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Supporting the soldiers, their families and the community

Some 2,600 members of the Minnesota National Guard have been training at Camp Shelby, MS for their March deployment to Iraq. This is the largest overseas deployment of the state's National Guard since WW II.

Recognizing the impact the departure will have on the soldiers, their families and their communities, Major General Larry Shellito, Adjutant General of the Minnesota National Guard, is visiting communities most affected by the deployment. On Friday, Dec. 16, he visited Little Falls. One of his stops was at the Initiative Foundation where he met for morning coffee with members of the Little Falls Area Chamber of Commerce, their employees and guests. His second stop was at the LFCHS where he met with Interim Superintendent Dr. Bruce Anderson and School Board Chair Susan Prosapio.

"I don't have a lot to give you," reported the Major General as he visited with Anderson and Prosapio. "For the students who have a parent deployed, it is important to maintain a steady environment. Then too, random acts of kindness are so helpful. A simple 'How are you?' is good."

Continuing, Shellito told the story of a superintendent having a teachers meeting. "When the school bell rang, one teacher got up to leave," he related. "The superintendent told her he was not finished. The wife of a deployed soldier, she answered back, 'My child will not come home to an empty house.' You've got to have insight into the family."

Agreeing, Prosapio further pointed out that many families feel they should work out their problems on their own. Dr. Anderson added, "Yes, we need to be more welcoming."

Included in the Major General's group was Mary Olson, a volunteer with the Family Readiness Organization whose husband is currently deployed. She related, "At the end of the day, you're still alone."

.....Dennis Shields, was also in the group. "Don't be afraid to give us a call," he said. "We need to know of potential problems. We have a chaplain available."

Asked how children and others might deal with war protesters, Shellito said, "Ignore them. Focus on the support groups. This is nothing like the Vietnam era. Tell the children that their parent is doing what their country asked them to. Tell them to be proud of their parent/soldier."

Before leaving, Shellito spoke of ways communities, churches, schools and organizations could offer support to the soldiers and the families they leave behind. Ideas ranged from having picnics for the families to sending greetings to the soldiers. He then told of the wife who made a life-sized cut-out of her deployed husband. "She took it everywhere she went—weddings, reunions, graduations—and made sure he was in the pictures."

Referring to means of coping with deployment, the Adjutant General said, "Hopefully, when we get this all figured out, it will all be obsolete."

Those interested in offering support to the troops, or offering help to the families left behind, are invited to contact:

- The First Lady's Military Family Care Initiative which offers volunteer services to the families. Go to www.governor.state.mn.us/FirstLady/flmain1.asp
- Minnesota Military Family Foundation which distributes money through grants to families that need a little help. Go to www.minnesotamilitaryfamilyfoundation.org
- Operation Minnesota Nice assembles care packages to send deployed service members. To contribute money or items, or to help assemble care packages at a "packing party," check out www.operationminnesotanice.com

One may also find out how to send games, supplies, DVDs, books, etc. to the soldiers by going to www.booksforsoldiers.com. Those who have no idea of what to send or who to send something to can go to www.anysoldier.com.

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