



# OPERATION: Military Kids

*Meeting the needs  
of military families in Wisconsin*

STEPHEN HORVATH

In the April 2007 issue of *Wisconsin School News*, I wrote an article, "Operation: Inform the Teacher," in which I shared the interactions my family had with our children's schools while I was serving in Iraq.

The article increased awareness throughout Wisconsin of the impact deployments have on military families and shed light on the unique needs of the children who find themselves without one parent/caregiver in the household.

Since I wrote my last article, a good deal of awareness has been raised in school districts statewide

concerning military children but there is still much work to be done. Let's start with the good news. There is a new, ambitious program currently under way to help Wisconsin school district personnel and school board members better address the situation that unfolds when a member of the Wisconsin Reserve or National Guard is activated and

required to leave his or her family.

This program is called Operation: Military Kids, (OMK) and Wisconsin was recently awarded a grant by the Department of Defense to fund this effort. In April, I mentioned that OMK was a national partnership organized to address the needs of military children; however, at that time, Wisconsin was not among the 38 states that had been granted money to carry out programs for military families.

At that time, the Department of Defense did not view Wisconsin as a "highly impacted" state in terms of



## Operation: Military Kids will be of great benefit to schools as well. School personnel will be better equipped to meet the needs of military families.

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the sheer numbers of military personnel located in the state. One of Wisconsin's largest military bases, Ft. McCoy, is considered a training base, not an active duty base. Simply put, the lack of an active duty military base put Wisconsin at a disadvantage in competing for OMK funds.

Now, thanks to the hard work of a number of committed individuals and given the fact that Wisconsin Reserve and National Guard members have been activated in very large numbers, the Department of Defense designated Wisconsin as an OMK state.

On Oct. 27, a kick-off event was held in Madison to officially launch Wisconsin's OMK program. The occasion was attended by nearly 250 people and included the reading of a proclamation signed by Gov. Jim Doyle that declared October as Operation: Military Kids Month in Wisconsin.

Being designated an OMK state brings with it a number of positive benefits. For starters, a Wisconsin OMK state team has been formed, which is comprised of individuals with varied backgrounds share one characteristic — the desire to assist children and families effected by a military deployment. National partners of OMK are represented and University Extension/4-H Youth Development is playing a major role in facilitating the work of the team. John Ashley, executive director of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, is the newest team member and through my role as a youth development agent with University Extension, I, too, am a member. Through my work with the OMK state team, I have been able to implement another program into

OMK — Operation: Inform the Teacher. Through this program, I can continue to raise awareness of the issue on an even broader plane with the help of my fellow OMK team members. As the saying goes, there is strength in numbers!

Another significant benefit to being an OMK state is that we have received grant money from the Department of Defense that will allow us to plan and hold events in communities where military activations are occurring or where activated units are returning home. Known as "Family Integration Events," they are designed to offer families the chance to spend an afternoon together. Games and activities are planned for younger family members and Hero Packs, backpacks filled with donated school-related supplies and souvenirs, are given to youth as a goodwill gesture.

Furthermore, Wisconsin OMK will soon be receiving the components to create a "Mobile Technology Lab," which will include computers, a printer and a digital camera. The Mobile Technology Lab will be set up at the Family Integration Events and will allow children to correspond with their deployed

family member. In other OMK states, these family get-togethers are often held in local schools. In Wisconsin, we anticipate using school sites as well, which will offer an excellent prospect for the school district — as well as community volunteers — to work proactively with military families.

Helping to coordinate and carry out the Family Integration Events will be young people organized as "Speak Out for Military Kids" (SOMK) groups. SOMK youth, a number of whom are "veterans" of a family deployment themselves, play a critical peer role in working directly with other youth whose family is going through a deployment. Currently, there are two SOMK groups formed with the members traveling to events when needed. In the future, SOMK groups may be formed locally. This would allow youth who are directly impacted by military activations the chance to assist others right in their hometown. Moreover, engaging youth on a local level offers yet another opportunity for OMK to partner with school districts, which may lend a hand in identifying interested participants.

### Learn More at the 2008 Convention

James Bradley, best-selling author of *Flags of Our Fathers*, will deliver a keynote address on Wednesday, Jan. 23, at 10 a.m. Bradley's father, John, a native of Antigo, was one of the servicemen who raised the flag on Iwo Jima. As a former military kid himself, Bradley knows about the challenges of growing up while having a parent serve overseas.

After Bradley's presentation, Operation: Military Kids team member Stephen W. Horvath will hold an idea exchange from 1:30-2:45 p.m. titled "Meeting the Needs of Wisconsin Military Families." In addition to offering more information about the Operation: Military Kids program, the session will cover the three stages of deployment — pre-deployment, deployment and post-deployment — that every military family endures. □

An additional component of our OMK work will be to strengthen the effort of education toward all school district personnel and school board members.

For instance, many people do not realize that when a family experiences a military activation, children are impacted not only during the time the family member is absent but also prior to the member leaving, as well as when he or she returns home. In fact, the “deployment cycle,” as it is known, is comprised of three distinct phases — pre-deployment, deployment and post-deployment. Each phase has its own unique dynamic that families experience.

One common misconception is that once a service member returns to his or her family, everything returns to normal. When we see welcome-home parades on television it’s easy to assume that all is well. However, this is not often the case. Children, in particular, may continue to feel stress long after their parent/caregiver is home. Similarly, stress for family members can occur long before the parent/caregiver actually leaves home.

Operation: Military Kids will be of great benefit to schools as well. With increased knowledge of what challenges and emotions military families truly undergo, school personnel will be better equipped to meet the needs of these families. Community members, including local school board members, will all equally benefit from a better understanding of this reality.

In recapping the positive efforts in Wisconsin for Reserve and National Guard families, a continued objective of mine is information sharing. I feel this is crucial to the success of helping young people going through the deployment cycle. As I discussed in my April article, increasing awareness among those involved in the education process — including school board members



— is really the first step to take in helping these families. In fact, as the efforts to meet the needs of military families in Wisconsin continues, school board members can play a very important role in letting OMK team members know what is going on in their respective communities.

One of the biggest challenges we face as an OMK team is acquiring current knowledge of military units leaving or coming home. This gets even more challenging with the military’s use of Individual Augmen-

tees who are called upon on an individual basis to serve. But with the help of local school board members, we will be able to obtain the information we require to assist those in need. ■

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