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Pledge of support from first lady sets the tone for Defense Department Joint Family Readiness Conference

By Samantha Quigley

American Forces Press Service

CHICAGO -- With personal assurance from the nation's first lady that President Barack Obama is committed to military families, more than 1,500 people participated as the Defense Department's Joint Family Readiness Conference kicked off here Sept. 1.



SAMANTHA QUIGLEY

Gen. Carter F. Ham, commander of U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army, speaks at the Defense Department's Joint Family Readiness Conference in Chicago, Sept. 1. The general delivered a joint keynote address at the event with his wife, Christi.

In a letter read to the group by Tommy Thomas, the Defense Department's deputy director of military community and family policy, Michelle Obama thanked the group for its support of servicemembers and pledged continued support.

"Our armed forces and their families have done their duty and we are grateful as a nation, and we must do ours to provide them all the support they need," Thomas read from the letter. "They do not complain about their sacrifices, but we all can help lighten the load. The president is committed to doing just that."

U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army Commander Gen. Carter F. Ham, and his wife Christi, delivered a joint keynote address at

the event. The general said that while the military's core values haven't changed since he was a young Soldier living in Italy with his family, support programs surely have, and they must continue to do so.

“We have to change,” Ham said. “Our services are now well over 50 percent married. Servicemembers are getting married at a younger age. We’re enlisting more and more married servicemembers and their families.”

The military realizes that it may enlist Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines, but in many cases, it retains families, Ham noted. Retention helps to ensure a high state of military readiness, he added.

“We do need to continue to create programs that equip our families and servicemembers with the knowledge to take care of themselves -- programs that highlight life skills,” Ham said. “Building systems of support, as this conference is focused on, is exactly the right concept.”

“I challenge all of you at this conference to identify and address the problem areas as you discover them,” he added. “Together, in this room, there are centuries upon centuries of experience that can be harnessed to develop innovative ways to improve the quality of life for our families and our servicemembers, and to improve the readiness of our joint force.”

The general’s wife, Christi, highlighted some of the programs that are of high interest to servicemembers and their families and are among the topics being discussed throughout the three-day program.

Greater access to health care -- especially behavioral health care -- for all servicemembers and family members and easing the transition from military medical care to the Veterans Affairs system topped her list. But no less important, she added, are employment issues and career options for spouses, the amount of time servicemembers spend at their home stations between deployments, and school transition issues for the children of military families.

She also advocated strengthening programs to help children cope with repeated deployments.

The day’s message may have been serious, but the Hams delivered it with a lighthearted flair. Mrs. Ham briefly caught the audience off-guard when she admitted to “marital difficulties.”

“When some folks find themselves at a podium in a sizeable audience,” she said, “they also find themselves making some kind of disclosure about their marital challenges. Finding myself here at this podium and in front of this amazing crowd, I’ve decided I should probably do the same.”

“For decades now, I have been involved in a relationship outside of our marriage,” she told the group, “but it has proven to be wonderful, worthwhile, important, and rewarding. My involvement during this time has been with Uncle Sam, and it has been an incredible relationship.”

Over time, she said, Uncle Sam has listened to her and other military spouses and slowly has brought about change to meet their needs.

Those needs will be thoroughly discussed over the next two days, and any suggestions for improvement will certainly make it to Uncle Sam’s ears, the general’s wife promised the group.

Her husband’s parting words encouraged attendees to remember the servicemembers and their families who are at the “core of everything we do.”

“Surely we can -- I would say we must -- do our best for them every day,” he said.



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