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Ft. Carson efforts lauded, but critics want tougher stance

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15 Domestic Violence Incidents Every Month at Army Post

COLORADO SPRINGS - The Department of Defense lauds Colorado's Fort Carson as home to one of its best domestic-violence prevention programs. The program provides domestic-violence counseling, anger-management classes and therapy for soldiers and their spouses.

But critics say the disciplinary side - what happens after an assault - remains a problem at Fort Carson, as it does throughout the military, where commanders determine whether a case will be handled as a criminal or administrative matter.

"The military invests thousands of dollars in soldiers. They don't want to lose the investment," said Jennifer Bier, director of clinical services at TESSA, a local women's crisis center. Last year, 36 percent of TESSA's clients had been assaulted by military personnel.

"There has to be consequences; it (domestic violence) has to be taken seriously over the deployment, over the mission," Bier said. "It has to be, 'You can't go; you let your unit down because you made a bad choice.'"

It's a struggle for military leaders - whose first responsibility is to keep units ready for deployment - to balance the need for combat readiness with treatment efforts for lawbreakers in their charge, said Victoria Youngblood, a Colorado Springs psychotherapist who treats offenders.

Of the 1,586 incidents of domestic violence at Fort Carson between 1994 and 2002, only 76 of those cases were investigated by the Army's criminal investigation command. Nine resulted in courts-martial and 24 in administrative punishment. Cases that aren't criminally investigated are handled on base, said Jeanne Koss, who has run the Family Advocacy Program at Fort Carson since 1991.

Koss said the rate of domestic violence at Fort Carson, five per 1,000 couples, is lower than the Army's overall rate of 6.7 per 1,000. In 1996, the Army praised Fort Carson, on spouse abuse in the military.

Part of the success at Fort Carson, the Caliber study said, comes from city and state regulations, and civilian cooperation with the military. The Family Advocacy Program "coordinates with the local civilian community service providers in Colorado Springs through both formal and informal means," the report said. "FAP maintains an excellent relationship with civilian police ... (who) routinely notify FAP of abuse cases occurring off base."

The Caliber study also said Colorado law is helpful: Police must make an arrest if they suspect domestic violence occurred or if someone is injured. At Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, FAP director Capt. John Woods says the cost of training troops is a factor in deciding how to deal with offenders.

"We don't want to throw them away haphazardly," Woods said. "Instead, we want to help them with alcohol abuse or domestic violence."

Woods said he briefs incoming commanders about the seriousness of domestic violence and how to handle it. at Schriever Air Force Base and Cheyenne Mountain. "I don't know of any situation where a commander said, 'It's too bad that's happening, but this is my best troop,'" Woods said. "Back in the day, did that happen? Sure it did. Over time it gets better. Society is less and less tolerant."

In Colorado Springs, an area that is home to five military installations and more than 43,000 active-duty military personnel, the city program DVERT (Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team), created in 1996, targets the most lethal situations. It is a collaboration of local police, the district attorney, Fort Carson, local crisis centers and other domestic-violence advocacy groups.

"The majority of commanders want to do the right thing, but they have no training in military or civilian life about domestic violence," said Howard Black, a Colorado Springs police officer and founder of DVERT.

Another tool for the city: Fast Track, a program that allows domestic-violence offenders to plead guilty and begin counseling instead of waiting for a trial. Military members usually opt for Fast Track and agree to attend 36 weeks of domestic-violence counseling and pay a \$138 fine. Military offenders are allowed longer periods of time to complete the classes due to missions and deployments, a review of records at the El Paso County Courthouse found.

Fort Carson's program gets kudos because of the command's commitment to the program, Koss said. It was the former commanding general at Fort Carson who sought to create classes at Evans U.S. Army Hospital to counsel offenders, Koss said. Six groups for men and two groups for women are ongoing. Fort Carson also provides victims an advocate who can help obtain a restraining order and may accompany the victim to court, Koss said. According to Deborah Tucker, co-chair of the Defense Department Task Force on Domestic Violence, fewer than 30 percent of military bases have victim advocates.

Koss pulls money from other areas to fund the job. "I felt strongly about it. ... We don't want to break up families; we want them to stay together but just be safe," Koss said. "We are here to help you, so your soldier doesn't do something else that is stupid."

Neither Peterson nor the Air Force Academy has a victim "Those couples were not equipped to handle their conflicts," said Nathaniel Nugin, Fort Carson troop-education coordinator. "They were not able to come to a mutual understanding and move forward."

The Fort Carson staff holds classes for soldiers new to the base or returning from overseas assignments. "We get them talking to each other here, so they don't go home and beat each other up," said Nathaniel Nugin, who recently taught a five-hour couples-communication class for troops just back from Iraq. "Deployment places a lot of stress on couples, and if they don't have good communication skills, other problems could get out of hand."

Mechanic Robert Spitzer, 29, attended the class with his wife, Denise Spitzer, 28. He had been home a week after six months in Iraq. While he was gone, his wife ran their three-child household. The hardest part of being back is finding his place in the family again, Spitzer said. "We were apprehensive about the class but come to find out we are not in the boat alone," Robert Spitzer said. "The first week back is like a vacation, and then reality sets in."