

The Key Volunteer Network

by Linda Mundy and Bettie Cooper

Family readiness is essential if Marines in the field are to focus on the job at hand, and key volunteers are the means by which the Corps ensures it achieves family readiness.

Family readiness and key wives programs are not new. Since the late 1970s, when the Key Wife Program was initiated at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, volunteers have spent endless hours training and assisting other Marine families in times of need. During DESERT SHIELD the 1st FSSG reported that 1 out of 5 Marines had some sort of serious personal or family problem that came to the attention of the command. When they deployed for Operation RESTORE HOPE, a significant difference was noted, and only 1 Marine out of 20 experienced such difficulties. Part of this dramatic difference was attributed to the increase in family readiness and the efforts of 1st FSSG key wives. With such a network in place, and knowing that their families are well provided for with information and resources, Marines are better able to concentrate on providing for our Nation's defense.

Today, there are more dependents than active duty Marines, and with the drawdown in numbers many units are currently spending 50 percent or more of their time away from home. In a recent poll, a married male sergeant with 3 children reported that he'd been away from home for the last 21 holidays and birthdays. As long as the Marine Corps remains the Nation's force in readiness, and both Active and Reserve members realize that they might be ordered to deploy on a moment's notice, it's clear that a communications channel between the commanding officer and unit families should be in place at all times.

Marine Corps Order 1754.2 sanctioned and sponsored the Volunteer Key Wives Network. For the first time, the Corps could provide official sanction for key wives and authorize funding, based on availability, for certain specific needs. In order to create this standardized network, three steps needed to be taken: The basic role of the key wife had to be defined; commanding officers had to be educated about family support and communica-

tion networks; and training manuals had to be written.

In July 1992, the first Marine Corps-wide key wives working group was held at the Xerox Training Center in Leesburg, VA. Those family service centers with active support groups were invited to send a program coordinator and a key wife to represent their area's units. Other Active and Reserve wives with special expertise were also invited, as well as representatives from the Human Resources Division of Manpower and Reserve Affairs, Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC).

The energy, enthusiasm, excitement, and expertise displayed by this group were unequalled. The agenda was carefully constructed to allow time for discussions, debates, and decisions. There was also time for networking and bonding—the essential elements needed to create a single network from many outstanding programs. Not only did the group provide the input for the manuals, there also was the opportunity to discuss unique situations at bases all over the world where many ideas and concerns were surfaced. For the first time, Reserve wives formulated plans for a Reserve Key Wives Network, completing a Total Force volunteer network for the Corps.

Since this conference concluded, the formal name of the Key Wives Program has been changed to the Key Volunteer Network; three manuals have been written and are in the editing process—one for the commanding officer, one for the volunteers, and a

Key Volunteers and the Corps

by Jeanne Overstreet

Would it surprise you if I told you that the Marine Corps today is married? The demographics of the Corps are changing. For example, today we have more dependents than we do active duty Marines. Throughout my time in the Corps I've witnessed many support activities but none that have proven so effective and efficient as the Key Volunteer Program.

The Key Volunteer Program is not new to the Corps; however, the deployment to Southwest Asia has brought the program to the forefront. Last year, Headquarters, Marine Corps brought 40 wives, who had been successful and were working in the Key Volunteer Program, together for a workshop in Leesburg, VA. Our goal was to develop the Key Volunteer Program into the most effective and efficient support activity possible. It was suggested that the Program be standardized throughout the Marine Corps. This would provide continuity to the families, Marines, and the units they support. When a family is transferred from one duty station to the next, the spouse will already know how the new unit's Key Volunteer Program operates. To assist in this standardization, it was suggested that a Key Volunteer and training manual be developed. The Key Volunteer Manual would assist spouses in the execution of their duties while the training manual would be entirely devoted to training and include a commander's guide. The Reserves will also be included in the Program by the inclusion of a 1-800 number they can use for assistance.

The Marine Corps has identified a unit that, after returning home from Southwest Asia and before deploying to Somalia, implemented the Key Volunteer Program. After this program was put in place, the percentage of Marines who returned home due to family problems declined to only 1 out of 200.

The purpose of the Key Volunteer Program is to support our Marines and their families while deployed and in time of need. One reality of the Program is that a key volunteer cannot solve every spouse's problem, but it can guide spouses in the right direction so they will be able to solve their problems themselves. This method helps spouses grow and empowers them to become more independent, which, in turn, helps develop first-rate key volunteers.

