

# ARMY FLYER

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MAJ. ROBERT FELLINGHAM

An AH-64 Apache from A Company, 1st-3rd Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, 12th Combat Aviation Brigade engages targets downrange with its 30mm cannon during aerial gunnery tables March 4. Crews conducted individual as well as advanced tables where two ships cooperated to eliminate targets.

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# DPS balances operational capabilities despite COVID-19 pandemic challenges

By Jim Hughes

*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

The Fort Rucker Directorate of Public Safety is engaged in a balancing act that all boils down to protection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The security, law enforcement, and fire and emergency services professionals on post are challenged to continue their mission of protecting the people and assets of Fort Rucker, while also ensuring they are protecting their own teammates so they can accomplish the critical DPS mission, according to director Lt. Col. Phillip Lenz.

“Preserving and protecting the DPS force – that is my No. 1 mission,” Lenz said. “It’s about informing and educating the team based on information from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and our higher headquarters; it’s about making sure our people have the proper PPE (personal protective equipment); and it’s about practicing social distancing wherever and whenever we can while still getting the job done.”

He added that while the COVID-19 pandemic creates many uncertainties, the direction and guidance from higher up the chain of command has been clear from the start.

“The CG (Maj. Gen. David J. Francis, Fort Rucker and U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence commanding general) and garrison commander (Col. Whitney B. Gardner) have been exceptional with communicating that the No. 1 focus being protecting the force,” Lenz said. “When you hear that from higher leadership, it really resonates and applies across the overall force – definitely for our team.”

With the COVID-19 pandemic, it also comes down to being “prepared and ready to support the USAACE flight training mission, where we compliment and support



ARMY PHOTO

**A Fort Rucker security guard scans an ID card at one of the post gates recently.**

what is happening on the ground and, most importantly, what is happening in the skies,” he said.

“I think we’re looking really good across the board with that with our prevention measures in place,” he said, adding that the DPS team is educated on the threat, has the proper protective equipment they need and has a firm grasp of its mission. “We’re doing everything we can to make sure we have a full, prepared, robust team that can accomplish our mission.”

Above and beyond the steps already mentioned, 911 operators are screening callers for any potential symptoms among the people where the call originates from so responders can ensure they have the proper PPE, using the phone whenever possible when dealing with minor issues and going digital with many administrative duties, according to Lenz.

“We’re really taking a more pragmatic approach to help ensure we maintain social distancing to preserve the force,” he said. “If there’s a true threat on the installation, we will respond, but we are doing lot of different things to help us meet the CG’s and nation-

al intent of keeping social distancing within our lines of effort.”

Lenz credits his team for the successes DPS has experienced so far during the pandemic.

“We have a very professional security and law enforcement team, and fire and emergency services team,” he said. “We exist for our customers and they definitely need us to be ready to respond to anything that could come up at any time. We in DPS remain poised and ready to deliver professional, world-class emergency services to everyone on the installation.”

And off the installation, as well, as in recent weeks the Fort Rucker Fire Department has responded to fires in Daleville and Enterprise to continue fulfilling the mutual aid agreements the post maintains with surrounding communities, Lenz added.

“(The surrounding communities) have always been there to help us out and we want to make sure that we continue to help them,” he said. “We had a fire recently, a pretty large structural fire in Daleville, and our team deployed and helped limit the damage and helped save lives. Our great team is not just

about protecting people inside the confines of Fort Rucker – we can reach out and balance that mission and also support the local communities that support us.”

Lenz added that while the community is following orders and staying inside, Fort Rucker hasn’t seen any kind of crime spike on post, but reports nationally of alcohol sales going up by 50% are definitely on his radar.

“Of course, when you have an increase in alcohol consumption, one unfortunate byproduct is you often see an increase in domestic violence cases, child abuse cases and the like,” he said. “We haven’t seen that here, but I would like to ask people to be smart about how they are doing things and to keep their eyes open to problems in their vicinity.

“We realize social distancing and some of the directives that we have in place can be challenging at times, but let’s not resort to alcohol, and if you do, make sure alcohol is being consumed responsibly and is not fueling criminal activity. Aviation students worked too hard to get here only to have their careers ruined by alcohol,” Lenz said.

