Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum officials update community with COVID-19 response, announce next town hall

Fort Drum, NY - Lt. Col. Jeffery Lucas, Fort Drum garrison commander, said that it is not “business as usual” on the installation as the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to impact the lives of everyone worldwide.

However, he said that Fort Drum and 10th Mountain Division (LI) officials have taken appropriate responses and will continue to do so as required to protect the health and well-being of the community.

“The health and protection of the community is absolutely paramount,” Lucas said. “As we are trying to address each of these concerns with a focus on the health and protection of our community, it’s to do so also with the preservation of future capability.”

This was the message Fort Drum officials reiterated to the community March 17 during a virtual Town Hall, while articulating the post’s response to COVID-19 and the changes that have occurred because of it.

One change that people will notice is also happening in stores across the nation. The Commissary and Main Post Exchange began imposing limits on high purchase items so that they can maintain their stock until resupply. Effective March 18, a 100-percent ID check was implemented for patrons entering the Commissary while all other visitor access is revoked.

Additionally, all Fort Drum Exchange restaurants will currently remain open, but with take-out and/or delivery options only.

Lucas addressed why the child development centers and the school age center will remain open when guidance dictates people should practice social distancing.

“It may seem a little bit counterintuitive to keep a facility open where we, in fact, aggregate a number of people together, but there is a very important reason why we do that,” he said. “Many of our service members start their days by bringing their children to our child development centers. So that’s one of the facilities that we provide that is absolutely mission essential as we continue our mission in the 10th Mountain Division here on Fort Drum.”

Lucas said that the CDCs also support civilian employees, to include many medical personnel.

“What will begin today, if you have a child in one of our CDCs on the installation, you will be receiving notification on where your child falls into the established prioritization for mission essential,” he said. “What we will ask is, if you are not mission essential and your child is coming to the CDC, we are going to ask you not to bring your child to the child development centers so we can continue to provide services to those who absolutely need them as mission essential members of our community.”

Lucas said that there will be no fees for parents who have to remove their child from a CDC. Once those facilities return to fully functioning status, those children will be placed back into the system and not placed on a waiting list.

In addition, Lucas said that cleaning protocols have been enhanced at all of the installation facilities such as the CDCs and physical fitness centers. A day after the town hall, Fort Drum Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation announced that all of its fitness facilities, to include Pine Plains Bowling Center is closed until further notice.

“This is not business as usual,” Lucas said. “That being said, we are all in this together. What I see in the community and why we wanted to reach out in this forum is to discuss what we are doing as a community for you, for one another and for ourselves.”

Maj. Gen. Brian J. Mennes, 10th Mountain Division (LI) and Fort Drum commander, addressed some of the issues facing division Soldiers and their families.

He said that, to mitigate the risk of exposure to COVID-19, the Department of Defense has stopped all permanent change of station (PCS) and temporary duty (TDY) movement until May 11.

“We have also limited passes and leave to emergency situations only, as strictly defined by Army regulations and policy,” Mennes said. “We have reduced attendance to off-post schools … and we’ve also reduced major exercises, as you may have heard, and reduced all conferences.”

Mennes said that all gatherings on post will have limited attendance, which includes the division change of responsibility ceremony scheduled March 18 as an invitation-only event. He has given units the authority to apply social distancing measures to physical training formations and other group activities.

The upcoming rotation for 2nd Brigade Combat Team to the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana, has not been cancelled or delayed. Mennes said that if he receives notice otherwise then 2nd Brigade Combat Team Soldiers should expect that brigade training will be conducted on post to meet mission requirements.

“The 1st Brigade Combat Team’s deployment to Afghanistan is going to continue, (but) we do acknowledge that a modest number of those Soldiers will return based on the president’s decision to downsize forces in Afghanistan,” Mennes said. “The families of those Soldiers will be notified through their chain of command and FRG (family readiness group) when, and who, those Soldiers will be coming home.”