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training manual for the network. There are specific training requirements for all network volunteers; there is also the flexibility to structure the program to specific locales and for advanced training as requested or required. There are sections in all the manuals that are tailored to the unique requirements of the Marine Corps Reserve, Marines on recruiting duty, and other Marines on independent duty.

It is vitally important that all commanding officers, no matter what size command or staff element they are responsible for, realize that this is their program. The purpose is not to be a burden to the commanding officer or his spouse, but to assist the entire unit. The primary focus is to help families become self-sufficient and to match available resources to the needs of family members. Often, the commanding officer's spouse or a senior staff noncommissioned officer's spouse will act as an advisor to provide feedback to the commander and to convey a positive attitude toward the program.

The key volunteer coordinator for the unit is selected and appointed in writing by the commanding officer. Coordinators can be spouses of either an enlisted Marine or an officer. They are charged with being the liaison between the commanding officer and the key volunteers of the unit. Other duties may include organizing a network, coordinating training through the family service center, developing and distrib-

uting a unit newsletter, and recognizing key volunteers for their contributions.

All units will have a family readiness officer (FRO), selected by the commanding officer, who serves as the primary military point of contact between the key volunteers and the command/staff element. The FRO is responsible for providing a monthly updated roster of spouses, which includes addresses and phone numbers, to the key volunteer coordinator. The FRO provides administrative assistance to the Key Volunteer Network and is responsible for educating Marines in the unit about their family readiness responsibilities.

Key volunteers are recommended by the key volunteer coordinator and appointed in writing by the commanding officer. They act as good role models for inexperienced spouses and are expected to respect the confidentiality of all members of the command or staff element. Breach of trust is cause for dismissal from the program. There are certain situations, however, that require key volunteers to report family members, such as suspected child abuse cases.

In the near future, all Key Volunteer Network manuals will be distributed and the Marine Corps Order will be rewritten to reflect the changes that have recently been made to the program. Computers and answering machines dedicated solely to the Network have already been sent to all family service centers. There will also be a

staff member in the Human Resources Division of Manpower and Reserve Affairs at HQMC who, along with a volunteer staffer, will be responsible for managing all Marine Corps volunteer programs. These staffers will work closely with the new standardized network, answering questions from the field, and providing support and advocacy for family readiness.

Everyone who has been involved with family readiness programs, both in the early years and during the past year and a half, is excited that all the hard work is almost complete. It's obvious to most that any Marine could have a genuine family emergency at any time, but the deployed Marine who has to return home because his "spouse can't cope" is a battle casualty as surely as if he'd been wounded in combat. If a Marine gets constant letters from home filled with nothing but problems, there's little likelihood that he will be able to concentrate on the job at hand. Such trouble could ultimately put another Marine in jeopardy. Preventing such situations is what the Key Wives Network is all about.



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A Command Team Seminar for Spouses

by Marie Blot

Senior Marines' spouses need a place to turn where they can gain insight into how best to deal with the families of junior Marines. The Command Team Seminar has proved to be a step in the right direction.

For many years, Marines have recognized the need for a program designed to train the wives of commanding officers. While there is a definite role expectation for wives in these positions, there has been no formal training available that would allow them to prepare for the task ahead. In fairness to the wives of new commanders, it was felt that a course needed to be designed that offered some

training in the following areas:

- Guidelines to make small group facilitating easier.
- Awareness of different leadership styles.
- Sensitivity to different value systems and how they develop.
- Understanding group dynamics.
- A chance to experience personal growth through self-awareness.

- Stress management and the art of communication.
- Assisting a family embroiled in a crisis.

An Army-run program to train commanding officers served as the model for a 3d Marine Aircraft Wing (3d MAW) initiative. A new program was then established and training began at Marine Corps Air Station El Toro in 1990 with two experts recruited from Fort Leavenworth, KS, acting as instructors for the first 14 Marine wife volunteers. A major effort was launched into researching the subjects of stress management, trauma and crisis leadership, group development, leadership styles, communication, Myers-Briggs personality type indicators, and the newly emerging Key Volunteers Program. A curriculum was written to cover these and other related topics.