“We, as the military police, are the eyes and ears out there and we’ve done a really good job of interacting with the public, mostly during the weekends and during evening hours, making sure people are practicing social distancing,” he said. “But we also look to our friends and neighbors who live on the installation to get that word out and help us make sure everyone is practicing social distancing. If you see something, say something to the other individuals and take that community approach.”

He also reminded people that the post still maintains its 911 call center at all times to report emergencies on post, and people can also call the military police at 255-2222 if necessary.



# LEANING INTO IT

## DPW gets creative in supporting Fort Rucker COVID-19 response

By Jim Hughes  
*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

The people of the Fort Rucker Directorate of Public Works are collectively leaning into supporting the post's COVID-19 pandemic response.

The staff, as a whole, is also exercising creativity, and doing things above and beyond their normal duties, according to Joseph Wyka, director of DPW.

"We're focused on COVID-19 as our primary task right now. Every day we come to work, all of us lean in and see what we need to do to support the CG (Maj. Gen. David J. Francis, Fort Rucker and U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence commanding general) and the ongoing training here," Wyka said.

"My guidance to my staff is to be creative and be proactive – lean into the problems that show up," he added. "If it's something you can help with, don't worry so much if it's in your lane or not, just engage and move the ball down the field – that's been my guidance and I think they've enjoyed being able to help."

That help has ranged from getting the post's in-processing and quarantine facilities ready to go in Bldgs. 313, 314 and 315; producing and installing signage leading newcomers to the facilities; to installing Plexiglas shields in high-traffic areas such as the ID card section in Bldg. 5700, and helping both the Army and Air Force Exchange Service and commissary with their shields – "a team effort," Wyka said; to donating personal pro-

TECTIVE equipment the DPW Environment Division had in stock to the garrison's efforts; to designing hand-washing stations for high-traffic areas on post; to working with teams to plan on how to deep clean and restore any areas on post that may become exposed to the virus.

DPW also continues to work with its many contractor partners who help keep the post running with how to keep social distancing yet still get the job done, he added.

"A lot of our contractors work elbow to elbow, so we've had to help them adapt their procedures to be able to continue construction and maintenance without violating social distancing – we've been successful at doing that.

"We've also had to defer some tasks. There are some areas where we would normally have people working in confined spaces together, so we've deferred some of that maintenance until after this has passed," Wyka added.

But there have been challenges, according to the director, with some outside contractors experiencing difficulties getting materials. "Things like cabinets – all kinds of things that you might not expect there to be shortages of, but maybe there was cabinet shop that was going to build cabinets, but right now they're taking a pause. Some things like that have been a challenge for us every day."



ARMY PHOTO

**Contractor personnel demolish Bldg. 6031 recently to make way for the new Training Support Facility.**

There's also a shortage of portable hand-washing stations for purchase for high-traffic areas, forcing the DPW team to design and build their own to use around the post. "We're fabricating those from scratch – most people don't think of that, but we have the ability with our shops to fabricate things like that. It's kind of fun and satisfying to be able to be a little creative and use a little ingenuity, and ultimately increase our posture as far as protecting us from COVID-19."

Above and beyond the COVID-19 response, DPW workers are still hard at work – largely teleworking from home and only going into the office when necessary – continuing with their normal missions, such as environmental protection, operations and maintenance, managing the contracts that keep the post infrastructure going, planning and design, and housing, Wyka said.

"Those are all still going forward, I would say they may have slowed a little bit, but we're

still moving forward," he said.

Wyka said he is proud of the DPW team and how members have responded to the current situation.

"Things are going very well at DPW – we've transitioned smoothly to telework," he said. "Most of the feedback I get from our staff is that they are very ready to return to work, and very much miss their coworkers and those interactions.

"Our approach has been to relook our priorities and our priority when we come to work right now is COVID-19 response, and being available – on the phone, on email or in person – when someone needs something.

"This is new ground for all of us," he continued. "It's been exciting to work so closely with the other directorates, and I think everyone is kind of dealing with the same thing. I think Fort Rucker is doing very well handling this."

# OUTSIDE THE BOX MINISTRY

*Fort Rucker chaplains go digital to meet demands of 'spatial distancing'*

**By Jim Hughes**

*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

When the post began practicing social distancing on a large scale in mid-March, Fort Rucker chaplains immediately realized they were facing a monumental task in their mission to tend to the spiritual resiliency of the post community.

