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## **STRONG BONDS HELPS NATIONAL GUARD FAMILIES COPE WITH STRESS OF SEPARATION DURING HOLIDAY SEASON**

Arlington, Va – The holiday season brings joy, but even in the best of times, the holidays can also bring extra pressures and worries. For the 450,000 members of the National Guard and their families, the holidays may also bring sadness and a sense of isolation. Since 9-11, National Guard Warriors have experienced an unprecedented increase in overseas deployments while the demands of its stateside mission have not grown any less demanding. In addition, Guard families live throughout their communities and may be geographically isolated from the support of other military families. Increased separations and the anxiety of having a loved one in harm's way put tremendous stress on family relationships.

Recognizing the pressure that Guard Warriors and Families experience, The National Guard Bureau offers its members a relationship strengthening program called, Strong Bonds. Strong Bonds is a free weekend retreat designed to help strengthen military marriages and families, and to help single members make good relationship decisions. The retreat provides relationship skills training using proven methods with a focus on communication, fun, and maintaining closeness. The fully-funded program is led by Chaplains and delivers not only valuable relationship training, but allows time for fun, recreation, and relaxation.

The overwhelming majority of response to Strong Bonds is highly favorable and preliminary studies indicate a significant reduction in divorce for couples who completed Strong Bonds training.

Currently, over 100,000 Warriors and Family members have participated in over Strong Bonds events. In 2009 alone, over 3,000 Strong Bonds events were planned. Starting in 2010, the Army has budgeted nearly \$30 million for the Strong Bonds program across the Total Army. Strong Bonds grew out of family programs begun by the U.S. Army Chaplaincy in 1999 called Building Strong and Ready Families. The unit-level training presents a holistic, preventative approach to building healthy relationships. In conjunction with the Yellow Ribbon Program, Strong Bonds also works to help provide health assessment tools to alert Warriors and family members to the signs of PTSD and suicide risks and access to resources for help. Research shows that training in communication, intimacy, and conflict management increases marital satisfaction and reduces rates of family violence.

Currently, 52 percent of all Guard Warriors are married and 56 percent of those who are single will marry. It is known that a strong family bond improves Warrior readiness and retention. This means better communication on the battlefield, which can save lives, and cost-savings by retaining recruits. There are programs designed for various needs of Guard members.

**Strong Bonds Singles Program.** Over half of all single service members will marry while enlisted. This program provides skills to help singles make good relationship decisions and learn healthy relationship behaviors.

**Strong Bonds Couples Program.** Over half of enlisted members are married. This program strengthens the marital bond, giving couples the tools and information they need for better communication and relationship building.

**Strong Bonds Family Program.** Children in military families face unique pressures. This program teaches family members to safeguard closeness during trying times.

**Strong Bonds Pre- and Re-deployment Program.** Prolonged separations are one of the most trying of all stresses on member families. This program provides the tools to help families stay close during a deployment and after a long separation.

Strong Bonds is just one family program the National Guard provides its Warriors and Families. For more information, call your local unit Chaplain or go to [www.strongbondsnbg.org](http://www.strongbondsnbg.org).