



A Large Support Team

Districts, Communities Step Up to Help Kansas Military Families

CONCORDIA, Kan. – Patricia Gerhardt likes knowing that military families who don't live on a military base are being taken care of in Kansas' communities. She even has something to do with making that happen.

As a River Valley Extension District agent, Gerhardt spends much of her time bringing local citizens together with families of deployed soldiers.

"We don't always realize that (military) families are in our communities, and so when those soldiers are deployed...we don't realize the challenges that the families left behind have," Gerhardt said.

In 2011, the River Valley Extension District was designated as a local and regional support network for military families. Programs for military families are coordinated through the statewide program, Operation: Military Kids (OMK), which is administered by Kansas 4-H and K-State Research and Extension.

"I'm not from a military background, and so learning about all the challenges that military families have has been very interesting," Gerhardt said. "And I appreciate what these families have given. It's not only the one serving the country, but their families too are serving. I realize the sacrifices they've made."

As a district agent, Gerhardt is able to spend more time providing support for OMK, compared to



River Valley District Extension Agent Patricia Gerhardt is helping lead programs to support Kansas military families

what county agents can offer. In addition to helping families of soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Riley, OMK helps those serving in the National Guard and Reserves.

Some of the programs are as simple as a community dinner; others include large efforts such as putting together 'Hero Packs,' essentially a backpack with toys and other goods that the family can use.

Gerhardt said these efforts are simply the local community's way of showing military families that they're part of a larger support team.

"We've had grandparents, too, who have responsibility for their children while the parents are deployed," Gerhardt said, "and we get a lot of feedback from them that they really appreciate these programs."

Recently in Wakefield, children (most of whom were age 13 or younger) got together for outdoor games, reading and other activities hosted by the River Valley Extension District. It also gave the kids a chance to talk about their experience with kids their own age.

"We provide children an opportunity to talk about their experiences as military kids, to share what their lives have been like and what they've gone

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through,” Gerhardt said. “I don’t think children have always had that opportunity.”

Gerhardt thinks the best is yet to come.

“We’ve had great support and more people have

offered to help,” she said. People have stepped up to the challenge of bringing items for Hero Packs or providing babysitting for the families when there is a need for childcare. We’ve had that kind of help.”

To learn more about OMK in Kansas, visit the program’s website at www.kansasomk.org.