

Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable With Lieutenant General Darell Jones, Director, Manpower, Personnel and Services Via Teleconference From U.S. Air Force Headquarters Subject: Air Force Key Spouse Program, Support to Air Force Spouses, and the Caring for People Forum Time: 3:45 p.m. EDT Date: Wednesday, September 21, 2011

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PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, September 21st, 2011. My name is Petty Officer William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call.

Today we are honored to have as our guest General Darrell Jones, Lieutenant General Darrell Jones -- sorry, sir -- director of manpower, personnel and services. General Jones will discuss the Air Force Key Spouse program, support to Air Force spouses and the Caring for People Forum.

A note to the bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question. Respect the general's time and keep questions succinct and to the point. If you are not asking a question, we ask that you place your phone on mute.

And sir, with that, the floor is yours for your opening statement.

LIEUTENANT GENERAL DARRELL JONES: Well, first, I just want to thank everyone for being here today. This is my first experience with the Bloggers Roundtable, so y'all are going to have to be very kind to me.

But it's not my first experience talking about people programs. You know, I grew up in the Air Force. I was a service brat. My dad was a master sergeant in the Air Force, and I've lived on bases all over the world. And so this is something very, very near to my heart, servicing people and doing what we can to care for our airmen around the Air Force. And so it's something I take very seriously and am very excited to be a part of.

And so I'm looking forward to answering your questions and addressing how we're working with folks today. And so without any further ado, I'll open the floor for questions.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And let's see. Amy, I had you on the line first. So you can go on with your question.

Q: Yeah. Sir, thank you so much for taking the time to do this today. My name's Amy Bushatz. I'm with Military.com. I was hoping that you could give us a little bit of background, first, on the Key Spouse program, since I'm familiar with it on a cursory level but not intimately.

And then I was also wondering if this is -- I understand it's a volunteer program at the moment. The Army has something that at least appears similar, the FRSA program, and that is a paid position. And I was wondering if the Air Force has ever considered making that a paid position. And perhaps this isn't the best time to talk about doing that, in the face of budget cuts, but I know the Army has found that to be very effective, so please.

GEN. JONES: Well, first off, Amy, thank you very much.

You know, the Key Spouse program is something we sort of modified from a program that, believe it not, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt came up with many, many years ago. Now we hate to say that we -- that we stole something from the Navy, but we're not above taking best practices from any service when it comes to helping our airmen.

And you know, what the basic idea is that -- idea is, is that in every squadron, you have -- or every unit, you know, even -- it's a squadron or a directorate on a staff, you have people who want to volunteer, who want to contribute and who want to be involved.

In the past, in the Air -- or in the military, there's a tradition of that being the commander's spouse or the senior officer's spouse or the senior enlisted's spouse, or a team. But we found that by having a key spouse, you out into the audience or the group of people you have, and you let someone step up who says: Hey, that is my passion, that's my forte. And so now you not only have the commander's spouse and your senior enlisted's spouse working with your airmen; you also have someone who's stepped up and volunteered and said: Hey, that's what I do best. This is what I like to do. It allows them to bring in their ideas. It allows them to bring in their energy and their passion and just really multiply the efforts of the squadron.

It allows -- as a good example, you may have a squadron who's got someone who's very tech-savvy who wants to be the key spouse. And they'll get all the youngsters on board with, you know, online information, with websites and things like that -- sort of a different

approach to how we take care of our airmen. And I really find it to be a most -- a force multiplier from the old way that we used to do it.

Your comment about whether we should pay them or not -- you know, different services have gone down different roads over time. You made a very, very good point. In these austere times, there's certainly no talk about paying for these positions, because right now we don't have to. We have a number of people who are willing to step up. And the reason they're willing to help people is, they were helped themselves. You know, when they reported into the squadron, somebody stepped up and said: Let me take you under your -- under my wing. Let me show you what it's like to be in the military. You know, let me make sure your family's taken care of.

And this is just a long -- a continuation of a long service tradition of taking care of our airmen. And it's the same tradition in every other service. We take care of our own in the military, and this is just another fine example of it.

