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FRG Symposium promotes teamwork, communication

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Running an effective family readiness group requires understanding and good communication between FRG volunteers and unit leadership. To ensure both groups are well-equipped with up-to-date information and to build cohesion, more than 300 commanders, senior enlisted leaders, family readiness support assistants and volunteers attended an FRG Symposium on Tuesday at the Commons.

Military leaders, from brigade to company commanders and senior enlisted advisers, along with FRSA leaders and FRG advisers gathered to learn from presenters as well as each other, according to Carrie Tate-Meyer, 10th Mountain Division (LI) family readiness program manager.

"It is important for all parties to attend this event to build a cohesive team," she said. "During these tight fiscal times, it becomes more and more important for FRSA leaders and commanders to learn to support and build on each other’s strengths. All three components are what make an FRG team successful, and learning about each other and sharing a common goal will allow for a better working relationship."

Maj. Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, Fort Drum and 10th Mountain Division (LI) commander, said he attended the symposium because family readiness is important.

"You enlist the Soldier, but you reenlist the Family," he said. "Family readiness is Soldier and unit readiness. When Soldiers are confident that their Families are being taken care of on the home front, (they) can focus on their jobs on the battlefield."

Townsend explained that it is important for the command teams to attend the event because the FRG is a commander’s program.

"My vision is a Family of warriors, and that’s how I view every military unit I’ve been a part of in my career," he noted. "When I’m not home with my wife and kids, I’m still around Family. I view the brothers and sisters I serve with as my Family. That’s the way successful units always are. When you have a strong family readiness group, it binds the whole team together – Soldiers and Family Members."

One of the speakers during the event, Dr. Amishi Jha, provided a presentation on mindfullness techniques. Jha, who is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, talked about her research and how it pertains to service members and their Families.

Jha defines mindfulness as “a mental mode characterized by attention to present moment experience without conceptual elaboration or emotional reactivity.” In other words, most people are so busy dwelling on the past or stressing out about the future, that they don’t know how to live in the “here and now." "Mindfulness, “allows us to be aware, because a lot of times, we don’t know we’re not paying attention,” Jha said. "Our mind is lost, and we don’t know we’re distracted."

"Exercising the body helps your physical health improve,” she continued. "The mind, just like the body, needs regular exercise to stay in optimal health.

Jha added that practicing mindfulness has been linked to improving attention span; regulating emotion; reducing physical and clinical symptoms like pain, depression and anxiety; and improving personal and occupational relationships.

"From my point of view, everything that Soldiers are experiencing, the Family unit is also experiencing in terms of the highs and lows of stressors,” she said, adding that practicing mindfulness can promote resilience.

Mindfulness also can lead to more accurate and objective observation skills, which improves situational awareness and better decision making; increase concentration and attention control, leading to quick thinking and enhanced learning; and improve emotional regulation, reducing likelihood of acting out emotionally and increasing tolerance during challenging situations, according to Jha.

"Even though I’m here today to tell you about some of the work we’ve been doing over the last five or six years in building resilience, I want to start off by thanking you for your continued service toward the Army," Jha said. "All of the people I’ve met, some of the most resilient people are the kinds of people sitting in this room right now.

"I want to share ways to bolster this capacity to recover from stress,” Jha added. "The kind of character it takes to be a member of the military really is highlighted in what resilience is."

Jha concluded by saying she was excited to be invited to speak to Soldiers and Family Members at Fort Drum, and she is working to create mindfulness training specifially geared toward military spouses.

Participants also learned about identifying roles in the FRG; how to motivate, recruit and entice volunteers; working with different personalities in a team setting; fundraising and donations; and social media considerations. During the event, teams participated in several vignettes to help them through difficult simulated scenarios.

"Each of these topics is very important to the success of the FRG,” Tate-Meyer explained. "Each topic helps the FRG teams learn to better communicate with each other, build on their team and learn to maintain their team. It is singularly important that having a successful family readiness team will add to the unit’s success and enhance the organization’s environment.”

The division has organized the symposium every year since 2009, with the exception of last year, Tate-Meyer said.

"In 2012, one could not be held due to the tight training schedule,” she noted. "This year, however, will be the first time that commanders will be joining their volunteers, and the first time we have included (U.S. Army Dental Activity, U.S. Army Medical Activity), garrison and NCO Academy. This symposium is all-inclusive because at Fort Drum, there is a collective experience that can be shared."