAP's 25th anniversary. Since the program's inception, 633 issues have been identified, resulting in 101 legislative changes, 147 Army policy and regulatory changes and 165 improved programs.

Thomas encouraged those “who sees something that they believe needs changing,” to become involved with AFAP at their garrisons. “By becoming part of AFAP, you can help fix something that is broken. You can be part of the solution,” she said.

For more information about AFAP, visit www.myarmylifetoo.com and click on the “Family Programs” link in the “Family Programs and Services” section.



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