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Dale or Deborah Kissinger?

Q: General Jones, it's so good to talk to you. And I consider -- I considered being affiliated with the military as an honor. There's respect. There's recognition. There's affirmation. And I think that the key programs that you're talking about and working with are exactly that. They have the flow of information up to the leadership and down to the leadership.

And sir, oh, how I remember the days when we had information and -- for everybody else. We were -- we were stationed at McChord Air Force Base with then-Colonel Sills (ph). And -- great memories, General Jones.

My point to you is, you know, I love the idea of the communication. I love the idea of the leadership. And I think that programs that involve leadership and information flow are vital. I think that's -- the vitality of family is having communication. I guess I don't really have a pointed question to you but just love the idea that I could even get on the board with you right now -- and I'm thinking of what (helps ?).

MS. : So it sounds like you really like the accessibility that you're offered. What is your last name, Deborah?

Q: Oh, I'm sorry. I should have jumped in right with that. I'm Deborah Kissinger from militaryavenue.com.

GEN. JONES: Deborah, if I can take a personal moment here, it's great to hear from you again. And you know, if you call me "General Jones," I'm going to reach through the computer and whack you on the head. I've been Darrell for a long time to you, and you know what.

Deborah and I go way back.

Please pass my best to Dale and the whole family. And it's exciting -- when you started talking, I was going, I know that voice.

Q: (Laughs.)

GEN. JONES: So it's just -- it's really neat to hear from you.

But you know, Deborah, you point out something very important, and that is the continuity of information among people. When we transfer a family to a new base, we should not have to put every family through new learning. Every family should not have to go out and find out what's available in the schools, what's available in medical care for their family if they have an exceptional family member. And for those who aren't familiar with that term, "Exceptional Family Member Program" is a term we use for people with special medical needs or, you know, medical needs above and beyond.

And that -- stopping that new learning is important because by having a network of key spouses, having a network of EFMP coordinators, of school liaison officers, when people come into the base, they know who to talk to. They know where to go for the information. And those individuals at the base have already talked to all the key people in town, all the medical folks, all the school folks. And they have the information. They can tell you exactly where to go. You should not have to move to a base two weeks early to make sure you can take care of your children's school issues or your children's medical issues. And that what -- that is what makes us such a vibrant community.

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Dale, did you have a question?

Q: I do. I'm on the line too, sir.

GEN. JONES: Hi, Dale. (Chuckles.) How you doing?

Q: I'm doing well. My question concerns the key spouse role during deployment. And for a commander, are there any OPSEC concerns that the program has?

GEN. JONES: No, I think we've worked through all those in the early days, Dale. You know, nowadays with Skype and email and all the other avenues that are available -- I saw a picture the other day that I just looked at and smiled and said wow, have we changed. Remember in Desert Shield and Desert Storm when we had the big, long rows of telephone booths that you saw, and the soldiers were lined up 20 deep to make their phone call? Those don't exist anymore because connectivity is -- maybe not instantaneous, but certainly, you know, almost real-time nowadays.

And so everyone has their OPSEC issues inculcated in them. It's not like the old movies when you have to turn your letter in to have it read by the censor to make sure you don't say anything wrong. We've just

had to teach all of our airmen, all of our soldiers, our sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen what's appropriate and what's not appropriate.

But the key spouse can pass back information. There's always been a spouse network. You know, they've always known when the airplanes are deploying, when the ships are coming in. And so this allows us to keep it all, I think, in one area and cut down on the rumor mill because you know as a commander, Dale, as yourself having been one many times -- you know as a commander that one of the things you have to struggle with is staying ahead of the rumor mill network. And trust me, if that was true many years ago, in the -- (chuckles) -- in the electronic age it's not the rumor mill as much as the electronic mill, I guess you'd say, of staying ahead of things that are going to be passed out there. So we've got to make sure we're getting the right words out on the Facebook pages and the web pages and things for the right information and the most accurate information. Q: OK, thanks.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Jared, you're there in the room, I hear. Did you have a question you want to go ahead with?

