

Military OneSource Podcast — Bringing Programs and People Together at Fort Hood

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Hi, there. Today's conversation is about the leadership at Fort Cavazos, who set out to improve the way to get their prevention programs to their warfighters, their families and civilians. So, we think that today's conversation will be valuable to leaders from any service and really any sized installation, as we talk about the intent of bringing all the command's prevention services under one office that takes direction from the senior commander. So, stick around for that.

Before we get started, I want to remind you that Military One Source is an official program of the Defense Department with personalized tools and support and resources for every step of military life. Please subscribe to the podcast on your favorite podcast app. I'm Bruce Moody, and let's go ahead and jump into today's conversation.

All right, here we go. Joining us today, we have Army Capt. Avery Smith. We have Donna Morrissey and Jason Westbrook. Welcome to the three of you.

Jason Westbrook:

Thank you, thanks for having us.

Bruce Moody:

So, the conversation that we're having is about the People Directorate. And to set the scene, for people who don't know, your installation is pretty much up there at the top of the list when we ask, which is the largest installation? You guys pretty routinely rate at the top of the list, so give us a sense of just how populous your installation is and how much ground you cover.

Jason Westbrook:

Yeah, so we're here in Central Texas and-

Bruce Moody:

I'm sorry, is this Jason?

Jason Westbrook:

This is Jason, yes.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, go ahead please.

Jason Westbrook:

Yeah, and so we're here in Central Texas, somewhere between Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, and just north of Austin, Texas, roughly kind of halfway between both, and just off the I-35 corridor. And we cover about 240 square miles here in the Central Texas area and have, when we're full-up without units being deployed, about 36,000 soldiers stationed here. There's another 49,000 family members, and then the installation here covers 175 counties in central Texas. So, it's probably contentious to say that we are the largest installation, but we are one of the largest installations, depending on whether you look at population or landmass.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, so you have a lot of people, a lot of land. And so, how did that play into creating the People Directorate? Maybe we should begin by explaining what the role is of the People Directorate.

Jason Westbrook:

Sure, that's a great question. The People Directorate is a unique organization to the Army. We stood it up mid-February of this year, and it really grew out of the commander's assessment that we needed a way to centralize the prevention programs on the installation. Like most installations, we have trends of some harmful behaviors that we want to reduce. We had a lot of prevention organizations that were under different headquarters.

So, for instance, Army Community Services fell under the Directorate of Family Morale Welfare and Recreation under the garrison headquarters. The Army Substance Abuse Program fell under the Directorate of Human Resources, also under the garrison headquarters. We had the Integrated Prevention Assessments Group, which was stood up two years ago under the senior commander, the III Corps commander, to do assessments and help assess programs on the installation and help identify potential solutions to mitigate harmful behaviors. We had the Sexual Harassment, Assault and Response Program under the III Corps headquarters, which typically reports to the senior commander, and really kind of falls under FORSCOM. Military Equal Opportunity that fell under the III Corps headquarters.

The Suicide Prevention Program, which fell under the Army Substance Abuse Program, which was pulled out of the ASAP and ACS and the garrison about a year ago and became a standalone program under III Corps. The Installation Reception Company and the Phantom Forge Center — which is what Capt. Avery Smith is the commandant of — it's a great immersive training solution to some of those annual requirements to address harmful behaviors. And the Ready and Resiliency Program, which is a contract program that does the master resiliency training across the installation.

So, we had all these different organizations that have great people that are doing great things to assist our soldiers, our family members and our DA civilians, but they weren't all under one single point of contact.

So, what the senior commander did, obviously with approval from Department of the Army and Forces Command was to stand up this new directorate that we're calling the People

Directorate. And it pulls in all these nine different prevention programs into a single point of contact with one vision, one purpose, unified under the senior commander's guidance, which enables us to streamline coordination, streamline resources, and streamline decisions to better support the readiness of our units and the readiness of our soldiers, our families and our DA civilians.

Bruce Moody:

So, the reason why I am wanting to have this conversation with you and about this particular approach, is that even if you're not serving in the Army, if you're in a different branch in a different installation, I think everybody needs to know that the commander is looking at maintaining the warrior ethos, and one of the ways that they do that is by taking care of their people. And so, in your environment, which as we discussed is just so huge, it does help to bring it all together under one proverbial roof. I'd like you to describe for me how you think this approach for your environment helps overall well-being.

Jason Westbrook:

Sure. So one — like I said — it brings us together for the ability to unify the programs under the senior commander's guidance. Then under that one umbrella, we're able to then bring all of the program leads together. We've developed an operation, Operation Phantom Steel, which is a series of meetings and work groups and meetings with not only the CG, the deputy commanding general, but all of the brigade commanders and other commanding generals on the installation. So, that we can, one, understand the operational area, what we're seeing with regard to the harmful behaviors. We can do diagnostic, descriptive and predictive analytics. So, descriptive, understanding what's going on in the installation. Diagnostic to understand why that's happening on the installation. And then predictive to understand what will happen. And then we can target those most at risk for harmful behaviors and then take some finite resources and more directly target those harmful behaviors so that we can mitigate them before they happen and we can reduce the risk and build the readiness in our soldiers, families and civilians.

