

Guard spouses focus on family strength

by Barbara Crane
for the Tundra Times

The message was clear — families are important — and how to keep families strong, healthy and happy was the topic of a recent three-day Family Assistance Conference sponsored by the Alaska National Guard.

Almost 60 wives, as well as a few husbands, of Guard members traveled to Anchorage from homes all over the state to participate.

"Our major goal is to present an incredible amount of information on the services and benefits that are available to the spouses and families of Guard members," said Mary Schaeffer, conference coordinator and wife of Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer, adjutant general of the Alaska National Guard.

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"John has been in the Guard for over 30 years," Schaeffer said, "and even I didn't know about all the resources that are available."

Family support for the Guard has always been strong, especially in Western Alaska where membership is often a family tradition.

"The ladies had to take care of operating the radios at the armories while our husbands were down in Anchorage for their training," Schaeffer recalled. "We would pack our babies on our backs and put the other children on sleds to go over to the armory and help out."

"Those days are gone now, but there is still a lot that needs to be done, and there is a lot that you can participate in."

While Guard families have always given, there is growing awareness and official recognition of the Guard's need to give back and provide assistance to the families.

"Soldiers who are worried about home, their wives, their children and their families are distracted, and they don't perform their mission very well," said Dorothy Ogilvy-Lee, family program manager of the National Guard Bureau in Washington, D.C.

Notebooks were distributed with information on many subjects, including medical, insurance and travel benefits available to Guard members and advice on setting up village family support groups.

"If you haven't started a Family Assistance Program in your own community yet, please get them started as quickly as you can," Schaeffer said.

Conference speakers addressed a wide range of topics.

Doug Modig of the Rural Alaska Community Action Program talked about the beliefs and sense of values that are a part of his Native heritage. He said he feels traditional values have changed for a lot of reasons.

"There are so many destructive forces all around us," Modig said. "Alcohol makes a whole lot of other things seem OK. But it erodes the foundation of the family and destroys what we are as a people."

"You must have a clear vision of what you are and the way you want

things to be. If you change, the whole world changes for you."

Susan Soule of the Alaska Division of Mental Health stressed the importance of becoming involved and finding help for a friend or family member who is considering suicide.

Guard spouses also made presentations and talked informally in small groups about the problems they faced

and the solutions they found.

Liz Beans, wife of Col. Joseph Beans, talked about the problems her family faced when they were transferred from Bethel to Anchorage. She was worried about how her children would adjust, and she was afraid to drive in big city traffic.

"But Joe was traveling a lot, so I had to drive or be stranded at home.

The kids made friends at school right away, but it was hard for me to make friends at first. I was pretty shy.

"I recommend that a sponsorship committee be set up to help families who are new to a community," Beans said.

The spouses also toured Camp Carroll where Guard members spend their two weeks annual training.