But far from that mission coming to a screeching halt, the talented chaplaincy staff thought a little outside of the box and took to the internet to continue its ministry to the community, according to Chaplain (Col.) Ed Hamlin, U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence and garrison chaplain.

"COVID-19 caused us to close a lot of facilities and cancel events due to spatial distancing – I won't call it social, I prefer spatial, keeping our space," Hamlin said, adding that because of the technical requirements of Facebook Live the religious services office decided to go with creating its own Fort Rucker Chaplain YouTube channel instead to continue its ministry.

The effort debuted on YouTube March 22 with recently pre-recorded Catholic and Protestant services being made available at their normal start times for people to view. New services were added to the channel March 29. Future services will make their appearances at the normal service times, as well, Hamlin said, adding there will be an Easter Sunrise Service on the channel April 12 at 6:30 a.m.

And people are watching them, Hamlin said, adding that there were more than 700 views of the services the first week, while normal in-person attendance averages about

600-800 people. "We're running right with it – we're very, very close."

But the RSO didn't stop there, as March 23 chaplains began taping daily devotionals on a rotating basis, which are also available on the channel.

Between the services and devotionals, Hamlin said there were more than 1,000 views, which is even more impressive when considering most views are being seen by multiple people.

The chapel also offers curbside Eucharist for the Catholic community Sundays at 9 a.m. and communion for the Protestant community on Mondays, available by calling 334-447-1807, the chaplain added.

Those just needing to talk are welcome to use the chapel's new Talk-2-Chaplain phone line available at 255-9566.

"Individuals can call in and say, 'Hey, I just need to talk to someone,' Hamlin said. "We will also take one-on-one walk-ins if people need to speak to a chaplain at Wings Chapel or Main Post Chapel. During times

like these, people need a comforting word, maybe a word of hope or encouragement, and we want to be able to provide that for them."

Hamlin is happy with the efforts of his staff in making all of this happen and succeeding beyond expectations while conducting business in a totally new manner.

"For both the Catholic priests and the preachers, this has been a little bit surreal – it's something we've never done before," the colonel said. "When you're preaching or speaking or holding Mass to an empty sanctuary, it's a little bit harder, especially when

talented enough to step to the plate, and be able to do other roles and responsibilities, as well."

It's a good thing, too, because the chaplaincy is seeing an uptick in the need for its services, Hamlin said.

"There's not an uptick in bad stuff, but there is an uptick in people just wanting some words of encouragement and hope," he said, adding that spiritual resiliency is important at all times, but even more so in times such as these.

"We understand that not everyone wants to worship – we've got that. But I think everyone has a longing for some kind of spiritual element about their life," Hamlin said. "Chaplains provide an element that helps individuals strengthen their spiritual resiliency – you need something outside of yourself in these times. That's where the chaplains can come in and help individuals clarify what it is in their spiritual life that is that factor that helps them bounce back."

People can check out the chapel's offerings on its channel at [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCehSmam8kzudL\\_90vuDifCA/](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCehSmam8kzudL_90vuDifCA/) or just searching YouTube for Fort Rucker Chaplain.

"We're looking forward to the day this thing is over and getting our congregations back worshipping together – that's what we're longing for," the chaplain said. "But until then, we're going to continue to support our commander-in-chief and our local leadership, and do the things that we need to do to mitigate all of the COVID-19 risks while at the same time reaching out to people and ministering to them."

**Would you like to speak with a Chaplain?**

**(334) 255-9566**

"Talk-2-Chaplain" is a way for you to speak confidentially with a chaplain. We're standing by Monday through Friday, 0900-1700.



you have a camera filming you. But overall, I have nothing but positive words to say – and they're learning a new skillset.

"I've got a great staff," Hamlin added, "Everyone's got their roles and responsibilities, but we've been able during this time to also to be able to say, 'OK, these were your primary roles and responsibilities, but in case you go down, who's your secondary?' They're



# SOLDIERS HELPING SOLDIERS

## Army Emergency Relief stands ready to support during pandemic

By Jim Hughes

*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

While much has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, one constant remains -- Army Emergency Relief stands ready to help Soldiers help Soldiers.

Despite the economic crunch associated with the pandemic, local AER officials aren't seeing an uptick of requests from Soldiers for support, according to Beth Gunter, Army Community Service AER financial counselor.

