

Dept. of Military Affairs: Serving those who serve: Service Member Support Division Part 1 - Family Program

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The majority of the Wisconsin National Guard's Service Member Support Division (SMSD) relocated to a new location earlier this year, ultimately making it easier to collaborate in an effort to provide Wisconsin's service members, veterans, Department of Defense civilians, and their families access to comprehensive services and resources based on their needs.

The SMSD is composed of a variety of programs and objectives, including Soldier and family readiness, Yellow Ribbon reintegration, sexual assault prevention and response, and warrior resilience and fitness.

The Wisconsin National Guard Family Program provides support to service members and their families, ensuring that they have the proper tools and resources to meet the challenges of the military lifestyle. Families are the enduring foundation for service members, taking care of everything at home while their loved one is away for training or a deployment in support of their state or nation.

"We know that especially with the younger Soldiers, and I think Soldiers all together, if there are stressors at home, they're not going to be able to focus on the mission," said Carina Sween, the Soldier and Family Readiness team supervisor within the family program.

Soldier and Family Readiness teams are available 24/7 to help Wisconsin's service members and their families with any challenges they may face.

There are 10 Soldier and Family Readiness teams located in family assistance centers in eight armories throughout the state. Each team supports approximately 10 Wisconsin National Guard units. The teams have a proactive mission — training volunteers, briefing units, communicating information with family members — and a reactive mission responding to calls for resources, information, and referrals.

“Our goal truly is to ensure that everybody that supports a Soldier has access to resources and programs that can provide assistance — maybe financial assistance, domestic violence, child and youth support — so a Soldier can truly show up at a drill weekend and concentrate on whatever their tasks are for that weekend,” Sween said.

One of the most used resources within the family program is Military Family Financial Aid (MFFA). MFFA is a grant program to help service members who are experiencing a financial emergency. The funding comes from Wisconsin state taxpayers who choose to donate on their state tax return.

“It’s a lot of paperwork, but for a service member that is really suffering from a financial issue, it’s a really great resource for them when everything else has been exhausted,” said Debbie Sohns, a family program specialist and the lead on MFFA requests.

Before service members are to the point where they are asking for financial assistance through MFFA, the Soldier and Family Readiness specialists work with the service member and the personal financial counselors to see if there are other ways to help mitigate whatever the situation may be and resolve the issue.

Another initiative that the family program has been working for five or six years to bring to fruition is a domestic violence reporting program. In the past, domestic violence which was reported through the family program would be reported to the Service Member’s chain of command, which can be dangerous for the victim if the service member is the perpetrator.

The Wisconsin National Guard now provides confidential or command notification reporting options for domestic violence victims. Confidential reporting provides adult victims access to services while giving them additional time to develop safety plans before involving civilian law enforcement agencies or the chain of command. Command notification reporting allows adult victims to report abuse and triggers a chain of command notification by the state family programs office.

“We’re just really looking for the safety or hoping that more people will actually report domestic violence so that we can help them,” said Lisa Kluetz, the state family program director.

The family program is not a 24-hour crisis line. They provide referrals to local law enforcement or advocacy services within the community. Victims of domestic violence or intimate partner violence who are in immediate danger should call 9-1-1 for assistance.

Service members and families can reach out to the family program for any questions, concerns, or needs.

“Regardless of the situation, there’s always someone out there that can provide help, and there’s no shame in asking for it,” Sohns said.

Another major component of the family program is the child and youth program. The Wisconsin National Guard Child and Youth Program provides programs and events that support the social, emotional, physical, and family well-being of military youth.

The Child and Youth Program hosts a variety of events throughout the state including one overnight camp, one day camp, and one or two virtual events per quarter. Programs and activities are generally available for children ages 6 to 17 years old.

The most well-known overnight camp is the annual Badger Youth Camp. This year’s Badger Youth Camp was held July 7-10 at Camp Lakotah. Children were divided into age groups and participated in activities like kayaking, paintballing, and archery, while also learning resiliency skills and connecting with other military youth.

“What we try to provide is a space in the community for military-connected youth because unlike active duty, with the National Guard they’re spread out all over the state so they may go to a school and they may be the only service-connected youth there that they’re aware of,” said JD Engelhardt, the lead child and youth program coordinator.

Day camps are open to the whole family, providing fun activities and resources. During the Month of the Military Child this past April, the Child and Youth Program partnered with the A&A All The Way Foundation for an event at Lambeau Field in

Green Bay, Wisconsin. Families participated in a variety of crafts and activities, toured the stadium, and met Aaron and Alvin Jones who discussed their experiences growing up as military youth.

“That’s a perfect example of we’re going to bring these kids together, we’re going to do some [master resilience training] on the side, and do some of the stuff with the parents where they get the chance to chat about what it’s like to be a parent in uniform,” Engelhardt said.

Virtual programs started as the COVID-19 pandemic hit Wisconsin, limiting the ability to host in-person events. They kept military youth connected and engaged, and continue to be a valuable asset within the program.

“[We’re] trying to meet kids where they’re at and be open to doing a mental health chat or a virtual camp or a virtual art night,” Engelhardt said. “If there’s one kid that shows up, that’s important because that one kid needs to be there. That one kid is there for a reason.”

The child and youth program also has a State Teen Panel composed of kids entering 8th grade through high school. The State Teen Panel meets monthly and has a quarterly camp. The members of the panel network with military youth from other states and also serve as an advisory board to the child and youth program to let them know where they might be missing the mark or what they want to learn more about.

“They wanted to learn more about finances,” said Emily Sorenson, a child and youth program coordinator. “They wanted to learn more about military culture, more in-depth than what they already know. So we try to provide those resources for them and also try to do volunteer outreach.”

The child and youth program is also launching a State Kids Panel for military-connected youth in 4th to 7th grade. The State Kids Panel will meet virtually twice between January and August, and will have one in-person event. The kids will learn more about what happens within the State Teen Panel, and can also advise the State Teen Panel.

The different programs provide youth with a safe space to discuss what it’s like to be a military child and work through unique challenges.

“Even if they know what parents do, even if they know their parents have an office job, they still know what media shows them for what the military is, and of course missions change and that kind of stuff,” Engelhardt said. “Kids are fully aware of that. They ask the questions. Even if they don’t ask the questions, they ask us the questions because they’re concerned and worried.”

If you are a Wisconsin service member or family member in need of assistance or to learn about upcoming events, you can access the Service Member Support Division’s website at www.wisconsinmilitary.org or call the 24/7 support line at 1-800- 292-9464 (option 1).

“We will serve everybody,” Kluetz said. “We won’t turn anybody away, and we will provide information, resources, and referrals.”