

USAOTC makes a difference for Backpack Buddies program in Killeen

By Eloise Lundgren, OTC Public Affairs

The organization “Communities in Schools” provided food support to more than 7,000 children and their families last year, and may need to feed more people this year, according to the CIS executive director.

“We identify students most in need,” said Mary Erwin Barr, “and provide food to them using donated backpacks, cash contributions and food donations. Last year, nearly three thousand of those we helped were Soldiers and their families.

“It’s caring individuals and groups like you who make it possible,” Barr told Brig. Gen. Don MacWillie, commanding general, U.S. Army Operational Test Command, whose employees had chosen for the third year the Communities in Schools Backpack Buddies program as their Make a Difference Day project.

MacWillie and USAOTC senior non-commissioned officer Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Bobb delivered more than 100 backpacks, \$1,108 in cash and checks, and assorted non-perishable food items to the CIS office in Killeen Monday.

“This (program) is important to OTC,” MacWillie said. “We take a great deal of pride in supporting your efforts; we think you are doing great things here.”

“We don’t want Soldiers deploying and worrying about food for their families,” Barr said.

CIS, a local private, non-profit organization, is comprised of paid staff and volunteers who are located at campuses in five area school districts: Killeen, Copperas Cove, Temple, Belton and Salado. Backpack Buddies is one of several services offered, Barr said. Other support includes emergency rent assistance, utility bill payments, medications/prescriptions, physicals, winter coats/blankets, shoes and family vehicle emergencies.

“CIS is not just ‘here’s some free stuff; come and get it,’” she said. “We’re really trying to teach those who ask us for help to fish and not just eat for a day.”

CIS staff works with families to teach them how to manage household budgets better, stretch their food purchases to go further and last longer, and make better life choices overall, Barr said. "This is just as much a parent program as a student program," she said.

Barr was particularly pleased to show the USAOTC leaders the new freezer CIS received from the Killeen Heights Rotary Club. "This is huge," she said. "Now I can store turkeys and hams for Thanksgiving and Christmas. I can buy more than one thousand turkeys with that money you just donated."

USAOTC family programs assistant Faye Debard said she plans to share information on the CIS shoe drive with all of Fort Hood. "There's a real need for shoes in the seven to eight and a half size range," she said.

Lynn Dykes, of USAOTC's Test Technology Directorate, who assisted with the collection effort, said she looks forward to helping with Make a Difference Day every year. "We did something for the babies," she said. "As long as we're doing something for children, count me in."

The 2010 Make a Difference Day was the 20th year for the largest national day of community service.

Source: Fort Hood Sentinel, October 28, 2010



Brigadier Gen. Don MacWillie, commander, USAOTC, presents money, food items and backpacks to Communities in Schools executive director Mary Erwin Barr Monday in Killeen. Looking on are USAOTC Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Bobb, aide-de-camp Capt. Jonathan Pride and Jane St. John, special assistant to the CIS executive director. (Photo by Tad Browning, OTC Public Affairs)