Press Release

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Fort Drum workforce adjusts to meet challenges of COVID-19 pandemic

FORT DRUM, N.Y. -- The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to disrupt routines and shake any sense of normalcy within the Fort Drum community in ways most people never possibly imagined. And yet there’s still work to be done as key services surge to meet the unique requirements of the installation's prevention and mitigation response.

Well before the first wave of customers arrive at the Main Post Exchange, associates pull latex gloves over their hands and thoroughly wipe down cashier stations and frequently touched surfaces.

“We’re taking extra measures to make sure we’re cleaning and sanitizing all surfaces more often,” said Pat Hastings, Fort Drum AAFES general manager. “Every 20 or 30 minutes we are sanitizing all touch points – anything that people touch. We want to make sure it is safe for our customers and for our associates.”

Similar to stores across the nation, the challenge here is to meet the demand for items such as toilet paper, hand sanitizer and cleaning products.

Hastings said that some community members will call the store asking if such items are available before they leave their homes, but the arrival of high-demand products are also posted on the Exchange’s Facebook page.

Store manager Jackie Bellis has worked for the Exchange for more than 36 years, and she said that she has never experienced anything like this before.

“It’s pretty stressful for everybody,” she said. “It can actually hurt your heart a little sometimes. I had a young girl come in the other day, and she was holding her baby and looking for toilet paper. It just killed me to tell her that we didn’t have toilet paper. As soon as a shipment comes in, I post in on Facebook, so hopefully she came back in and got some.”

Bellis said that she saw another customer break down in tears when she saw shelves stocked with tissues, paper towels and toilet paper.

“It does affect you,” she said. “We’re here to get the things you need into your hands, and so it can be emotional these days.”

Hastings said that the COVID-19 outbreak has been stressful on patrons and employees alike.

“I’ve had a couple people in the main store who have quit or decided to self-quarantine because they have low immune systems,” Hastings said. “With one woman, this is her first pregnancy, so she didn’t feel comfortable being in the store. So, we’re not making anybody come to work if they don’t feel they should. We’re fine with that; we have a liberal leave policy and we are here to support our team.”

Racquel Mackey, human resources manager, said that they will also continue to hire new associates to fill vacancies. A current list of employment opportunities and instructions to apply are available at www.applymyexchange.com.

Michael Ferguson, Fort Drum Army Emergency Relief officer, said that the AER fundraising campaign is continuing as normal and that the staff is still processing casework. However, now this is being done entirely through teleworking. He also said that there hasn’t been any requests so far for assistance related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

“AER has been able to support many different situations, to include several natural disasters that affected our military,” Ferguson said. “AER Headquarters has implemented new policy and procedures to specifically address Soldiers and families affected by COVID-19.”

For AER assistance, call (315) 772-6550 / 6555. After normal business hours, an AER caseworker can be reached at 1-877-272-7337. For information about AER, visit www.aerhq.org.

Chris Ramie, Fort Drum Army Wellness Center supervisory health educator, said that his staff is getting used to the fact they will not be able to meet with clients, conduct fitness assessments or offer health coaching in their office.

However, they began livestreaming some of their classes via Facebook live, starting at 1 p.m. March 24 with a Stress Management class. For more information, or to attend the virtual class, visit www.facebook.com/Army-Wellness-Center-Fort-Drum-320246481446058. Future classes will include Healthy Sleep Habits, Fueling for Health and Meals in Minutes.

“A class that we have but don’t regularly offer is ‘Staying Fit – Home and Away,’” Ramie said. “I think this class is going to be key right now, with gyms being closed and people being isolated in their homes.”

Additionally, they would like to begin offering instructional videos as they explore different ways to reach community members.

“Our individual ‘virtual’ appointments will be done over the phone for now and will focus on Health Coaching, Biofeedback, Exercise Prescription, and Metabolic testing,” Ramie said. “We plan on providing other snippets of information as well to include exercise demos and relaxation techniques.”

Ramie said that he is optimistic that the AWC staff can continue to support the Fort Drum community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Honestly, I really think we are built for this,” he said. “There is so much good that people can still tap into with the resources that we offer and the way we are offering them. I want them to feel comfortable knowing that we are here to assist during this difficult time. It's going to be a challenge, but I also think it might be a preview of what's to come in the future of health and wellness care delivery.”

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Photo Caption:

An employee at the Fort Drum Exchange wipes down her work area. This has become a frequent safety measure taken to clean and sterilize surfaces that customers and associates frequently touch. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created challenges to the way the Fort Drum garrison workforce conducts its day-to-day operations in support of the 10th Mountain Division (LI) and community. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

Media with inquiries regarding this press release should contact Fort Drum Public Affairs, Julie Halpin, julie.a.halpin2.civ@mail.mi, 315-772-8286.