"I don't know if it's that they don't know that we're here, or if the stay at home policy is a concern," she said, adding that the office is always manned and the staff is taking steps to keep people who need support safe when coming to AER.

"People need to make appointments with us because of the health concerns, but that doesn't mean we're not providing AER assistance during the COVID-19 situation," Gunter said. "In fact, this is a time when there are probably more financial hardships going on -- such as a spouse who has lost their job, and the needs of a family are not being met by just the Soldier's income.

"AER can help out, provide assistance," she added. "If someone was financially impacted because of the stop movement, we can provide assistance in that aspect, as well. We



PHOTO BY BETH GUNTER

**Fort Rucker's Sgt. Ted E. Bear shows his support for Army Emergency Relief and its mission to help Soldiers help Soldiers April 13.**

want Soldiers to know that we understand it may have to be an exception to what we typically do, but we do want to help out if we're able to in order to keep them from going into further financial hardship."

She said much of the process of getting help from AER can be done on the phone or via encrypted email, but the first step is to call the staff at 255-2341.

"That way I can discuss the situation with them, so I know what paperwork to send to them so they can start the process," she said, adding that people should not hes-

itate to reach out for a helping hand if they find themselves in need. "At least make that phone call and see how the program works, what the process is and the benefits of the program. We're an Army family and we're here to help each other. That's what AER is all about -- helping each other.

"It could be during normal times, when we're here for vehicle repairs, emergency leave, special needs equipment for children," she said. "But it's also about during this unexpected pandemic, where we're learning all kinds of new things every day and different

financial hardships are occurring, so we want to make sure that we stick together through this."

Soldiers won't find a better deal, either, as relief comes in the form of 0% loans, and grants that don't need to be paid back.

For more information on AER and how it helps Soldiers help Soldiers, call the Fort Rucker staff at 255-2341. People who would like to donate to the program can visit <https://www.armyemergencyrelief.org/>.

# FULLY COMMITTED

## Commissary overcomes challenges presented by COVID-19 pandemic

By Jim Hughes

*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

The Fort Rucker Commissary continues with its mission of serving Soldiers, family members and veterans amidst the many challenges brought on by the need for social distancing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the store is experiencing shortages in high-demand items, such as hand sanitizers, disinfectant sprays and wipes, bleach, toilet paper, paper towels, Marisol Hennessey, store director, said operations are going well overall and suppliers are catching up with the increased demand.

"The Fort Rucker Commissary is facing challenges, as everyone is, during the COVID-19 pandemic," she said. "But we're doing all we can to continue the excellent service our customers have come to expect from us and, at the same time, protect our employees and customers from this threat. We remain fully committed to the Soldiers, family members and veterans of the Fort Rucker community."

That commitment has resulted in a number of changes at the store that affect customers and employees alike, Hennessey said.

Sneeze guards have been installed at the check-out registers.

Employees are following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations on wearing face masks, and the Defense Commissary Agency recently mandated that all customers will be required to wear a face covering, as well, starting April

10, according to memo sent by Rogers E. Campbell, DECA Senior Executive Service executive director of store operations.

All shoppers and employees entering the commissary must have their temperature checked upon entering the store.

Priority shopping for seniors, disabled, military in uniform, immunocompromised people and spouses of deployed service members with young children can shop between 9-10 a.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays and 10-11 a.m. Sundays.

Commissary staff asks customers to use credit, debit, Military Star Card or gift cards, if possible, to reduce the transfer and use of cash. Customers can still get cash back as long as the store has the ability to keep sufficient change on hand and does accept cash when necessary.

Customers are no longer required to sign their credit card transactions. This is being done temporarily to prevent spreading germs from patron to patron.

As an additional precaution, the commissary has discontinued the use of reusable shopping bags.

"In order to continue to find ways to keep patrons and employees safe during this pandemic, we will soon receive floor graphics that are intended to encourage social distancing at patron check-out," Hennessey added.



JIMMIE CUMMINGS

A sign at the entrance of the Fort Rucker Commissary alerts patrons to its 100% ID check.



# 'WIN-WIN'

## AAFES debuts curbside pickup at Fort Rucker

By Jim Hughes  
*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

The Fort Rucker Post Exchange debuted its new curbside pickup service April 10.