Bruce Moody:

And so, as we had discussed, you're on a very, very large installation. There are many installations across the country and overseas that are kind of in the ginormous category like you guys are. What are the kind of challenges that military families face, such as just being able to get to services, when they're at large installations?

Jason Westbrook:

Yeah, that's a great question and one of the great things about having the People Directorate and having the same great people doing the same great jobs and providing the same great services to the installation and those stationed here, is that we have experts that have been doing this for years. And one of those experts is sitting here with me right now, Ms. Donna Morrisey, the director of Army Community Services.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome. So, I'm asking you to discuss challenges that families face when they're at a very, very large installation.

Donna Morrissey:

So, I'd like to start off with what Mr. Westbrook mentioned about the services offered through the People Directorate. And I just want to mention the fact that they focus on three areas, intervention, advocacy and crisis intervention.

One of the things that you were asking had to deal with challenges. And so, when our purpose is to ensure we meet the needs of our soldiers and families in those areas, we definitely have to address those challenges. And being on a large installation, that comes with transportation issues, getting to the right place at the right time. One of the things that's occurring at this time is the majority of all these services are co-located in one facility, which makes it easily accessible on the installation. But we also have to remember that not all of our families reside on the installation. Single soldiers, as well as married soldiers have opportunities sometimes when they're living off the installation. So, in doing so, we have to ensure our services are accessible in other ways, whether that's in training opportunities that are virtual and our outreach initiatives.

We take pride in the fact of collaborating with our local leadership, because as Mr. Westbrook mentioned, this is such a diverse area and very large. We cross several different counties, as well as also different cities. So, with the partnerships that we have with those local leaders there, we're able to initiate outreach initiatives in those communities to reach our soldiers and families.

One of the things that we do like to emphasize is on the installation, we do have a mass transit system now. So, in the local communities, there is transportation, so our families can take that transportation that arrives on the installation, then they'll transfer to our mass transit, which operates also as circular and also micro transportation. So, therefore, they can go to any facility on the installation to receive the services that are necessary for them, and that takes off that pressure of not being able to go to the different offices that they would like to go visit because they don't have transportation. So, that's one of the main hindrances that we do face as a large installation but now with our mass transit system, that's a problem that is solving that issue. And continuing, as I mentioned with our outreach, is how we're reaching those families, as well as using other methods such as social media too.

Bruce Moody:

Thanks, Donna. We did a whole episode on your mass transit system. It's actually really, really interesting, I encourage people to have a listen.

What I'd like to do, and I'll just toss this out to the three of you, is to see if you have any stories to share. Maybe a story or an experience where the People Directorate provided services that made a difference in a warfighter's life or in their family's life.

Capt. Avery Smith:

Hi, sir. This is Capt. Avery Smith, the commandant of the Phantom Forge Center. And just a good example of that is exactly what we do at the Phantom Forge Center. We provide immersive, experiential and vignette-based training to build cohesiveness and reduce harmful behaviors within our units here. And so, most importantly, throughout our course, we empower soldiers and command teams to connect their soldiers to resources when they need it.

So, here recently, there was a service member that experienced the loss of their mother, and in doing so, they inherited a few debts, whether mortgage and vehicle debts, as well as a couple additional family members and dependents. And so, while that service member was waiting to get their basic allowance for housing and their basic allowance for sustenance updated, I directed them to financial assistance at ACS, which greatly helped them get grants and loans that they needed to get back on their feet. As well as I directed them to the chaplain's food insecurities program, which then provided them with financial counseling, but also a gift card to our commissary here on the installation. And then just by doing that, that helped this service member put food on the table for her family, as well as get caught up on some of those incurred debts until some of those inheritance pieces of that situation went through.

Bruce Moody:

Listening to that, it's very interesting and it certainly drives home the reason why you would call this the People Directorate. And I wonder what you feel personally about this work. What motivates you? How do you feel when you see that you're having an impact on the folks that you serve?

Jason Westbrook:

Hey Bruce, this is Jason Westbrook again. And I'll just share with you from a personal perspective that I spent 31 years in the military as an enlisted soldier, as an officer, commanded at the battalion level and at the garrison level. So, I have firsthand experience with helping and taking care of soldiers for most of my life. And so, this is an opportunity to continue doing that, giving back to the soldiers, the family members and the DA civilians that make our Army such a great place to be.

And so, when this job came up and I applied for it, I knew that I was going to be working with some of the same great people that I worked with in the garrison and adding to that team and continuing the great support to our soldiers and the units on the installation, that really has been going on for decades. But again, building that and taking it as a cohesive team forward so that we can make things better for our soldiers, family members and civilians.

Bruce Moody:

What do you believe are the most common barriers or misconceptions that people face when it comes to seeking support in the military?

Donna Morrissey:

Well, sir, commonly some of the barriers are stigma and fear of judgment and just difficulty recognizing a need for help. We recognize those things, and sometimes it's also lack of awareness, or it could be their cultural norms or financial limitations, just to name a few. I think that's something that we've recognized and in efforts to overcome those barriers with soldiers, we have to continuously educate them. And what I mean from that is, consistently from the command teams to every level there is, as to consistently provide information, get that out to our soldiers so they can understand more, be situationally aware of what's provided for them. There's so many different efforts that this takes place.

