

Camp for military kids loses funds

Operation Purple lets children of deployed fighters take a break

By William Cole

The stresses on children of a parent deployed during wartime can be great.

ARAND Corp. study found that having a deployed parent increases a child's risk for emotional and behavioral problems and that about one-third of military children had symptoms of anxiety.

For the past four years, a collaboration between the YMCA of Honolulu and the National Military Family Association has been trying to take the edge off.

Operation Purple, a nearly weeklong camp at Camp Erdman on Oahu, brings together military children who indirectly face the effects of war.

This year, though, there's a new stress: a funding shortfall that might force a significant cutback in the effort.

The nonprofit National Military Family Association provided \$143,000 last year for the summer camp in Mokuleia, and 319 children went through the program, officials said.

This year the family association is providing no funds for the camp.

"They significantly cut back on the number of Operation Purple camps across the country that they are offering this year (and) that they are funding," said Michael Broderick, president and chief executive officer of the YMCA of Honolulu.

"So, basically, what they say to those that weren't funded is, 'You can do Operation Purple, but you've got to raise the money on

your own,' and we said, 'OK, we're going to do that,'" Broderick said.

Military families don't pay for the camp. The YMCA has raised enough money for the June 3-8 camp for 80 military children, but 100 more are on a waiting list.

"We are so fortunate that several of our local corporations, such as AT&T and Hawaiian Electric Co., have already stepped up to the cause, allowing 80 military dependent children to attend camp this year," Broderick said.

AT&T and HECO each contributed \$10,000 toward Operation Purple, a YMCA official said.

"Ideally, we'd love to raise another \$55,000 so we could accommodate all 100 kids on the wait list," Broderick said.

"But at a minimum we hope to raise about \$18,000 so we can include another approximately 30 kids or so. That's our hope."

There's an additional challenge: The YMCA has to raise the money by May 18.

Each year, Operation Purple (a color reference to a joint service branch military effort) offers a high-wire ropes course, swimming, hiking, archery and campfires, plus visits by Navy SEALs, Coast Guardsmen and other service members.

Behavioral health experts are on site if needed.

"We stress some things that we think are particularly important to these kids. We stress communication, building trust and — this is hard for kids — identifying and expressing feelings," Broderick said. "But the neat thing is that all of it is done in a very fun way so the kids don't feel that the environment is too heavy and too intense." Broderick said Operation Purple is different from other camps by virtue of the stresses its participants have coming in.

"It's not your traditional camp experience where kids are coming and showing up and kind of in a great mood to begin with," he said. "They are showing up in an unusual mood for kids."

Brandon Husted, son of an Army lieutenant colonel at Tripler Army Medical Center, saw it when he went through the program in 2011, when he was 11.

"There were a lot of kids that talked about their (parents') deployments," Brandon said. "I remember this one guy, he barely met his dad. His dad was deployed over and over and over again. He didn't seem very happy. He



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2011 Children of deployed servicemen and women cheer as a Sea Stallion helicopter from Marine Corps Base Hawaii circles Camp Erdman in Mokuleia.

was kind of sad, and he just always looked down at the floor."

Brandon's father, Lt. Col. Tom Husted, had deployed to Afghanistan the year before.

"I don't know if my son had major deployment issues," said Cheri Husted, Brandon's mother. "Obviously, he missed his dad and all that that means. But I think for him to even be able to see that other kids were going through the same things that he was going through was helpful."

The YMCA said when the son of a Kaneohe Bay Marine went through the program last year, his father was on his fifth deployment, the family had just moved to Hawaii and he was missing his friends.

He was so depressed after talking about his dad that he ran off to the beach by himself, the YMCA said. His sister found him and brought him back, and the boy eventually made friends at the camp with others going through the same stress.

Broderick, a former family court judge, saw wartime pressures in the form of restraining orders being taken out on military spouses who were back from a deployment.

"What I saw was, the wife would say, 'I don't recognize my husband. This isn't the man I married. He got on the plane, he came back and don't know who he is,'" Broderick said.

Children also aren't immune, but Operation Purple helps them know they aren't alone, he said.

"What these kids have in common is they bond really quickly and in very deep ways, so they develop relationships that most kids in most camps aren't going to develop," he said.

For more information, go to www.ymca-honolulu.org or contact Kerri Van Duyne at 541-5473 or kvanduyne@ymcahonolulu.org.

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"Obviously, he missed his dad and all that that means. But I think for him to even be able to see that other kids were going through the same things that he was going through was helpful." Cheri Husted, speaking about her son Brandon, shown with his father, Lt. Col. Tom Husted