

## Extension trains to help military families cope

By Amanda Karr [akarr@coxnc.com](mailto:akarr@coxnc.com)

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Couples dealing with military deployment have a new place to seek support and advice.

During a two-day workshop ending today, state cooperative extension agents are undergoing training on how to help couples and families through what can be a stressful time, particularly for National Guardsmen and those in the reserves.

"Military families on a base would have available a whole array of life skills available to them. For those that don't, we want to supplement those services, and to do that we really need to touch the local community," Karen Smith Rotabi, support programs coordinator for **Citizen Soldier Project**, said.

The **Citizen Soldier Project** is a civilian group based in Chapel Hill that promotes outreach to military personnel and their families. The group helped organize the training with faculty in East Carolina University's College of Human Ecology.

Although family counseling seems an atypical job for cooperative extension agents, who are perhaps better known for working with farmers, strengthening families is part of the organization's mission.

In Pitt County, Susan Reece is the family-consumer science agent. She runs programs in stress management, nutrition and finances, among other topics. She said she hopes the training will expand her outreach.

"I'm hoping to take the information out to **citizen soldiers**, those that just came back from being deployed or about to go to help create a more harmonious family and help them feel better about leaving," she said.

Reece was one of more than 50 cooperative extension agents across the state who attended the training run by Kelly Simpson, a Texas marriage therapist and author of "Active Military Life Skills."

While Reece joined more than a dozen others at ECU's global classroom

building, other agents across the state watched and interacted via a video feed on college campuses from Appalachian State University to Elizabeth City State University.

Attendees discussed general relationship skills, such as the importance of communication, as well as issues more specific to couples separated by deployment, such as making the most of short phone calls home and what to discuss during that time.

"With deployment in the civilian world, not only do they worry about the businesses they leave behind, but also finances, insurance, kids. There are so many facets of it. In addition to the stresses of a regular relationship, they have to deal with stress above and beyond," Simpson said.

Peggie Garner, Onslow County extension director, already has some experience dealing with military personnel through the military bases located in her area.

"We want to try to empower (couples) by giving them information so they can make the calls they need to make," she said. "It's a great opportunity for those not in the military community to provide support and preparation for reservists who may have thought they might not go anywhere," she said.

With cooperative extension offices located across the state, just like the more than 20,000 reserve and guard members in North Carolina, those involved in the program hope the message reaches the families who need the advice.

Amanda Karr can be contacted at [akarr@coxnc.com](mailto:akarr@coxnc.com) and 329-9574.

Author Kelly Simpson speaks to a group from the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service on Thursday at the Science and Technology Building at ECU in Greenville. Simpson was training the agents on how to help military families and couples deal with separation issues after deployment. Greg Eans/The Daily Reflector (c) 2006 Cox Newspapers, Inc. - The Daily Reflector