Q: Yes. Sir, Air Force announced some -- another round of buy-outs and early-outs today for civilian workforce. Can you talk through a little bit what the objectives -- how many you're trying to get to leave the service and how you're going to manage that?

GEN. JONES: Well, what we're doing, Jared, is -- if you remember, Secretary Gates announced back in December -- but don't quote me on that date -- he announced that we were going to stay at -- that we were going to hold the DOD budget basically at FY '10 levels for funding. And what that made us do is go back and evaluate where we're putting our focus, because we had planned to grow some during the out years in the Air Force. And so we are going to now not recognize some of that growth, but we knew that in some of that growth were important new missions that we needed to still go do.

So now we're looking at sort of re-baselining the force to get people in the right areas that we need them to be in. And so whenever you do that, the government is certainly trying to do what's best for the individuals, and the best way to do that is, as you're trying to re-baseline the force, is encourage folks who have already served their time, are maybe thinking of getting out but haven't made that decision to get out, to say, hey, you know what? I think I will go.

And you do that a couple different ways. One is -- is variable -- (pause) -- (early ?) retirement authority. Thank you. It took me a second. You know, somebody who may be a couple months short of being able to retire, you might waive that last couple months and let them go ahead and retire.

The other is what we call VSIP, variable separation incentive pay. I got that one right. Where someone who is retirement eligible, you might offer them a bonus, a buyout, if you will, to go ahead and put their papers in and retire. That allows you to free up a position so that as you're re-baselining the force, that position's now freed up to

move someone else into who you need to keep, or if that position's going away, if you've got -- if you happen to be reducing -- well, let's take, you know, administrative specialists, just as a non-specific term. If you happen to be reducing administrative specialists at a base and you have 10 and you need two of them, and you're going to reduce those positions by two, you want to go in and incentivize two of those people who are maybe retirement eligible to go ahead and say, yeah, I've had my time, I'm willing to go ahead; I was thinking of retiring next year, but I'll do that now.

So that's how we hope to use that, because you want to use the - - you want to use all these voluntary programs that allow you to reshape your force and do so without any adverse actions to the force. So that's just one early step in our plans to start reshaping the force and making sure we have the right individuals in the right specialties so we can continue to do the Air Force mission. Q: And off the top of your head, can you think of areas that the Air Force needs to protect to make sure that you don't lose workforce size as you're trimming down overall?

GEN. JONES: Well, I think the best way to do that, Jared, is just look at our key areas. You know, we have nuclear -- we have -- you know, continuing to bolster the nuclear enterprise, acquisition excellence, just a few off the top of our head -- of areas where we probably -- you know, where you want to continue to focus your effort. Obviously, you also want to maintain your capability in a lot of your combat skills, the things that are heavily deployed. Those are areas that you'd want to maintain your skills.

Q: I'll let other folks jump in. Thanks.

GEN. JONES: All right? Thank you, Jared.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And was there anybody else in the room there with you that wanted to ask a question?

MS. : I think Jared's our only in-the-room reporter.

GEN. JONES: Everybody else works for me, and they're not going to say a word. (Laughter.)

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that, sir.

All right, back around to Amy, then.

Q: Hi. Thank you so much for -- (inaudible) -- sir.

I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about maybe any changes or increase to support or -- you know, or (decrease ?) to support of Air Force spouses now that the deployment OPTEMPO is slowing down or at least forecasted to slow down a little bit. Is that something that means we need more support because, you know, the guys are going to be -- and women -- are going to be home more and often that can bring up situations that you have to address with your spouse that you didn't have to before, because they kept leaving? Or is it something that means

we're going to need less support because we don't have the deployments that we were having? How do you view that situation, and what are your plans?

