As part of the national Army Child, Youth and School Services initiative, the University of Massachusetts Extension 4-H Youth Development Program coordinates the statewide Operation: Military Kids (OMK) effort. MA OMK’s mission is to build communities of support for the approximately 13,000 Massachusetts geographically dispersed military children and youth who could experience the deployment of a loved one at any time. Our statewide team does this by organizing regional teams, by educating communities on the effects of deployment on military youth and by offering educational, recreational and social activities for those military youth. Specific goals include the packing and delivery of Hero Packs, conducting community based Ready, Set, Go! workshops on the effects of deployment on children, providing OMK briefs and information tables at state and community events, supporting military youth events, and providing the Mobile Technology Lab (a set of laptop computers, cameras and printers) at military family events.

State team members are from the MA National Guard Family Program, MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Westover Airman & Family Readiness Center, the Army Reserve Child, Youth and School Services, the Army Reserve 804th Medical Brigade, Greater Westfield and Cape Cod Boys and Girls Clubs, The American Legion, the American Legion Auxiliary, MA 4-H, Cape Cod Extension, the Joint Family Support Assistance Program, UMass Veteran Services, the Preschool Enrichment Team, Army One Source, and University of Massachusetts Amherst. In addition to the state team, MA OMK has 4 regional teams which operate from western MA, central MA, northeastern MA and Cape Cod. These collaborators touch the lives of thousands of military children throughout the Commonwealth.

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THIS PAST YEAR WAS A CHALLENGE for me because my dad was deployed to Iraq. Working with Operation Military Kids really helped me get through it. Little things like working at the Big E OMK pod made me feel connected to other military kids. My dad deployed as an IA (Individual Augmentee), meaning he didn’t deploy with a unit or group. Outside of OMK I was the only military kid I knew so I had no one who could relate to me. It was only at OMK that I had a chance to have any connection with kids in the same position as me. Making cards at the Big E made me feel connected even though I wasn’t with them face to face. I made cards saying how I knew what they were going through and thanking them for how brave they were being. It’s nice that I can make a difference in the lives of military children even if I don’t know them. Some of my favorite 4-H events are OMK Hero Pack handouts; I am able to help out families who have members deploying by entertaining the younger kids in the families. It’s taught me compassion, understanding and so much more. Through my Yellow Ribbon Training I have learned how to more effectively work at OMK events and work the Mobile Technology Lab. I really love helping out with OMK and am excited to do more with the program. In the future I hope to run my own fundraisers and events for OMK.”

– Emily Oneschuk  4-H member and military teen –
From October 1, 2010 through September 30, 2011, MA Operation Military Kids delivered 17 Ready, Set, Go! (RSG!) workshops reaching 446 community participants.

YMCA staff, summer camp staff, school personnel, child care providers, 4-H volunteers and other community members learned about military culture, the deployment cycle, its effects on children and what resources are available to help military children. Julia, a summer camp counselor attending an RSG! workshop stated: “I never thought about how I would feel if my dad left for 13 months. I never really related to what the kids are feeling.” Another counselor stated: “Something that struck me as important was the difference in stages of the deployment cycle and how kids could be in different places.” A child care provider attending a workshop in her community stated: “I learned I need to listen more to the children in my care...to read between the lines!” From school teachers: “I feel ashamed of myself in a way for not letting myself feel a deeper experience or thought on my own.” “I never really thought about how difficult it is on families. I mean I know it is but never realized how much it entails.” “You don’t need a degree to help!”

State and regional team members staffed an additional 63 informational briefs around the Commonwealth reaching 3915 people with the OMK message of supporting military children. The 4 regional teams met a total of 18 times developing local support events for military youth. Over 200 volunteers donated 600 hours of service to the initiative.

OMK team members trained 30 teens (military and civilian) on communication skills through “Speak Out for Military Kids” in an effort to help them learn how to relay the OMK message. The teens prepared posters to display in their communities and 2 teens made a DVD on their deployment experiences which appeared on local cable stations.

Massachusetts OMK Delivers 554 Hero Packs!