The new service, which the Army and Air Force Exchange Service was already running successful tests on at other locations, is a “win-win” for the PX staff and its customers, according to Brenda Hyland, Maxwell/Fort Rucker/Gunter exchange general manager.

“We’re excited about it – we think it’s a great addition,” Hyland said. “It was something we were working on getting anyway, but with the current environment it’s a great extra tool for serving our customers.”

To use the new tool, people just need to log onto or create their account at <https://www.shopmyexchange.com/>, pick the items they wish to purchase, select pick up in store and pay online, the general manager said. The Fort Rucker PX staff will then put the order together and notify patrons it is ready via email, text or phone call – the patron’s choice.

Patrons then go to pick up their items in the parking lot near the employee entrance, which is near the gazebo on the side of the parking lot nearest the arts and crafts center, Hyland added. Signs mark the curbside pickup parking spots and patrons then can call to have their purchases brought out to their car.

Patrons will receive the number to call when they are notified their items are available, and the number is also be posted on the parking spot signs.

“You can even just pop the trunk and we’ll put it in there -- we won’t even touch your car if you want it that way,” she said, adding that when patrons make their purchases online, the site will inform them if an item isn’t in stock at the Fort Rucker store. “Pretty much all items are available, but if we don’t carry an item in our location, you can still order it and pick it up in store – there may be a little delay because we have to wait for it to be delivered to our store.”

Hyland said things are going well at AAFES facilities on Fort Rucker, although things are “a little slow at the moment,” at the food establishments and their carryout-only services.

“It’s had an impact, and I’d like to encourage folks to use our restaurants,” Hyland said, adding that AAFES and its brand franchisees are regularly inspected by public health and other organizations, and also that the staff is making everything as safe as possible for people to continue to purchase food at the establishments.



“We’re doing everything we can to mitigate any risk – I’ve been eating in the food court, personally,” she said, adding that the staff has shut down the self-service drink stations and the staff is dispensing people’s beverages.

AAFES has also installed Plexiglas shields and marked out social distancing guidelines at registers at its facilities, the general manager said. “Command has been really great having people every day at the main exchange taking people’s temperatures to ensure no one has fever coming into exchange – employees and customers. I think that gives everyone an extra layer of peace of mind.”

AAFES staff has also stepped up its cleaning by using food-grade sanitizers and constantly wiping down frequently-touched surfaces and shopping carts, she said.

Hyland said she’s proud of her staff and

the work they’ve done to keep AAFES facilities as safe as possible for shoppers and employees alike.

“I am so proud of them,” she said. “I can’t say enough good things about our team. Everyone is stepping up to the plate and doing an outstanding job. Even in trying times, they come in every day, smile and work hard and do everything they can to serve our customers. I also want to thank our customers – you truly are the best customers in the world.”

She also thanked the entire Fort Rucker team for its support of AAFES and its mission to serve Soldiers, family members and veterans.

“They’ve been really communicative and helpful – I think they’re doing an excellent job,” Hyland said.



# CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH

*Despite event cancellations, support available to Army families*

By Jim Hughes  
*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

April is both the Month of the Military Child and Child Abuse Prevention Month.

And while the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in planned events being cancelled on post, the Directorate of Family, and Morale, Welfare and Recreation's Army Community Service still stands ready to support Soldiers and families, said Joy McCormick, Fort Rucker Family Advocacy Program and New Parent Support Program home visitor.

"Military children are asked to be flexible and endure many obstacles during their parents' military careers. They demonstrate great resilience in life," she said. "All of the special activities that were planned for this month have been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but ACS Family Advocacy Program has attempted to share helpful tips to families via social media during the pandemic to help address the added stressors of created by the current conditions.

"There are many activities being offered online for families to do at home," McCormick added. "Do outdoor activities, play board games, read a book, put puzzles together, start a family craft project, do spring cleaning, or be creative with activities."

One ACS-promoted activity is the Kindness Chain, she said, which challenges families to write an act of kindness that they have witnessed during the day or week and begin creating their chain.

"Once we are able to gather together

again, we will be asking Fort Rucker families to share their chains with the Fort Rucker community," McCormick said.

