



Base Realignment and Closure

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Garrison Commander looks forward to new challenges

By Minnie Jones
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When Col. Mary Garr became garrison commander of Fort Sam Houston five months ago, she expressed a desire to improve the communication process across the installation.

“In terms of the garrison’s mission and roles there is a duality of missions in supporting mission readiness and quality-of-life, and knowing that there are finite resources. Working to maintain that balance is extremely important for the garrison staff, so that we can provide the best support possible across all areas,” said Garr.

Not many garrison commanders are more connected to their posts than Garr, who calls San Antonio her home. Her Army and personal life has overlapped with Fort Sam Houston several times throughout her career.

Because of the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, “Fort Sam of yesterday is not the Fort Sam of today and definitely will not be the Fort Sam of tomorrow, with all the growth components going on,” she said.

In 2008, the focus was construction contract awarding, and the upcoming years will deal with executing those contracts. The next two years will be the most significant, due to several major projects set to break ground on Fort Sam Houston.

This year will be a big year for the post. One of the central developments is the construction of the Medical Education Training Campus, scheduled to open in 2010, and with it expanded staff and faculty, and thousands of military students from across the nation to attend medical training here.

METC will be Department of Defense’s shining star in first rate military medical training, transforming Fort Sam Houston from the “Home of Army Medicine” to the “Home of Military Medicine.”

Under the BRAC Joint Basing plan for San Antonio, installation support functions at Fort Sam Houston will combine with those at Randolph and Lackland Air Force Bases to form one of the largest base organizations within the Department of Defense.

Garr wants to ensure the Fort Sam community that as a garrison, and with all the BRAC changes taking place, “Fort Sam will still maintain its integrity as an Army centric, historic installation,” she said.

The Air Force will be the lead agency for the San Antonio Joint Base, providing support services under the joint base construct. The planning phase for that change is happening this year, but, as far

as the actual transitioning of post operations is concerned, the experience will be transparent Garr said.

Communication is one of Garr's highest priorities. "On my level, I am looking at improving our communication processes across the installation, at various levels, to ensure that our community knows what's going on at Fort Sam, today and tomorrow," she said.

Some of the things that we are doing are increased integration among our quality-of-life leaders on Fort Sam Houston, to see where we can better synchronize and provide more quality-of-life programs in concert with each other, instead of parallel to each other."

Garr has energized community town hall meetings, which she conducts quarterly. The next round of town hall meetings will begin in February.

She is initiating a new forum called the community information forum for senior tenant commanders and their command teams, specifically for command sergeant majors, spouses, Family Readiness Group leaders and housing area mayors. This forum is designed to provide monthly updates about activities and programs relevant of interest to those units.

A company commander and first sergeant course is scheduled to begin in March. This new program is designed to provide incoming supervisors an orientation about garrison operations and Family support services available on Fort Sam Houston to assist them in successfully commanding their companies.

Last year, Fort Sam Houston saw a significant increase in community and cultural activities on post. Not only were there more held here, but one of the biggest events last year was hosting country music artist, Tim McGraw, who thanked the military for their service by performing a free concert for about 25,000 service members and their Families.

In 2009, Garr wants to continue on that path of bringing more Family oriented events and activities to the post, and is working closely with the Directorate of Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation.

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service is putting a package together for Fort Sam Houston, similar to the ones at Forts Belvoir and Bliss, designing an improved community center for shopping and dining to include a movie theater.

After BRAC is complete in 2011, over 9,000 students will be rotating on and off Fort Sam Houston, "We need a fuller range of activities for Soldiers coming on post," said Garr. The goal is keeping the Soldiers on Fort Sam, so they won't have to go off post to find something to do."

When looking ahead, financial resources to make these quality-of-life enhancements on Fort Sam Houston happen is always a challenge. "We just have to find a way to make it happen, because the needs are still there," said Garr.

Another challenge that Garr faces is receiving continuing feedback from the Fort Sam Houston community. Her staff is working on various avenues to assist the community with an opportunity to voice their opinions and provide suggestions to the command.

The Army Family Action Plan is one of those avenues available to let the Army leadership know what works, and what doesn't. AFAP boxes have been placed throughout post to solicit the community's feedback. There is an AFAP conference scheduled Feb. 4 through 6 at the Sam Houston Club.

"... Programs don't happen without community involvement and community support. It is critical that people volunteer or make suggestions. Even though our resources are limited, we need to know how we can improve our services or provide more programs at Fort Sam Houston," she said.

"We (Fort Sam Houston) want to be one voice and one community moving in a forward direction, not multiple voices, going in different directions."