GEN. JONES: Amy, I don't think that -- I don't think we're ever looking at lowering support for spouses, because I don't think the requirement to support our families ever goes away. It just may change a little bit. And the reason I say that is, you know, I grew up during the Vietnam era, and I remember my father was gone a lot deployed overseas. And his mission was Strategic Air Command. And when the spouse is gone, there's certainly a lot of support you need at home, but when the spouse is at home, you've also got reintegration issues you need to work with the family. You've got -- you know, the demands of the job will not change. Some people will argue -- it's sort of anecdotal when people say that, you know, sometimes it's easier to deploy than to be at home, because all you have to focus on at home -- I mean when you're deployed is a job, but at home you have to juggle job and family.

So we're certainly not going to be looking at reducing any of the support to our spouses, but this will be a time, if the OPTEMPO does slow down -- and I say "if" because I certainly don't have a crystal ball yet. And I know that as the forces reduce overseas, my personal opinion, the Air Force will still be very, very engaged in the missions that we do, the global reach, the global power.

But, you know, if you go with the assumption that if OPTEMPO were to increase, you then have got to work on back home, how you support the families -- gives you a chance to rebaseline how we're taking care of folks, how we're making sure that when you move from one base to another, the care there is robust, the support there's robust and you don't feel like you're just left out there on your own. And I think that's the important thing.

So we're not going to -- we have families who are -- units who are deployed; the left-behind spouse has certain needs of staying connected, of understanding what's happening with their members deployed. Families that are intact back home, they have certain needs of being connected to the unit, understanding they are a big part of this Air Force family. You know, I think sometimes it's more important when everybody's back home together, because the tendency is to say, well, we don't need to worry about them right now. But you do. We have to make sure that everybody in the family understands the importance of the service member's duty and the importance of what they bring to the fight.

And, you know, I want -- I don't want any -- I don't want any spouse, any dependent ever to look at the military as a job. I want them to understand that their loved one has stepped forward and raised their hand in a time when we don't have a draft, when we have an all-volunteer force and a time when we know the dangers and we know the commitment and we know the sacrifice that's required; if their loved ones raise their hand and say, hey, I want to be part of something much bigger than myself, that supports people across the entire world. And I think that's the important thing we've got to focus on when people get back home.

Q: Thank you so much.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Dale and Deborah.

Q: This is Deborah again. And thank you again for this time.

I did have a question. When I first saw that, you know, we're going to be talking about family matters -- and then it was you, General Jones -- and I know that this is your heart and your soul of the whole thing -- I went online and I saw that one of the ideas was caring for people. And it was interesting, because when I think of caring for people and I think of the Air Force family, I think of, like, the worries of a mom with a PCS (ph) And like you said, you don't -- you shouldn't need to worry about the forward and the backward of the whole thing, you know, the chapel and youth groups and schools and things like that, so for families.

Now, you have one of the things online that Google put out that you're going to be talking about caring for people. And that's -- in July there was a Caring for People Forum. Can you tell me more about that?

GEN. JONES: I can. In July, we had a chance to bring -- and when we say caring for people and families -- let me just throw out one thing before I forget -- we're not excluding our single airmen either, because they're a big part of that. And in July, we brought together representatives from all the commands across the Air Force, and gave them a chance to come and sort of listen to the most current updates. It was hosted by General Schwartz and Mrs. Schwartz, and all of the key leadership was there for different portions of it. And I sat through the whole thing.

And it gave us a chance to do breakout sessions and ask, OK, today what's important to you? You know, what's important to our airmen? The youngsters told us that -- they joke that, you know, as long as they have Internet access -- what was it -- what did it come out to be? -- Internet access, good chow and a meaningful job, they'd be happy. And I laughed because I said, OK, I know we have two of those three. I'm not sure about Internet access all over the base everywhere.

But it is what's important, because you've got to remember that if you don't bring people together, if you don't ask the youngsters what's important to them, all the decisions are made by old people like me. And I've got a different view of the world than that young 19-year-old. And, you know, I often joke: I've got a son in uniform and a daughter-in-law who, you know, is going through all these family experiences now, and I enjoy hearing their feedback. I enjoy hearing the feedback from the children of friends of mine, because their view of the world is much different, and their experience in the Air Force, frankly, is very different from somebody who has been in as long as I have. And so it's important for us to realize that if the service is a pyramid, we're pretty close to the top of that pyramid.