National Child Abuse Prevention Month is an annual observance in the United States dedicated to raising awareness and preventing child abuse and neglect. April has been designated Child Abuse Prevention Month in the United States since 1983, she added.

"It is a commitment to giving every child a chance to succeed, and to ensure that every child grows up in a safe, stable and nurturing environment that is free from abuse and neglect," McCormick added.

"ACS is raising awareness of the Department of Defense and Fort Rucker commitment to keeping military children safe through the prevention of abuse and neglect by highlighting the power of a safe, caring adult in the life of a child," McCormick continued. "A caring adult with a steady presence in a child's life can be a source of trust and support, and is especially important for kids with adverse childhood experiences. Children who grow up with such an adult in their lives are significantly more likely to develop healthy social behaviors and positive coping skills that will help them to weather life's difficulties, including abuse and neglect."

She said that people who suspect abuse is taking place, should remember that "it is not your place to prove that abuse is taking place,



BETH GUNTER

**The Child Abuse Prevention Month proclamation posted alongside Sgt. Ted. E. Bear.**

but if you suspect abuse, report it." She said people should call their local department of human resources (Coffee County, 334-348-2000; Dale County, 334-445-4900; and Houston County, 334-677-0400) and make a report, or "call the military police at 255-2222 if you live on post, and your local law enforcement if you live off post." She added people can also call the family advocacy program at 255-3898 if they live on post.

DOD, the Army and Fort Rucker meets its commitment to battling child abuse by providing numerous resources for Soldiers and families to use as needed, she said.

The Fort Rucker Family Advocacy Program offers parenting classes for all ages of children, from infancy to teens. There are also free programs and learning opportunities for military parents available through the program and Military One Source, including:

- NPSP: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/family-relationships/parentingand-children/parenting-infants-and-toddlers/the-new-parent-support-program>;
- Period of Purple Crying Resources for Parents of Newborns: <http://purplecrying.info/>;

- THRIVE: <https://thrive.psu.edu/>;
- New MilParent Specialty Consultation: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/confidentialhelp/specialty-consultations/new-milparent/new-milparent-consultation>; and

- Teach Your Kids Healthy Body Boundaries: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/familyrelationships/family-life/preventing-abuse-neglect/teach-your-kids-healthy-boundaries>.

McCormick, who works with the program, said NPSP is a great resource for new parents.

"NPSP offers education and support to military families in dealing with the time of pregnancy through the child's age of 3 years," she said. "Anything that impacts a parent or child during this time, NPSP can assist with. We offer classes, one-on-one home visits, and referrals for support services within the military, as well as the community, if needed. Anyone can do a referral to our program."

NPSP is in Bldg. 5700, Rm. 371G, and can also be reached at 255-3359.

She also had some quick advice for parents who find themselves struggling with the challenges parenting raises.

"Ask for help! Seek resources for assistance – you don't have to do this alone," McCormick said. "You don't have to do everything perfectly – spend time with your child and really be there, attentive and engage! Find ways to connect to your child on their terms. Be a parent, not their best friend!"

For more information on Child Abuse Prevention Month or resources available to Soldiers and families, visit Military One Source at <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/>.



# STRESS RELIEF

## Soldiers authorized to accumulate additional leave this year

By Joseph Lacdan  
*Army News Service*

WASHINGTON -- Soldiers who have continued to serve during the coronavirus pandemic can now accumulate an additional 60 days of leave, according to new guidance.

A special leave accrual allows Soldiers who have served between March 11 and Sept. 30 of 2020 to carryover up to 120 leave days of leave into fiscal year 2021, doubling the normal carryover limit of 60 days.

Soldiers who have already accumulated extra leave on another special leave accrual due to a deployment or an extended hospital stay can also add additional days to their FY total, but cannot exceed the 120-day cap.

To help maintain readiness across the force, the Defense Department encourages Soldiers to spread out using their leave. Soldiers have until the end of Fiscal 2023 to use the additional leave days earned in 2020.

Sgt. 1st Class Michael Blank, assigned to the 18th Medical Command at Fort Shafter, Hawaii, learned last month that he might lose 23 days of leave when the DOD placed travel restrictions on service members.

Blank had deployed to Guam in support of efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Due to the DOD travel ban, he could not take leave days to visit his family in the U.S. He said the new instruction will bring Soldiers in similar situations much-needed relief.