From October 1, 2010 through September 30, 2011, MA OMK distributed 554 Hero Packs to military and civilian children experiencing the deployment of a loved one. These presentations were done at deployment events, schools and homes depending on the military or family request.

Hero Packs are a tangible way of honoring children for the sacrifices they are making while their loved one is deployed in support of Overseas Contingencies Operations. They contain a thank-you 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 books, 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. Children too young for Hero Packs were given Hero Totes and infants were given Hero Blankets made from fleece or handmade quilts tied with a ribbon and soft toy. Most of the items for these packs and all the quilts and blankets were donated.

Donations totaled over $75,000! A major contribution came from the customers of Borders Books in southeast MA. For several weeks in the spring, OMK was the recipient of Borders’ community service effort whereby customers purchased a new book and donated it to OMK. One hundred and fifty boxes of books were donated! Another contributor of note was Crane Paper Co of Dalton, MA. Through a connection with a member of the American Legion Auxiliary who works at Crane & Co., OMK received 300 boxes of stationery for the Hero Packs. Operation Homefront donated thousands of toys and school supplies through Dollar Tree Stores. Two quilters guilds and one youth church group made quilts and fleece blankets. 4-H Clubs, Girls Scouts, and Boys & Girls Clubs made Hero Pack thank you cards, collected donations and packed hundreds of Hero Packs. As in previous years, the MA 4-H Foundation gave $1000 and several American Legion Posts donated over $500. Many community groups, schools, and individuals made contributions as well.
Massachusetts OMK Touches More than 3,000 Military Youth!

MA OMK supported 89 youth events during the 2010-2011 project year. From Cape Cod to Westfield to Danvers, over 3000 youth from all branches of the military and Coast Guard participated in activities such as mock deployments, fencing lessons, afterschool programs and leadership trainings. MA OMK volunteers also supported youth activities at Guard and Reserve family events and Yellow Ribbon pre and post deployment seminars.

MA OMK organized the following camps funded by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Military Community & Family Policy Office. Held at YMCA Camp Lyndon on Cape Cod the two week-long overnight sessions attracted 75 military youth experiencing the deployment of a loved one. They participated in all the traditional summer camp activities such as nature, archery, music, drama, arts & crafts, swimming and had evening sessions tied specifically to being a military youth. A Military Family Life Consultant was present to provide emotional support throughout each week.

Collaboration among the Air Wing at Barnes, the Greater Westfield Boys & Girls Club and OMK resulted in a second set of day-time only weekend “camping” opportunities. A total of 51 Army and Air Guard youth attended the “Military Kids Club” offered at the Boys & Girls Club during two drill weekends February 5 & 6 and April 2 & 3. The “Club” was actually a supervised open-house with planned activities throughout each day.

In honor of the Month of the Military Child, OMK coordinated several events including two days at the Ecotarium in Worcester, a hands-on science museum for children. Staff prepared a unique show in their planetarium entitled “Under the Iraqi-Afghani Sky” and a family room was set up where the participants could relax and mingle and the children could make cards for their loved ones. The USO provided refreshments. Over 150 military family members attended.

The Mobile Technology Lab (MTL) which consists of 10 laptops, 2 printers, cameras and supplies was used at 12 youth focused events and each evening during the two weeks of the OMK overnight camp. By using the MTL approximately 375 military youth and family members were able to make cards and pictures to send to their deployed loved ones.

If you would like further information or to get involved with Operation Military Kids, please contact the MA OMK State Team Coordinator or visit the website: www.operationmilitarykids.org/MA

Number of youth contacts by military branch in 2011:

- 30 Active Army
- 39 Army Reserve
- 312 Air Force
- 462 Air Force Reserve
- 679 Coast Guard
- 33 Coast Guard Reserve
- 727 MA National Guard
- 337 MA Air Guard
- 33 Marine
- 271 Marine Reserve
- 36 Navy
- 13 Navy Reserve

“You don’t need a degree to help!”
– A School Teacher –
MASSACHUSETTS

2011 ANNUAL REPORT

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MILITARY FAMILIES IN OUR OWN BACKYARD.