And the majority of the folks look at things differently. You know, it's the old cartoon about -- that I saw years ago that showed a mother walking into her son's bedroom, and he was on the computer, doing his homework, listening to his iPod, talking on the phone and he had some other device going. And the mother said: How can you text, do your homework, listen to music, talk on the phone and watch TV at the same time? And his response was: How can you not? That's the way they're wired. And so by bringing these youngsters together, the single member of the Caring for People Forum, the young spouses with young children, pre-school, elementary school, the spouses with children going off to college and concerned about the GI Bill and what's going to be available for them and whether we're going to move the family in the senior year -- that was sort of the genesis behind the Caring for People Forum.

We took away a number of initiatives to work; we're sort of chipping away at them. We do this every year, where we get together for the Caring for People Forum. And it basically informs our work for the next year and where we need to focus. And that's the key ingredient, I think, of the Caring for People Forum.

And then, just today, if I -- without trying to give you too long an answer -- which I know I've already busted that -- but just today, we had a chance to bring together -- Mrs. Schwartz asked the Air Force Association to help us sponsor the -- excuse me, to help us sponsor the Family Forum here at the AFA. And we focused on spouse employment and spouse empowerment. And we had wonderful speakers: Sue Hoppin is an author and a military spouse herself; talked to us about balancing career and a military family. We also had Mr. Robert Gordon from the Office of the Secretary of Defense talk to us about the Military Spouse Employment Program.

It was just another chance -- and, oh, by the way, all the key spouses from the major commands were there today. It's just another way to get together to tell everyone what's going on, get the word out to the field and hear their feedback. And it was a great forum today. I have to tell you, everybody was excited we're getting together. And I think to say we'll double next year is probably an understatement, based on the enthusiasm in the room -- because this was the first year we tried it -- I think it's going to -- it's going to at least triple by next year.

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Dale, did you have a follow-up?

Q: I do. General, the Key Spouse Program was -- they were recognized at the command level at the -- at the forum. Did there -- was there a significant number of traits that came out for a key spouse that were chosen to become the command representative? What did they do to earn that recognition?

GEN. JONES: You know, it was interesting, Dale. The spouses were really across the board. You had young mothers, you had -- you had -- matter of fact, I think one was expecting at the forum in July. And you had young mothers, you had -- you had -- you had spouses that had

been in for a number of years. They were all, I would say -- I'm generalizing here. Most of them were probably below the age of 40; probably, all of them were below the age of 40. And I'm really getting in trouble here, so nobody write that down. Please just write they were all young. Many of them came from -- many of them had enlisted spouses; some of them had officer spouses. It really depended on the makeup of the squadron they came from.

And what got them recognition from their major command, the sort of the universal thing, was they had thrown their heart and soul into this program. You could tell these were not spouses who were just doing this as we used to joke about additional duties, Dale, when we were young. These were people that had a fire and a passion in their belly. They wanted to find out everything they could do. They wanted to be on Mrs. Schwartz's Facebook page and learn what's going on every day, and they're following things like that. And they have a passion for getting the word out.

And each one of these spouses have a -- has a following within their units and within their bases and within their commands, because they know that they're the mavens, if you will; they're the folks that connect people; they're the folks that get the information out. And I -- and I think that's the common trait, is having a passion for what you do and a willingness, a desire and a love of helping people.

Q: Oh, that's great. Thank you, sir.

GEN. JONES: You're welcome.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Jared, I think we have time for another question.

Q: OK. Sorry, I'm going to ask another force shaping question.

GEN. JONES: That's all right.

Q: (Inaudible) -- just asked the same question on the uniform side. I know you did some involuntary force shaping initiatives earlier this year to get the officer end strength back under the authorization level. Where is that whole process, both on the enlisted and the officer side?

GEN. JONES: We're doing rather well. General -- the secretary and the chief -- General Schwartz and Secretary Donley -- made a commitment early on that we would -- we would -- we would work very hard to meet our officer force -- our -- excuse me, our military force levels, officer and enlisted, by the end of FY '12. And without giving a specific number, because it's still conjecture, I will tell you that we're projected to meet our end strength levels, without any doubt, by the end of fiscal year '12.

