

# Stronger Communities Through Childhood Fitness

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## Lawton, Oklahoma

Fort Sill has a fabled place in American history. Its field artillery training has served the nation in every military operation since 1869. Located on the Great Plains near Lawton, Okla., it numbers among its early frontier scouts “Buffalo Bill” Cody and “Wild Bill” Hickok. Many of its enduring structures are the work of the Buffalo Soldiers, the regiments that were the first African-Americans in the regular army. It also is the final resting place of the great Apache chief Geronimo.

Military and civilian members of the Lawton-Fort Sill community long have worked together on common interests, such as education and employment opportunities. The base and community have an amazing history of resilience in the face of change and challenge. They have joined forces once again to tackle another pressing challenge, one that’s facing many other communities throughout the country: childhood obesity. A program called Fit Kids of Southwest Oklahoma, in conjunction with local schools, is taking on a campaign to improve the health and well-being of all its children by providing access to fitness and nutrition programs. Fit Kids of Southwest Oklahoma, originally Lawton Fit Kids, was developed in 2006 to serve as a coordinating organization in an effort to create a more active and healthy community for children. The burgeoning community-based initiative includes participation in the Safe Routes to Schools program, intramural sports, fourth-grade testing, information on healthy food choices, and the Commanding General’s Challenge to get and stay fit.

Lawton public schools worked with the base to develop a plan that would serve the unique needs of the military child. Criteria include academic success, healthy social and emotional development, parental involvement, and effective partnerships. Eighty percent of the service members and their families, including 9,000 children from military families, reside off post. For nearly 15 years, the Army Partnership with Lawton Area Schools (APLAS), consisting of the community, 17 school districts, and Fort Sill itself, has enriched the lives and education of all students in the area. Now, with Fit Kids, even more is being accomplished.

Brenda Spencer-Ragland, director of Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation at Fort Sill, met with Dr. Ben Cooper, founding member of Fit Kids, to create a program to focus on service families. “I know as a senior leader that the military can invest in the best

playgrounds and sidewalks on the installation, but if it does not have strong connections to the community, where military families eat, play and work, then it will be very difficult to accomplish the same types of projects and wellness goals off the installation,” she said.

Representatives from Fit Kids, plus civilian and military stakeholders, meet each month at the Comanche County Memorial Hospital to provide training, create teamwork and inspire further integration with possible future programs, including those from the Department of Defense Healthy Base Initiative. The result has been a number of lively, engaging, health-enhancing community events such as:

- Fit Kids Walk or Bike to School, with hundreds of kids finding an enjoyable way to set off for the school day;
- Operation Live Well Health Expo, with NBA players, outdoor games, nutrition information contests, professional health advisors and prizes from Fit Kids; and
- Open Streets Lawton Fort Sill, which turned city streets into a temporary park for family activities involving walking, exercising, bicycling, dancing, playing and socializing. Working together, the APLAS also has improved fitness in the schools, as evidenced by the following:
  - In 2015, Freedom Elementary Public School became the first and only school on a military installation to win Silver Level status as part of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation; and
  - The 434th Field Artillery Brigade sent 72 drill sergeants to Tomlinson Middle School to train them for the Presidential Youth Fitness Challenge Test. As a result, 70 percent of students achieved certification.

In addition, Fort Sill was chosen to be the first all-military population to participate in a study of people who eat many meals outside the home each week. The goal is to see if written materials are effective in educating consumers on making healthy food choices. Inspired by the teamwork among Fort Sill, the service members and their families, city, county and state governments, and private enterprise, U.S. Sen. James M. Inhofe noted: “This seamless connection between a city and its neighbor military installation fosters numerous partnerships that improve the quality of education, health and wellness every day. The Army Partnership with Lawton area schools and Fit Kids of Southwest Oklahoma, two standout partnership programs promoted and led by community leaders, represent superb examples of this successful link, which have raised standardized test scores and improved student fitness.” – KB

