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ALSO INSIDE

Latest housing management software *page 12*

New single-soldier housing *page 24*

Naval Submarine Base privatization project *page 34*

At Home in the Desert

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ALSO INSIDE:
Wounded Warriors
honored at golf
fundraiser. *Page 44*

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Holding Down the Fort

An innovative program at Fort Drum, New York, helps house the families of deployed soldiers.

By JoAnne Castagna, Ed.D.

Last year, Army spouse Melissa Smith and her four daughters left Denmark—where Smith's husband had been assigned—and arrived at Fort Drum, New York. Smith's husband would soon be deploying to Afghanistan, and she and her daughters would live at Fort Drum, where her husband had previously been assigned.

As soldier deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan continue, situations like Smith's have become more and more common, and housing professionals at military installations throughout the country have had to creatively meet the inherent challenges that come with housing the family members of deployed service members. To meet this challenge at Fort Drum, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—the Army's construction agent there—has implemented an innovative lease program. The program facilitates finding affordable off-post housing for family members, while ensuring that the housing is of good quality and close to on-post resources and services. It is this program that helped Smith and her daughters find housing that is convenient and comfortable. This is, of course, also important to Smith's deployed husband.



BARBARA DINDL, FORT DRUM HOUSING OFFICE

Above: The Smith family moved into this home located just outside Fort Drum as part of the Domestic Lease Program. The program was developed and implemented by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers New York District.

Right: Developer Mike Treanor and Associates will renovate and remodel this building to create homes for Fort Drum families.



BARBARA DINDL, FORT DRUM HOUSING OFFICE

Doing the legwork

In February 2005, Fort Drum leadership informed the Corps' New York District that they needed 2,100 temporary, affordable, quality homes outside Fort Drum by 2009, but within commuting distance of the base. New York District, in cooperation with the Fort Drum housing team, began researching the civilian community. The area within a 30-mile radius of Fort Drum is semi-rural, and outside that area it is completely rural. Syracuse is the nearest city.

The Domestic Lease Program facilitates finding affordable off-post housing for family members, while ensuring that the housing is of good quality and close to on-post resources and services.

At this time, New York District also had finished creating the Domestic Lease Program and thought the current housing challenge would be the ideal situation for putting the program to the test.

"The program encourages land developers to construct or rehabilitate new temporary housing specifically for Army soldiers and their families from bases that are in a difficult market to find housing," says Noreen Dresser, Chief of Real Estate, New York District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "We reached out to developers and told them of this new demand for Army families. [We explained that] the Army traditionally is about 80 percent rental, and that soldiers receive a basic allowance for housing—making this a great market to build for."

Under the program, developers also were offered a government lease. "In addition, we offered to speak to the developers' leads as they pursued their

own resources—from banks or other sources—for construction, rent, and maintenance for the housing," adds Dresser.

New York District also began an educational campaign within the 30-

mile radius of Fort Drum to inform local residents about the program and the Army's need for quality housing. The district placed advertisements in a local newspaper, posted flyers, mailed letters, and made telephone calls to a

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host of institutions, including banks and financial lenders, real estate property associations, community groups, realtors, churches, chambers of commerce, apartment complexes, land surveyors, and assessors. They also spoke with banks and financial institutions to encourage them to lend for construction, refurbishments, and new development of housing in a moderate and affordable range. They worked with interested developers on their unique development's needs, educated them about the market, and offered them assistance with state and local officials.

New York District also held meetings with mayors and other city and town officials to impress upon them the positive economic impact the program would have on their communities and spoke with the county office responsible for certificates of occupancy to expedite the permitting process for various construction and remodeling projects.

Interested developers

In the spring of 2005, developer Mike Treanor and Associates contacted the

Army Corps with interest in the Domestic Lease Program. The company purchased the Pinehurst Apartments, which are close to Fort Drum, and had plans to develop the property into approximately 27 new housing units that would be suitable for Army families. The Corps visited the property to confirm that it met Army housing criteria. Mike Treanor and Associates received money from a financial lender and used it to create 33 new housing units.

"This development sent a positive message to the market early on," says Dresser. "Since then, Mike Treanor and Associates has renovated over 40 homes and purchased a factory on Black River for an additional 32 apartments—all for the purpose of providing military families temporary affordable housing."

Clover Management, one of the largest developers of affordable housing in New York, also contacted the Corps with interest in the program. In September 2006, the company signed a contract for 103 acres just outside of Fort Drum to build 648 apartments—418 with two bedrooms and 230 with

three bedrooms—with an Olympic-size swimming pool, community room, and physical fitness facility.

Benefits to date

So far, military families are benefiting from the program. Smith and her daughters were able to move into a home "right outside the gate."

"It is a real home with plenty of room," Smith says. "It's so nice to live in a community with neighbors, a real yard, and room to breathe—really nice."

Dresser says the Domestic Lease Program is different from other government programs. "The government would normally select one developer to do all of the work. What we did with this program is create a natural free-market approach with healthy competition," she explains.

Now the Corps is encouraging other districts to implement the program. Recently, New York District assisted the Alaska District in implementing this program there.

What's more, the Domestic Lease Program is helping improve the economies of surrounding civilian communities. The program brings additional residents and revenue, creates jobs for developers and service industries, and improves the infrastructure by rehabilitating existing homes and creating new ones.

Most important, the program is providing quality, affordable temporary housing for military families close to military installations and at no additional cost to the government. Plus, deployed service members can rest assured that their families are living in quality and convenient housing—which contributes to increased morale and the overall well-being of service members and their families. ■

Dr. JoAnne Castagna is a technical writer-editor for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. Reach her at joanne.castagna@usace.army.mil for more information about the Domestic Lease Program.

From the Desk of the PHMA Historian

Help Uncover PHMA Chapter History

By Jennie Hibbert



As PHMA Historian, I am currently working on collecting information about the association's chapters. I am interested in how each chapter got started—particularly the basic who, what, when, and where data. For starters, I have been going back through the issues of *Defense Communities*, and have already found many of the charter dates and where chapters were located at that time. Several PHMA members were involved in the beginnings of more than one chapter; please contact me with any of this information. Photos, of course, are always welcome. E-mail information to JLWHibbert@aol.com or mail materials to Jennie Hibbert, 8304 Pinyon Pine Court, Fairfax Station, VA 22039. ■

Jennie Hibbert is the PHMA Historian. She welcomes any chapter or association tidbits, including pictures, which are suitable for inclusion in her records. Reach her at JLWHibbert@aol.com.