

Rock Island Arsenal expands childcare offerings

By Jennifer DeWitt | Thursday, November 13, 2008

The changing needs of families as well as a strengthened commitment to take care of Army families are the building blocks behind a new child development home on the Rock Island Arsenal.

Covenant Cottage, located in a former military housing unit, will provide more specialized childcare options than existing facilities on the island. Parents will be able to use it for hourly care as well as back-up/emergency, respite, evening and temporary full-time care.

"This was well worth the wait," Nancy Reeves, chief of the Children, Youth and School Services program, said Wednesday after opening the home's doors to a few dozen visitors, including some of the families it will serve. Tours continue today and Friday for Arsenal workers and families.

The Covenant Cottage name comes from the funding the project received from the Army Family Covenant — an agreement the Army has signed with its soldiers to ensure them that their families will be cared for when they are deployed.

"The Army has recognized we need to take care of your family while you're over there," said Nancy Lawson, director of Family Childcare on the Arsenal.

Under the covenant, all military families with deployed soldiers receive 16 hours of free respite care per month. Covenant Cottage will be one of the providers of that care.

The Rock Island Arsenal is the first Army installation in the Northeast Region to offer a child development home, she said, adding that all installations must offer the service beginning next year.

In addition, the Army is requiring its installations to expand childcare options in order to accommodate an additional 22,000 children, Reeves said. "They've said 'Try to find out-of-the-box things you can do,'" she said. "Covenant Cottage will serve as a model for other installations."

Although the focus is on military families, she said Covenant Cottage also is available to children of Department of Defense civilians and contractors employed on the Arsenal.

As she showed off the home's interior and pint-size amenities, Lawson said Covenant Cottage was four years in the making. The challenge was waiting for the right type of building to become available to provide almost around-the-clock care. The small house has been outfitted with new toys, supplies and kid-friendly furniture for the children — infants 4 weeks old and up — it will serve.

Covenant Cottage will meet the needs of parents who either cannot use or are on a waiting list for the Arsenal's two other centers. "If we can't accommodate a family — say they have odd hours — Covenant Cottage can be open 23 hours a day," Lawson said, adding that the facility also plans to offer Saturday service to allow parents to run errands or do whatever they need to do. "This is a cost-effective way to the gaps that we can't meet."

Arsenal employee Heather Bishop's 9-month-old son, Nate, will be one of the first children to be cared for at Covenant Cottage when it opens Monday. She hoped to enroll him at the Arsenal's Child Development Center, where her 5-year-old daughter Annabelle had been before kindergarten. "But it's hard to get infants there. It's a long, long waiting list," she said.

She sees Covenant Home as a great alternative because it will put her son on the island, where both she and her husband work as civilians for the Army Corps of Engineers. "This is really great for civilians, but it's really going to be important for military spouses of people who are deployed. They often don't have any families here to help out."

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New child center under construction

The opening of Covenant Cottage is the latest expansion of childcare services on the Rock Island Arsenal.

In October, ground was broken for a \$5 million child development center scheduled to open next summer. With its completion, the Arsenal's on-post childcare centers will be able to accommodate 188 children ranging in age from 6 weeks to 5 years.

The new center, located just north of Covenant Cottage, will replace the existing facility, which was built in an old Army barn. The project was funded through the Army Family Covenant.

The Arsenal's child development centers are certified with the Department of Defense and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

— Jennifer DeWitt