

Family Readiness Group Rules in Review

By Judy Konitzer

Editor's note: *This is the first of a two-part series by Judy Konitzer on Family Readiness Group issues. In Part II Judy will help to clarify the Reserve Component FRG policies and procedures.*

The Global War on Terrorism has invigorated new levels of support for Army volunteers especially those connected with Family Readiness Groups (FRG). These are an informal network of family members, friends, parents and others, who together help maintain communications about deployed Soldiers, and offer mutual support, care and concern. With the prolonged conflict, the role the FRG plays in the overall unit family readiness has been clarified with new guidance on both operations and fund-raising. I would like to use this section to provide the most current information about existing FRG rules and procedures.

Recently I interviewed Ms. Delores Johnson, the director of Family Programs with the Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command, to help us understand this better.

JK: Why did the Army change the rules on FRG operations?

Johnson: The role of FRGs has evolved dramatically from the first desert war (1991). The FRG is the backbone of the unit family readiness plan and is the primary method by which commanders and rear detachment commanders keep families informed and connected. FRGs provide a vital role for mutual support and concern. In order to facilitate participation in FRGs and more clearly define their responsibilities, the Army determined that FRGs were an official Army entity to ensure the right levels of support. About that same time, various senior spouses were concerned about the amount of time FRG leaders and members were spending on fund-raising activities. Some FRGs were very successful, inadvertently creating a situation of "have and have-nots." To level the playing field and establish some guidelines to support



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Delores Johnson, the director of Family Programs with the Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command, addresses family readiness group questions during the AAAA Spouses Panel in Atlanta, Ga.

the FRG primary role of mutual support and concern, the Army published new guidance in AR 608-1, Appendix J in July 2006.

JK: What are the most significant changes?

Johnson: First, the status of the FRG was clarified. FRGs are an official government entity and may be funded just as any other commander's mission supported program, and must abide by Army rules. FRGs operate using a variety of fund sources: appropriated funds, non-appropriated funds for volunteer reimbursements, recognition and child care, informal funds raised through various fund-raising activities, and supplemental funds received through donations to the FRG. FRGs are not a private organization, a part of MWR, a non-appropriated activity, or a non-profit organization.

Second, informal funds are those raised and managed by the FRG with the annual income cap being increased from \$1000 to \$5,000. We purposefully set the cap below the level to match the below the target funds level of Internal Revenue Service scrutiny.

Third, as an official Army entity, FRGs may not solicit gifts or donations and cannot accept commercial sponsorship.

Finally, the Army established a mechanism known as a "Supplemental Mission Activity Account" so that FRGs may accept donations and tangible items that exceeded \$1000.

JK: I was told that the Army National Guard does not have Supplemental Mission Activity Accounts (SMAA).

Johnson: This is correct. The supplemental mission accounts are managed by the Director of MWR and apply to garrison operations. Supplemental mission activity funds are non-appropriated funds generated from the operation of specific and unique situations that occur in support of an Appropriated Fund mission program. The FRG supplemental mission activity contains supplemental mission funds generated entirely by unsolicited donations or gifts made to the Army and intended for FRG or military family support. All other policies and procedures concerning FRG operations do apply to the ARNG.

JK: How does the FRG organize for success?

Johnson: The unit commander is responsible for family readiness. The rear detachment commander (RDC) is the unit commander's representative when the unit is forward deployed. The RDC must publish standing operating procedures (SOP) and a budget

for the activities of the FRG to include the procedures for requesting support. All resource support for FRGs such as meeting rooms, non-tactical vehicles, office equipment and computers, newsletters, telephones, volunteer costs, and child care costs should be authorized in accordance with the SOP and by the RDC. Commanders should include FRG leader input in the budget development and review the appropriated fund support provided to the FRG the previous fiscal year prior to developing the plan for the upcoming year.

JK: Does the Army provide funding for childcare during FRG meetings? Many young spouses say they are unable to come to meetings because they cannot afford the babysitting fees.

