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New mental health effort focuses on military families

By Lorene Parshall
Staff Writer
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GRAYLING — A recent study concluded that children and youth in military families can be at a significant disadvantage compared to nonmilitary peers unless they receive appropriate mental health or other types of support when needed.

Columbia University's National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) has released a report on the negative impact of military life on the children of soldiers. Frequent moves, parent deployments, physical and psychological injuries incurred by parents in war zones, or their deaths, can leave a lifelong mark on children if not treated.

Having a parent sent to a war zone, especially on multiple deployments, impacts the entire family. This trauma in younger children may cause anxiety, excessive neediness, clinging, sadness, sleep problems or physical illnesses. Older youth may exhibit depression, angry outbursts, poor school performance, physical fights and other disruptive behavior.

The trauma may be intensified when the soldier returns home. According to the NCCP's study, the rates of physical, emotional or sexual abuse of children was 42 percent higher in the families of enlisted Army soldiers in combat-related deployments, than noncombat deployments.

Multiple deployments have become the norm for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It places a heavy burden on already inadequate mental health and support systems.

Captain Brian Martinus, Michigan National Guard chaplain, himself about to be deployed, was available for counseling Wednesday at a Camp Grayling orientation of soldiers being sent to Iraq.

"These soldiers can probably count on being deployed three to four times," Martinus said. "Within the next few years, 39 percent of the National Guard will be deployed."

Although a search for local resources from community counseling and educational agencies was unsuccessful, the regular military and the National Guard provide what support they can before, during and after the deployment.

Specialist BethAnn Amy runs a family assistance program for National Guard families at Camp Grayling. She also provides information on "Military OneSource," a 24/7 program that enables soldiers and families to get master's level counseling on a variety of subjects. The program is available by calling 800-342-9647 or visiting www.militaryonesource.com (<http://www.militaryonesource.com>).

"Angie Spina, youth coordinator for the state of Michigan, sends out letters to schools she knows are attended by a number of children of deployed soldiers and she offers to provide information and training to school personnel to help them deal with issues that may arise," said Amy. "Any Michigan school can request this service."

Spina can be reached at her Lansing office by calling 517-481-8359.

The military and 4-H Extension have partnered at bases across the world to provide resources to children of the military, on and off base, to help them cope. The only 4-H program in Northern Michigan is available only to those assigned to Camp Grayling. More information can be obtained by calling 344-3266.

The Veterans Administration Web site has advice on preparing children for a parent's deployment, and symptoms of trauma to watch for along with tips and resources to deal with those symptoms. Visit www.va.gov (<http://www.va.gov>) and click on the "Veteran's Services" link at the top, then PTSD, which will lead you to an article on "Children Coping with Deployment." It will also have information on deployed soldiers with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) which increases the odds of abuse, violence and suicide occurring when the soldiers return to their families.

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Specialist BethAnn Amy of Camp Grayling provides support for National Guard families before deployment and during and after the deployed soldiers return to their families.

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