

Chamber of Commerce works to assist military families in Belton by David Tuma | Tuesday, October 21, 2008

The Belton Area Chamber of Commerce has been working with military families through a series of town hall meetings in order to assist those families. Military families are very mobile with deployments all over the world and with military bases stretched across the globe. Deployments are the norm in today's overseas conflicts that have stretched military families to the breaking point in many cases.

Over 11 percent of the students in the Belton Independent School District are from military families so the issue is of vital importance. The Belton Chamber has been working in cooperation with the Military Child Education Coalition a national organization to assist military families. "We needed to get the community aware of the need to support these military families. Our involvement started over two years ago. That first meeting every community in the area was invited to learn about the issues of education, business, healthcare and their relation with the military," said Jay Taggart who is in charge of the Military Affairs committee for the Belton Chamber.

The chamber developed a packet for military families and reached out to them through a series of town hall meetings to create communication both ways. The latest meeting Monday night held at Lake Belton Middle School involved Fort Hood, local military families, Belton Mayor Jim Covington, Temple Mayor Bill Jones and BISD school board president Randy Pittenger. The meeting was hosted by the Belton Chamber of Commerce in order to better understand what military families need from the families themselves.

Carrie Hartwick lost her husband over two years ago in Iraq and has remained in the area. Hartwick's children attend Belton schools but the nearest relative is in Missouri and yet she choose to continue to live in the Belton area. She has been involved in the town hall meetings and is highly respected in the Morgan's Point and Belton communities not only from her families sacrifice but from their reaction to both communities support after the loss of her husband. "The outpouring from the church, school district and community was overwhelming. I had more than just me watching my children. If I moved from here I would be the Hartwick widow. Here I have people supporting me and it hasn't slowed up," said Hartwick. "Those Vietnam veterans who were treated so poorly really stepped it up and helped us. Even their children helped us and it was a big factor."

"The meetings have brought families together so they could network with each other and the community. If you can support people in a non-crisis time they will come to you when they actually need help. We can't help people unless they let us know they need help. This committee we formed brought it all together. You talk to the realtors and they will tell how many military families are moving in our area," said Belton Chamber President Stephanie O'Banion.

"The number one reason we moved here was Belton schools," said Hartwick who lives in Morgan's Point Resort.