"It definitely takes a lot of stress off Soldiers," Blank said of the extended special leave accrual. "It's going to allow people to be together with their families when they're able to take leave."

Blank had planned to use his accrued leave this spring to visit his wife and two daughters in Washington state. The pandemic conditions have placed his leave plans on an indefinite hold.

"Right now it's a coin toss on when I'm going to be able to see my wife and kids again," he said.

J. D. Riley, deputy chief of the Army compensations and entitlements division, G-1, said DOD made the change to address concerns of Soldiers who do not wish to take leave during the pandemic and to reward Soldiers for their efforts in response to the coronavirus outbreak. Soldiers currently may only take local leave and must remain within a 50-mile radius of their home station.

"It's absolutely important," Riley said. "Although the current leave policy allows people to take leave locally, what you have is a lot of service members don't want to take leave because most states have said 'we need you to stay at home.' They don't want to take leave for just sitting at home."

Due to pandemic conditions, new guidance marks the first time an SLA has been implemented for all service members from all service branches, showing the DOD's dedication to the troops' well-being, Riley said.

"It absolutely shows the commitment DOD has to taking care of service members," he said.

Since DOD ordered all non-essential personnel remain home last month, Soldiers have been in a standstill. During the quar-



SPC. ALAURA LUCAS

**USAG Daegu families enjoy the Easter Egg Hunt on Camp Walker's Kelly Field April 11, 2020. Under a new Department of Defense instruction, Soldiers can now accrue up to 120 days of leave in fiscal year 2020.**

antine, most Soldiers are under a domestic travel ban and must avoid going out except to acquire necessities.

The option to retain additional leave gives Soldiers a much-needed morale booster during extended home stays, Riley said.

"We don't need service members thinking about losing leave and things like that," he said. "They need to be focused on the mission at hand. They need to be focused on their families."

# Soldiers should check IRS website to ensure stimulus payment

**By Devon Suits**  
*Army News Service*

WASHINGTON -- Soldiers anticipating a stimulus payment should immediately update their direct deposit information on the Internal Revenue Service's website to avoid possible delays, according to Office of the Judge Advocate General sources.

To quickly provide financial assistance during the COVID-19 outbreak, the IRS has begun to send out economic impact payments to Soldiers and families that filed their 2018 or 2019 returns, said Melissa Halsey, legal assistance policy division chief.

However, Soldiers or families that used commercial tax-filing services to file their

return -- and opted to receive a Refund Anticipation Check or Refund Anticipation Loan -- are more at risk of a delay.

Tax-preparation businesses often provide refund anticipation services that allow Soldiers to pay the cost of the tax preparation service out of the Soldier's refund instead of payment up front, or provide Soldiers with their tax refund early at a cost, officials said.

"It is our understanding that about 70% of Soldiers that use a paid tax preparation service also use a Refund Anticipation Check or Refund Anticipation Loan," Halsey said. "When someone uses a refund anticipation service, the tax preparation business may set up a temporary bank account."

Herein lies the problem, Halsey said. When the Department of Treasury tries to

direct deposit a Soldier's stimulus payment, it gets routed to the bank account on file from their return.

If the account on file is a temporary account because the Soldier used one a refund anticipation products, the payment should not be made to these accounts, OTJAG officials said.

"Right now, we don't think stimulus amounts are paid to these accounts, (because) the IRS recognizes that these accounts are not associated with a taxpayer," Halsey said. "But we are working with the IRS to verify that stimulus payments are not placed into these temporary accounts."

But if the IRS does not have the correct account information for a Soldier, they will not receive a direct deposit. They should act

now to correct the issue on the IRS site, she said.

If a Soldier does not address the problem, the IRS will issue a printed check and mail it to the last known address, which could delay payment further if the Soldier is no longer associated with the on-record residence.

In the future, individuals or families that choose to use refund anticipation services should be careful, officials added. Many of these services include undisclosed fees or high-interest rates -- at times exceeding 200%.

If any Soldier has questions or concerns about their stimulus payment, they can seek assistance at their nearest installation legal assistance office or through the legal assistance website, Halsey said.

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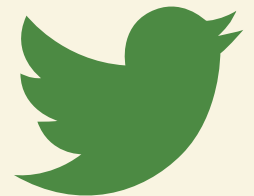
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