Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum and Northern New York Community Leaders unified in fight against COVID 19

Fort Drum, NY - Fort Drum and 10th Mountain Division (LI) officials met with tri-county leaders March 25 to discuss ongoing efforts to combat the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19) while keeping an open dialogue to support one another through the pandemic.

The small group forum was held at the Jefferson County Historic Courthouse, with others contributing via teleconferencing. In all, nearly 20 community leaders participated.

Col. Jeffery Lucas, Fort Drum garrison commander, said that even as people are socially distancing themselves from one another, a positive “reverse effect” happens when communities work together to share strategies, provide support and dispel rumors that misinform a concerned nation.

“Fort Drum is part of this community, and we don’t see ourselves as separate or distinct. We are part of this community’s fight to flatten the curve of this pandemic,” Lucas said. “From every level of leadership, at every echelon, we are absolutely committed to flattening the curve. We will maintain this open dialogue to make sure we are communicating with our partners on a cohesive prevention and mitigation strategy as we address this crisis.”

Scott Gray, chairman of the Jefferson County Board of Legislators, said that a special thanks has to go out to the health care professionals who serve on the front lines of this pandemic.

“It is in front of them every day, putting not only themselves at risk but their families, at a certain extent, at risk,” he said. “I’m certain that our health care facilities are taking every precaution to protect them, and they are doing an outstanding job.”

Representatives from area hospitals provided updates on staffing levels, inventory of beds and ventilators and COVID-19 screening and testing measures.

Ginger Hall, Jefferson County public health director, said that part of their strategy includes public education and a Live Facebook Q&A.

“We are trying to decrease the fear and increase the knowledge,” she said.

Tom Carman, Samaritan Medical Center chief executive officer and president said that, in accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, four mandates are guiding their actions: patient care, reduce the spread of the virus, protect the medical staff and maintain hospital operations.

He said that a resource phone line, operated by registered nurses, has helped to build public trust, educate people on the virus and provide assistance.

Brig. Gen. Michelle A. Schmidt, 10th Mountain Division (LI) deputy commanding general-support, said that strategies implemented by off-post agencies mirror what is being done at Fort Drum.

She said that daily social media updates, video messages, town halls and information posted on the Fort Drum website are ways they are communicating facts and correcting rumors.

She said that this is critical when situations change sometimes hour by hour, and keeping the community informed impacts people’s morale and well-being.

Most recently, Maj. Gen. Brian J. Mennes, 10th Mountain Division (LI) and Fort Drum commander, directed a series of changes to Soldiers’ duty requirements to enforce social distancing. Shift work, telework, liberal leave policy and safety leave are all being used to keep non-mission-essential personnel at home.

Col. Robert Heath, MEDDAC commander and director of health services for Fort Drum, said that medical personnel on post are continuing to improve and streamline processes daily to make it easier and more efficient for beneficiaries. He said that isolation and quarantine measures are similar to off-post medical facilities. He discussed the drive-up pharmacy and single point of entry screenings at the clinics.

“We are also reducing routine appointments, reducing face-to-face appointments, and increasing virtual appointments,” he said.

Lucas said that he is appreciative of the partnership Fort Drum has with area health providers, but in this time of crisis he also wanted to acknowledge the community educators.

“We have no schools on our installation, and because your schools are our schools and our schools are yours, we are in this together,” he said.

“Those educators who are figuring out how, in different forms, to teach and keep school-age children engaged and focused – giving them a sense of normalcy. I want to thank them for their efforts.”

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