

Support That's Right on Base

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In July 2016, when Brig. Gen. Brook Leonard became commander of the 56th Fighter Wing at Luke Air Force Base outside Glendale in Maricopa County, Ariz., he assumed responsibility for more than 5,300 military personnel and the base's new mission of training pilots for the Air Force's next-generation fighter, the F-35 Lightning II. But he also became a community leader for more than 1,200 civilians on the base and 10,000 family members.

And while Luke provides many support programs for airmen and their families, over the past few years, budget cuts have forced it and many other bases to reduce or eliminate many services.

That's where Fighter Country Partnership (FCP) comes into play. Founded in 1997 by civic leaders and elected officials, FCP is a nonprofit community and advocacy support group for Luke AFB that is supported by membership and donations. A sister organization, Fighter Country Foundation, was added in 2006.

According to Ron Sites, executive director and president of Fighter Country Partnership, his organization's role supplements the base's mission and community support activities, adding that it's a "huge and humbling" responsibility. Sites said the group's efforts fall into three main areas: morale and well-being, supporting the culture and tradition of the military, and the sustainability of Luke's mission.

"Our role is enhancing the quality of life. We never want to create the perception that Luke can't take care of their own, because they can," Sites said in a recent interview with a local business that supports FCP. "What we do is to make sure that we protect that quality of life."

FCP provides a variety of services including financial counseling for airmen and their spouses, and numerous events throughout the year such as the "Dorm Dweller" holiday party for airmen who live in the dorms on base and are unable to go home to be with family. FCP partners with local businesses to provide support, prizes and other logistics. Fundraising events such as an annual golf tournament help generate resources and awareness for FCP's efforts.

The foundation has initiated programs such as Operation Thunderbox, which collects comfort items and pays for boxes and postage to send 450 care packages a year around the world. Operation Warmheart assists military families in times of hardships for things

that Air Force Aid is unable to help cover. The foundation also provides support and services to help Luke service members cope with the demands of deployments and to help families during separations. Base funds are limited for these programs. A program called Hearts Apart provides monthly activities that offer social, recreational and morale support through a wide range of events, including picnics, bowling, arts and crafts, spouse luncheons, sports events, children's activities, and concerts.

"There's literally nobody in the country doing what we're doing to support these families out at Luke," Sites told the local CBS television affiliate in Phoenix last year. "And it's not just Air Force. It's Navy families. It's Marine families. It's really total force integration, and we get to support all of those families."

FCP also has helped organize a summer camp for military children with autism. Former F-16 fighter pilot Sam Mann told the CBS affiliate that FCP had a positive impact on his son.

"Had we not been introduced to that through Fighter Country Partnership, that's an opportunity we would have missed out on," Mann said. "Through my two decades in the Air Force, I've been to several bases and there's nothing like Fighter Country Partnership that I've seen at other bases." —CD
