

Institute Fosters Community Support of Military

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Story by [Elaine Wilson](#)

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BETHESDA, Md. - An Indiana-based organization is working to build community support of service members and their families throughout the state in the hope of serving as a model for the rest of the nation.

Shelley MacDermid-Wadsworth, director of the Military Family Research Institute and a family studies professor at Purdue University, Dec. 8, discussed the institute's efforts on behalf of military families -- active-duty, Guard, Reserve and veteran -- during the 3rd Annual Trauma Spectrum conference here.

The NMFI is a research and outreach organization based at Purdue in West Lafayette, Ind., It is supported by Lilly Endowment Inc., the Defense Department and other organizations.

MacDermid-Wadsworth called her talk Life in the Weeds she said, because she's "way outside the [Capitol] Beltway" in a state without a major military institution, and in a place where people don't often associate with a strong military presence.

Yet, the state contains many Guard and Reserve members, as well as some smaller active-duty components, she said. The state is home to 23,674 active and reserve component members, mostly Army National Guard, with 1,800 deployed and 3,600 cued up to deploy in January 2012, she said.

The institute has been working to boost awareness of and support for these military members and their families with some success, MacDermid-Wadsworth said.

She highlighted an effort called Our Heroes' Tree, a community outreach program housed within libraries. Under the program, participants create a handmade ornament honoring a servicemember, past or present, and take it to a participating library during the month of October to be placed on a tree.

"We offer libraries free resources in exchange for doing programs leading up to Veterans Day," she explained. The tree offers people a way to honor loved ones or those they admire, and also brings people together, such as school children and veterans.

It also offers a way for libraries to contribute, she said.

The program now is offered by nearly every county in the state, MacDermid-Wadsworth said. Additionally, the Navy hosts the program worldwide in its libraries, she added.

"It's a nice way to get on the radar screen of the community," she said.

While a great resource, Our Heroes' Tree is just the tip of the iceberg for making a true impact, MacDermid-Wadsworth said. Along with program resources, libraries also are provided with a document called How to Help Military Families in response to a common community concern. The one-page guides, also available on the institute's website, give suggestions for helping neighbors, friends and community members who have a military tie, she said. Each is customized for a different group, including childcare providers, faith-based organizations, teachers, family and friends, employers, medical professionals and neighbors.

MacDermid-Wadsworth stressed the need to funnel information about the military to communities. It's important, for example, to inform teachers when they have a military child in their classroom.

"In your classroom, when you're talking about how you feel about the war, you might want to keep in mind that there might be a kid in your classroom whose parent is there," she said. "It's just helping people be aware that they are in contact with military families. They just may not know it."

In an effort to foster this information flow, the institute partnered with the Center for Deployment Psychology to provide training sessions for large groups of providers such as health care providers, marriage and family therapists and mental health providers, MacDermid-Wadsworth said. They've also asked to present a military track at conferences and seminars, and have reached out to early childhood professionals, social workers, school counselors and teachers. Additionally, the institute has shipped 1,300 training kits to primary care physicians within the state, she said.

MacDermid-Wadsworth also highlighted an effort to reach out to and support military children within the community. The institute has developed a reintegration program called Passport Toward Success, offered to military children 60-days post deployment through the Defense Department's Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program. The one-day program helps to build resiliency among military children, she said.

The program is particularly important in a state without an active-duty installation, she noted.

"These military kids get almost no time with other military kids, particularly during reintegration," she said. "I think it's very important for them to have an opportunity to be with other kids who have been through what they have been through."

The institute has created a model for the use of community volunteers at Passport events, MacDermid-Wadsworth said, and now has 100 volunteers from five states who want to work with military children. "It's been very gratifying to see," she said.

MacDermid-Wadsworth also acknowledged some roadblocks to community-based support efforts, including the variability of communities, even across one state.

Evansville, Ind., for example, is 76 miles away from a Veteran Affairs medical center, and the closest child psychologist is about 100 miles away, she said. Yet, there's a fairly large military unit there with families who have specific needs, but limited resources.

Columbus, Ind., also is lacking infrastructure, yet it is the home to Camp Atterbury and soon will be the home to a small active-duty unit. More than 50,000 troops have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan after training there, MacDermid-Wadsworth said, yet there is relatively little child care and no after-hours care.

Communities need infrastructure — such as jobs, health care, veteran and family programs, and awareness within schools and nonprofit groups — in order to offer military families the support they need, MacDermid-Wadsworth said. "All communities are different and all are confronting issues in different ways," she said. "Our goal is to help them succeed."

It will take an ongoing effort to bring communities on board for the long-term, MacDermid-Wadsworth said.

"If you're really going to make change," she said, "you have to get the community mobilized, wanting to do this work, have to feel they own it ... and there has to be a way to sustain it.

"The thing we struggle with the most is, how do you shift from awareness to mobilization?" she added. "That's where we're at now."