The 10th Mountain Division Headquarters is currently scheduled for deployment. Mennes said that Soldiers departing ahead of the main body are allowed to self-quarantine at home as a preventative measure to reduce risk of exposure.

He said that Soldiers who were on temporary duty assignments to other installations for training and educational purposes should not have difficulty returning to Fort Drum.

“They are still being allowed to travel,” Mennes said. “We don’t have a very large number coming from a very high-risk area where they would have to undergo quarantine.”

Mennes also said that he also does not anticipate an extended deployment schedule for troops currently serving overseas, such as the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade.

Col. Robert Heath, Fort Drum MEDDAC commander, said that, while all medical facilities on post will remain open, they are reducing the volume of face-to-face interactions by postponing routine appointments and procedures.

The three symptoms of COVID-19 are shortness of breath, fever and cough. Heath said that patients who are actively ill should stay home and contact the facility where they normally receive primary health care.

TRICARE beneficiaries can use the 24-hour TRICARE Nurse Advice line for guidance at 1-800-874-2273.

“The TRICARE Nurse Advice Line will be able to talk you through your concerns, conduct a triage and direct you to the appropriate facility or locations to receive care,” Heath said.

The Defense Health Agency recently hosted a TRICARE COVID-19 Town Hall, which can be viewed at www.facebook.com/pg/TRICARE/videos.

Heath also advised using the Army Public Health Center at 1-800-222-9698 or, locally, the Samaritan Medical Center’s COVID-19 Resource Line at 315-755-3100. There is also a New York State COVID-19 Hotline available at 1-888-364-3065.

“We’re working collaboratively off-post with our civilian health care partners – Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization, Samaritan Medical Center, Carthage Area Hospital, River Hospital – we remain in contact with those organizations on a regular basis,” Heath said. “We are all consistently following those same appropriate clinical protocols and CDC guidelines as we move forward.”

He said that the pharmacy will remain open, as it is a high-volume service not just for service members and their families but also for the retiree population in the area. Health said to comply with social distancing guidance, a drive-through pharmacy will be established so that people can pick up their prescriptions without leaving their vehicles.

To place a refill request, contact the Guthrie Clinic Pharmacy refill line at (315) 772-3696.

Heath also said that they are working toward a process of screening staff and patients before they enter medical facilities.

During the Q&A session, Mennes confirmed that a part-time employee from the Fort Drum Education Center tested positive for COVID-19. The employee, who lives in the Albany area, last worked on post March 11-13 and had received confirmation of a positive diagnosis on March 17. Fort Drum Medical Command personnel are identifying the clients who may have been in contact with the employee and they are being advised on how to proceed, to include a 14-day self-quarantine.

The Education Center is currently closed and is being cleaned in accordance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention protocols. The Robert C. McEwen Library, located in the same building, is also closed.

While other facilities and operations are closed, such as the Fort Drum Tax Advisory Facility, the Fort Drum Reel Time Theater and the 10th Mountain Division and Fort Drum Museum, Mennes assured the community that Fort Drum is still open.

“This installation will remain open in some capacity, regardless of what happens,” he said. “Similar to what we do when we close the installation for snow emergencies, you could see limitations for folks coming to work who are deemed mission essential. We’re not there yet, but that’s certainly a tool we have available based on the threats and risks to this community and installation.”

Mennes said that community members should monitor official Fort Drum and 10th Mountain Division sites for updates and use those mediums and their chain of command to ask questions.

Information is updated regularly on the Fort Drum website at https://home.army.mil/drum/index.php/about/Garrison/public-affairs/coronavirus-update and also at www.facebook.com/drum.10thmountain.

“We learn a lot from those questions and, certainly, if we are not being clear or you would like to learn more about what we are doing and why, those really inform us on how to better care for you,” he said.

The next virtual COVID-19 Town Hall is scheduled at noon (12 p.m.) on Friday. To view the COVID-19 Town Hall from March 17, visit https://www.facebook.com/pg/drum.10thmountain/videos.

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