Johnson: Be reminded that the FRG is a conduit of support and the responsibility for unit readiness rests with the unit commander and his or her rear detachment commander. Commanders can pay for child care, education and other youth services using appropriated funds for FRG meetings for family members of Soldiers who are activated for a contingency operation or are assigned duty in support of a contingency operation, or who are deployed to a contingency operation. This allows more Soldiers and families to attend FRG meetings prior to and during contingency operations. Unit commanders should work with local garrison commanders to determine the amount of funding available and develop a strategy for providing these services based on local needs and resources. Reserve component commanders should contact their State or Regional Family Program staff.

JK: Can a social event take place in conjunction with an FRG meeting and appropriated funds still be used?

Johnson: No. Appropriated funds cannot be used for the social event after the official FRG meeting. The FRG informal fund can be used to purchase refreshments, pay for FRG parties and outings for FRG meetings. Appropriated funds may be used to support the meeting, provide equipment, and print newsletters and materials necessary towards carrying out the meeting activities. All refreshments costs may be paid using the FRG's informal fund or the SMAA, if funds are available. Appropriated funds cannot be generally used for food or refreshments. The

local ethics counselor should be consulted if there are any questions.

JK: Should FRG funds be used to support unit events other than FRG meetings?

Johnson: Although the FRG is nested within the unit, commanders and FRG leaders must be careful not to confuse the FRG with on-going unit social activities not related to the FRG. Planning and contributing funds to support a unit formal, holiday party or a division ball is not the responsibility of the FRG. Certain FRG mission activities are essential and include FRG member meetings, FRG staff and committee meetings, welcome activities for new members and the publication and distribution of FRG newsletters. FRGs should provide activities that enhance the flow of information from command to the family and serve as a referral resource.

JK: Can the AAAA National and local chapters provide funds for dispensing to an Aviation FRG for events during deployments, etc.? Currently, upon request, monies from AAAA National are going to the chapters for pre-deployment and welcome home ceremonies, balls, etc. – is this considered supplemental funding?

Johnson: Absolutely. Non-profit organizations may make unconditional donations of \$1000 or less to the FRG. FRGs must be careful to ensure the amount does not exceed their \$5,000 annual calendar year amount. However, for amounts over \$1000, in the active Army, the organization (AAAA) would make that donation to the garrison commander who would accept it using the FRG's SMAA account. The ethics counselor should be consulted before any donation is received.

JK: Can donations be directed to a specific FRG or does it become incorporated into the Supplemental Mission Activity fund that the installation commander can use for any FRG proportionately?

Johnson: The Army has created flexibility in how the funds are directed at the local level by allowing the garrison commander and unit command representatives to make these decisions locally based on deployments and other local unique factors. The funds do not have to be divided among all FRGs. They can determine which one or all units receive the donated funds.

JK: I find that many people are confused about the Army's policy on FRG fund-raising. When was the guidance published?

Johnson: After extensive staffing with the field, the guidance was published in July 2006. I agree that one of our biggest challenges is to ensure that the information is correct and out there. I think due to the natural rotation of FRG leaders, it is a constant battle to ensure we have this guidance out to the right individuals. On installations, the Army Community Services (ACS) staff train FRG and RDCs using the Operation Ready Handbooks that contain new guidance. We have established an on-line course at www.MyArmyLifetoo.com to make this easier. Additionally, I provide copies of the RDC and FRG Handbooks to all Pre-Command Course attendees at Fort Leavenworth to ensure that new commanders have the most up to date information.

JK: You have posted a lot of information to your websites, *MyArmyLife too.com* and *www.ArmyFRG.org*. Many young spouses cannot access websites. How do you get the information to them?

Johnson: We use every venue known: radio, video, television and printed local military newspapers, etc. We understand we have a challenge here. We are working with our senior enlisted spouses' leadership to develop some innovative ways to reach junior enlisted spouses. This is an issue of interest by the Sergeant Major of the Army. I would also add that the shortages in family programs in both active and reserve components are documented, and the Army is actively working this issue. GEN George Casey has highlighted family readiness in his seven key initiatives. So I believe we will see more attention given to improving family support and family readiness.

I want to personally thank Ms. Johnson for taking time to not only address these complex issues, but also being a key panel participant at the AAAA Convention in Atlanta. Questions and comments can be addressed to judy@quad-a.org.



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