

Massachusetts

Operation Military Kids 2007 Annual Report



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Operation: Military Kids is a partnership of Army Child and Youth Services, National 4-H Headquarters/USDA, and University of Massachusetts Amherst 4-H Youth Development. Operation: Military Kids— Massachusetts is supported by the 4-H/Army Youth Development Project under Kansas State University special project number 2007-48661-03868.



The University of Massachusetts Extension Outreach 4-H Program coordinates a statewide Operation Military Kids (OMK) team which strives to educate communities on the effects of the deployment cycle on military youth and to offer those youth support via educational, recreational and social activities. Team members are from the MA National Guard Family Program, MA Department of Education, the Army Reserve Child and Youth Services, Boys and Girls Clubs, Operation Homefront, The American Legion, MA 4-H, 4-H camps and UMass. The State Team coordinator is Gretchen May at 101 University Dr, Amherst, MA 01002, gmay@umext.umass.edu, 413-577-0332.

Hero Packs

In 2007, MA OMK distributed 410 Hero Packs to military children at deployment briefings, Family Readiness Groups, schools, and homes, wherever the child or family member thought it best to be done. Hero Packs contain a support letter written by a non-military youth, a variety of items such as cameras and stationery to be used by the children to stay in touch with their loved ones and items for themselves such as toys and stuffed animals. Teens were given a choice of a Hero Pack or a Hero Package which contained some of the regular items in addition to a gift card to a store, eatery or gas station. Children too young for Hero Packs were given Hero Totes and babies were given Hero Blankets made from fleece and tied with a ribbon and soft toy. MA 4-H took on Hero Packs as its community service for the year resulting in donations of 28 messenger bags, stuffed toys, \$600 in gift cards, school items, cameras and hundreds of Hero Pack letters. The MA 4-H Foundation donated \$1600 which was used to buy gift cards, world and US maps, 4-H items, cameras, toys and Hero pins for the packs. It also donated 140 Red Sox tickets for military families which had a value of \$3500. (Middlesex County 4-H donated an additional \$200 in food gift cards for

some of the families that attended the game.) The American Legion donated funds to buy cameras. Through Operation Homefront, OMK received a portion of the 103 Hero Packs filled by BAE Systems of Nashua, New Hampshire.



A note written by a mother after her 2 children received their Hero Packs says it all: *"My 8 y.o. son and 6 y. o. daughter received the packs the morning their father was leaving for 6 months in Kuwait. It made a sad day much happier. Thank you..."*

OMK Regional Teams

MA Operation Military Kids has 3 regional teams: one in central MA (Worcester area), one on Cape Cod and one in western MA (Westfield area). Those teams,

along with the State Team, are very active, bringing the OMK effort to local doorsteps.

★ Cape Cod Team

The Cape Cod Team led by Kerry Bickford (Barnstable County Extension) and Ruth Provost (Boys & Girls Club) conducted 12 informational/display sessions reaching attendees at a variety of school related statewide conferences held at the Cape (ex. school council members, school counselors, school superintendents) as well as local events such as the Communities, Families and Youth Conference and the Cape Cod Amvets Post #333 Ladies Auxiliary meeting. This last connection led to strong collaboration between the Cape Cod OMK Team and the Ladies Auxiliary resulting in donations totaling \$1250 for use by the Cape Cod OMK Team and \$250 for the state! The Cape Cod Team conducted youth programming including an after-school series, a holiday party and a support group for military children among other



fun activities at community events. The licensed social worker who led the support group donated his services so that the funds could be used to send 2 of the participants to 2 weeks of day camp. The 2 team leaders have close relationships with many of their schools. They have made Hero Pack presentations at school assemblies and privately. Upon receiving her Hero Pack, one 3rd grader remarked it was hard being away from her father. However her school and friends were helpful. She had never thought of herself as a "hero" but thought it (receiving the Hero Pack) was "cool"! The Team also met with principals and family members to work out deployment and reunion adjustment related issues. The Team works closely with the MANG Wing at Otis and the elementary school there. Cape Cod OMK was highlighted in the "100 Best Communities for Young People: Barnstable" application as an outreach effort that supports youth affected by items in the media such as Iraq.

★ Central MA Team

The Central Ma Team (Worcester) coordinated by Kim Pond (MA 4-H) made a strong link with the local cable tv station (wccatv.com) in Worcester. WCCATV staff member Judy Langlois has been central to OMK efforts which included hosting an RSG! Training which will be placed on the station's website. She also arranged for her teen volunteers to record a PSA to be shown at military events encouraging soldiers to come to the station and be taped reading a story to their children. The tape (or DVD) is then given to the soldier to bring home. The PSA is just beginning to be used. Judy also led a "Making a PSA" training at the station for the

"Speak Out for Military Kids" teens resulting in a PSA on Hero Pack donations. That PSA is available on the station's website. Another Worcester team member, Dave Johnson, hosted an RSG! at the housing development site he manages, opened the site's food pantry to military families and held concerts this summer to raise money as well as canned goods for military families. In addition to the RSG!s mentioned, Central MA team members presented informational sessions or staffed displays at the Annual 4-H Banquet, the MA Association of Family and Consumer Sciences meeting, 2 professional sororities (resulting in donations of 14 cameras and \$50 for Hero Packs) and several fairs.

★ Western MA Team

The Western MA Team (Westfield) coordinated by Shirley Mietlicki (UMass) and Gretchen May (MA 4-H) works closely with the MANG Wing at Barnes. Lerryn Godden, Kellie Brown and Bill Parks of the Greater Westfield Boys & Girls Club supported military children and families by opening the club for free to

military families on certain nights. Their Teen Torch and Keystone Clubs made a Welcome Home banner for the returning Air Guard and provided youth activities at Family Day at Barnes. Team members conducted four OMK informational sessions.

★ State OMK Team

The State OMK Team hosted a one-day training by the Military Child Education Coalition reaching 52 professionals and 3 RSGIs reaching another 50. Evaluations reported that participants felt the information was extremely valuable and useful and that they shared that information with an average of

14 people! The Team also staffed 30 displays/informational sessions focusing on increasing the awareness of community members of the effects of deployment on children around the state. The entire team fields child/deployment questions and works to resolve issues.

MA OMK Reaching Youth



★ Twelve youth participated in 3 Speak Out for Military Kids trainings. Those young people, military and non-military, learned how to make a PSA (and made one!), learned what is involved in good communication and created posters and Hero Pack letters.

★ OMK funded many military youth activities this past year reaching over 200 children. Activities included high ropes training, over-night experience at an ecotarium, USS Constitution and Boston Duck Boat tours, participation in after-school robotics and gardening sessions, family day at 4-H camp, and attendance at fairs.

★ MA was fortunate to host an Operation Purple Camp at 4-H Camp Marshall in Spencer. State Team members Penny Marston (4-H Camp Director) and Jennifer Cesaitis (MANG FAC Coordinator) wrote the proposal. State Team members Shirley Mietlicki and Gretchen May conducted a mini-RSGI training for the 32 staff members. 75 military children attended the session.

Supporting MA Military Kids and Families

In all, MA OMK received donations of \$7800 in cash and hundreds of dollars worth of toys, school items, cameras, etc. The majority of the cash went to stock Hero

Packs and the \$1250 Cape Cod team received is being used for the coming year's efforts to support military families.