Where that will go from there, we don't know, obviously, because we continue to have big budget debates on Capitol Hill. But our goal was to work hard to get down to that, because you've got to -- if you don't

meet your force levels -- and you know, it's really a -- it's a decision about do you not do -- do you keep people in and let them stay as long as they want, and then sacrifice your accessions in the service, or do you have to take really distasteful, unfortunate choices to ask people to leave maybe before they're ready?

You know, the last time we did significant force shaping, the unemployment rate in the country was between 4 (percent) and 6 percent. Today, the unemployment rate is under -- is just under 10 percent; it's peaked at 10 percent, I believe, a couple of times in the last year or so. We have the highest retention in 16 years.

So on the one hand, you want to say, just let the people stay in until they decide to get out.

But for everybody you keep in, you can't bring in that accession because it is a flow, the way we bring people into the Air Force. And if we don't bring in that -- those accessions that are all important, then we're sacrificing the future capability of the Air Force.

And we're certainly not sacrificing the current capability by encouraging people to leave because the -- you know, in the past years that's when they were leaving anyway. It's now that people are staying well past what they've done historically in the past. And if you have someone at 22 -- if someone normally left at 22, 23 years, and they decide now, wow, with the economy the way it is, I think I'm going to stay till 26 or 27 years, that's two or three years of not bringing in a new accession, whether it's an officer or enlisted. And you realize that (bathtub ?) through the years, and you can't make that up. You really can't.

Q: Am I remembering correctly that the problem this year was mostly with officers and you were pretty --

GEN. JONES: It was. We were doing good with enlisted. We had a problem with officers. We were -- we were -- we were planning to end -- you know, and I'll give you the exact number in a minute, but I think we were planning to end FY '11 about 600 officers -- I'm looking at my staff because they're going to give me the number; I've just blanked -- about --

STAFF: (Off mic.)

GEN. JONES: That's right. At the beginning of September we were 857 officers over end strength, basically even on enlisted. We were going to draw that number down some more during this year. But the key point was by the end of FY '12 we will have met our targets for both officers and enlisted end strength. And so that puts us in a good position whatever comes in the next few years down the road, because as you carry those bubbles through -- you know, if you end the year over end strength, you not only have to realize your normal losses, which are about 3,000 in the officer every year; you also have to realize additional losses to get down to that number, which makes it so much harder.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Is that good for you, Jared?

Q: I'm all set, yeah. Thank you. PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that.

And sir, with that, I'd like to thank everybody for their questions and wrap up today's call. If you have any closing statement, sir.

GEN. JONES: Now, Petty Officer Williams (sic), thank you very much for your help. I certainly appreciate that.

Amy and Dale and Deborah, it was great to hear your voices out there, and Jared. Thank y'all for your time here.

You know, this is a -- this is an interesting time for the military. We have -- we are engaged overseas significantly. We've got uncertainty back home with the economy and families. And so this is the time when you have to focus on the individual family. I know growing up in the Air Force, there were times when I was curious what was going to happen, but there were never times when I was worried about our future. And we've got to make sure that we're doing everything to alleviate some of those worries of our military members today.

The good thing is that the military continues to change. As I always tell people, I did not join the military that my father joined. My son did not join the military I joined. And we continue to grow. We continue to change with the reality of the world around us. And I think that's what makes us a stronger Air Force. If I had joined the same Air Force my dad had joined, and my son had joined the Air Force that he had joined, we would not be relevant today. And so we have to continue to change. We have to continue to be flexible and to be resilient as we move forward.

So thank y'all very much for your time. I look forward to meeting y'all and talking with you soon.

And Dale and Deborah, it was great hearing from you, and I'll talk to y'all soon.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And thank you once again to all the bloggers that were on the call and for your questions.

Today's program will be available online at DODLive.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with the source documents such as the audio file and print transcripts.

This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time.

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much. END.