For example, every week there's an installation commander's newcomers orientation where that information is shared. Then also, I believe that Captain Smith is going to talk to you more about things involving the Phantom Forge Center, how it's reiterated there, as well as the Installation Reception Center as well. So, there are many efforts to, first of all, let soldiers know the services are here and also to help them overcome those barriers. And now I'd like for Captain Smith to reiterate some of that.

Capt. Avery Smith:

Of course, I think you hit the nail right on the head, Ms. Donna, with my sister unit, the installation reception company, that is where soldiers really get that baseline, especially in all of the prevention fields. And then as they transition into their units for their stay here on the installation, they get multiple opportunities, usually once a year, to rotate through the transformation course that we offer at the Phantom Forge Center.

Playing off of the stigmas mentioned by Ms. Donna, there's some other misconceptions that chain of commands just don't care and that couldn't be further from the truth here on our installation. With our transformation course, as I mentioned, it provides immersive, experiential and vignette-based training. But here in the Army we also talk about train as you fight, right? And so, speaking on training as you fight, when these soldiers see these harmful behaviors and situations that maybe they need to get their battle buddies or themselves out of, we need their reactions to be second nature, similar to the battlefield. Right?

And so, moving on from that, I understand that a cohesive team is a lethal team, and we're all about readiness and lethality here in the III Armored Corps. And so, once those soldiers get past those misconceptions and those stigmas, I think that's where we really start to hammer down a more cohesive and lethal team.

Bruce Moody:

So, once an individual decides that they should probably get some advice, some help, however you want to characterize it, what would be the absolute first step? And maybe when is it time for that first step?

Capt. Avery Smith:

So, from my experience here at the transformation course, the best first step is always bring it to your chain of command. Once you bring it to your chain of command, your chain of

command will have access to a plethora of resources that we've all worked together under the People Directorate to unify and make sure that we are helping each individual service member, because we understand that there's no one size fits all way to leadership and resources. So, that way, our programs are tailored to help every individual soldier and their family get the best care that they need and deserve while serving our country.

Bruce Moody:

So, as we wrap up, I'll let people know that we have some more resources linked in the program notes, but maybe just in wrapping up to just get your final thoughts on maybe what it's like to serve and to take care of people, and what they might do to best ensure that they're in good health and ready to support the mission.

Jason Westbrook:

Great question. And so, what I would add in closing is, is this is a really innovative approach to providing services to all members across the installation. Right? And so, it's really a radical change for the Army pulling organizations together that have been heretofore separate and still focused on doing great work, providing great services, but bringing them all under one umbrella to provide a comprehensive focused effort across the installation to reduce the harmful behaviors. And it's not, I listed the nine programs up at the beginning of our discussion, but it's so much more than just those nine programs. We're including the local hospital units, the behavioral health units, chaplains, and the chaplains have got a great resiliency program going right now that has really taken on a lot of traction across the Army. It's getting some attention at the Department of the Army level and TRADOC, and we have other partners as well.

One that I'm really excited about is a program where we're partnered with the Veterans Administration and they have shown some great progress in reducing suicide and transitioning service members. And now we're bringing that same capability with that same doctor to our active component, and they're going to start a series of studies this coming summer using AI driven algorithms, identify a whole host of data sets that we don't have the capacity in our own headquarters to analyze that much data. But they're going to bring in this AI-driven system that will look comprehensively at a number of different factors and will very specifically identify those at most risk, in this case for suicide, which will then enable them to teach some life skills and build resiliency in that particular service member or service members.

And so, we're really coming at this from not how we used to do business in the Army, but how do we do business better? How do we streamline our efforts? And how do we become more targeted and effective with the resources that we have in a much more narrow time? And that is what I would leave you with. It's a very exciting opportunity for change, not just here in Central Texas, but across the Army.

Bruce Moody:

Well, we'd love to have you back and when you get to a point where you have information, lessons learned and maybe an idea forward, please come back to the podcast and talk about it.

Jason Westbrook:

Yeah, this has been great. We'd love to come back. Kind of alluded to in the beginning, we're really a few months into this. We stood the directorate up in February. There was some lead into that before, but officially the directorate was established mid-February. And so, we've got a lot of room to grow and a lot of things to do, but we're incrementally getting better as we go forward as a team.

Bruce Moody:

Good, good. Keep in touch, and we'll share your progress on the podcast.

Jason Westbrook:

Thanks for having us.

Bruce Moody:

Well, anyway, thank you very much to Army Capt. Avery Smith, Donna Morrissey and Col. Jason Westbrook for joining us today. I really appreciate you talking about the People Directorate.

Capt. Avery Smith:

Thanks, have a great day.

Donna Morrissey:

Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

And I want to remind everybody that Military One Source is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. If you have any questions or comments, maybe an idea for a future episode, you can use the link in the program notes and send us a message. Always subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast, which includes YouTube, because we cover a wide variety of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening, take care. Bye-bye.