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Supporting our soldiers, means supporting their children



By JoAnne Castagna, Ed.D.

Before CPT John Lim was stationed at the Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in Wrightstown, New Jersey, he, his wife, and young child moved a lot in the last

eight years for his military career.

They set up homes in Texas, Missouri, South Korea, Texas a second time, and now New Jersey at the Joint Base where he is the deputy resident engineer, southern resident office for the New York District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

He said, “These moves could be particularly hard on young kids who are leaving behind a familiar environment and the friends they have gained. Some kids may not even understand why they are moving or why their parents are gone for periods of time.”

So, when he heard that the base is completing construction on a new youth center, he was very happy.

“As a military family that moves around a lot, a youth center represents a bit of consistency for military-affiliated kids. It gives the family normalcy after a move, by giving the youth an opportunity to meet new people in similar situations with similar interests. It’s particularly important at this base because of how isolated this community can be at times.”



CPT John Lim, deputy resident engineer, southern resident office, New York District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers with his 5-year-old daughter.

Constructing this new youth center at the base is the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. The center will replace another structure that's in poor condition. The new center will not only be beneficial for military children, but also their parents that support the national defense of the United States.

The Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst is a United States military facility that is the only tri-service base in the United States Department of Defense and includes units from all six-armed forces branches.

This wide range of combat capability is performed on 42,000-contiguous acres and is home to more than 44,000 airmen, soldiers, sailors, marines, Coast Guardsmen, civilians, and their family members who live and work on and around the base.

Among the services the base provides soldiers and their families, they will have a new youth center. The center will be a one story, 16,260 square foot facility that will provide 168 school age children – between the ages of 5 and 12 – with after school programs, youth activities and youth support.

According to the Armed Services YMCA, programs like this are important for the unique challenges faced by military kids who may be struggling with a recent move or deployed parents.

These programs help to develop their resiliency and provide them with the tools they need to get back on track and build skills that allow them to weather future challenges.

The ASYMCA is the oldest military support organization in the United States with the mission to enhance the lives of active-duty junior enlisted military members and their families through programs relevant to the unique challenges of military life.

The ASYMCA said of the Joint Base's new Youth Center, "We know how important it is for our military to have adequate childcare options and are happy that other organizations agree.

Paul Jalowski, resident engineer, New York District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said, "The new Youth Center is a beautiful modern building that will provide a safe and secure facility for the children of our Military men and women, while they support the National Defense of our country."

Jalowski said that when children enter the center, they will enter a commons area where they can put away their backpacks and jackets into lockers that line the walls. This space will also be used for small group activities, such as playing games like air hockey, football, and board and video games.

Near this is the eating and activity area where children will have meals and snacks at shared tables. There is a self-serve snack bar with view into the kitchen prep area that can also be used as a culinary teaching space for students.

The youth center will also have four activity rooms designed for different uses including homework & computer work, arts and science, life skills & dramatic play, and a youth room.

The homework and computer room is designed to provide a dedicated area for study and completion of homework with the availability of computers. The room is large and can also be used as a “hang-out” space in the start of the day when children arrive and at the end of the day when they are winding down to leave the youth center.

The arts and science room is dedicated for special activities relating to art projects, painting, crafts, and science and nature activities. The room has doors that lead outside where students can perform messy projects, play, and perform a nature exploration program that is planned for the center.

Jalowski added, “From my perspective the outdoor classroom and nature exploration area is most interesting, as it contains planting boxes with visual windows to see the growth of the roots for different types of plants.”

The lifestyles and dramatic playroom is designed with a small stage for pretend play and performances. This room has two pairs of glass doors that open into the eating and activities area.

The youth room is a destination for the older children to hangout, play games, and relax. This multi-purpose room is the largest space, approximately the size of a basketball half court. This room will also serve as assembly space for family and community events.

North of the youth center is the outdoor play area that is divided into several areas including a fenced in hard-surface area, fenced in open area, a shaded playground area, and an outdoor classroom and nature exploration area, as mentioned earlier.

Lim has a five-year-old daughter and a child on the way. He said, “My daughter is always excited to try new things and socialize with other kids. When she is old enough, we plan on exposing her to many of the different programs that is offered at the youth center. We hope she finds activities that she’s interested in and can continue for a lifetime and meet people who may become lifelong friends.”

In addition to student activities, the school will also be equipped to be a safe environment for students and staff.

When students, parents and visitors enter the youth center’s covered entry way, they will be greeted in the lobby’s reception area by a security person who will check them in and out.

This person will have clear views of the front entrance doors, the commons area and eating and activities area.

Next to the lobby is the staff room and administrative offices that also have clear views of the lobby area.

The staff room includes a staff lounge with a kitchenette, a meeting and training area, lockers, mailboxes, computers, and a work room.

This modern building will also be energy-efficient and fulfill the qualifications for the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver building certification.

Jalowski said, “One way this project earned this certification is because the center has a Hyper Heat System. This is a heat pump system, but it adds an exclusive Inverter™ technology that allows it to maintain its efficiency when temperatures drop.” By contrast, traditional heat pumps start to lose their efficiency when temperatures go below 40 degrees, requiring a backup system.

Lim recently had an opportunity to visit the center that will be opening later this year. He said, “It looks great! The new youth center can support a wide range of interests to include technology, sports, and arts. We are excited to use the center someday.”

Dr. JoAnne Castagna is a public affairs specialist and writer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. She can be reached at joanne.castagna@usace.army.mil.