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ASYMCA celebrates 150 years of service

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The Armed Services Young Men's Christian Association (ASYMCA) has been supporting the United States military since 1861. The year 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of that partnership.

The ASYMCA continues this tradition of support through the multiple and varied programs that are offered to active duty military and their families today.

Tracy Kamemoto, out-reach director for ASYMCA Hawaii, said, "Here in Hawaii, the YMCA and the Armed Forces YMCA work on similar missions. While the YMCA focus is primarily community, the ASYMCA focuses specifically on military."

On Oahu, the ASYMCA has four branches: at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Wheeler Army Air Field, Marine Corps Base Hawaii, Kaneohe, and Aliamanu Military Reservation (AMR).

"ASYMCA works hard to give families the tools they need to get through their day-to-day living. We hope also to be there to assist families as they move to the island to help them adapt to their new surroundings," Kamemoto said.

While the ASYMCA primary target group is junior enlisted E1-5, their services are available for all ranks.

All sites offer "play mornings" which are organized weekly play groups held in military community centers and ASYMCA branches.

They also offer "parent participation pre-school co-op" to enhance the parent and child relationship and grow developmental learning.

Schofield and Tripler medical centers offer "children's waiting rooms." Children's waiting rooms are available from 8 a.m. through 3 p.m. (with lunch breaks) as drop-off child care for two-hour slots for parents who have doctor appointments or if parents need to take a sibling to an appointment.

"Food for Families" is a food bank that is offered free of charge to those in need. No questions are asked when food is requested, and no registration forms are required. This is one of the ASYMCA critical areas that serve the immediate needs of families who are new to the island, or especially when returning from deployments

when many service members may experience a shift in pay. All that is required is for the service member or spouse to show their identification to prove military affiliation.

Commands can recommend families in need to receive one of more than 500 food baskets that are distributed to needy military families during the holiday season.

The ASYMCA also offers volunteers various opportunities to get involved. Every third Tuesday of the month from 8:30 a.m. through 2 p.m., volunteers meet to work on "Operation Comfort Quilts." These quilts are distributed to children six years of age or under who have a deployed parent. They also make pillows for children seven years and older. They are always in need of printable fabric, ink and volunteers.

A military family can camp at their North Shore YMCA Camp Erdman for Operation Purple dependent and/or family camps that are offered through the National Military Family Association they can request a quilt or pillow or get needed food from the food closet, they can learn about toddlers at parent-child pre-school, submit a drawing or poem for the Student Art and Essay Contest, or simply call the local ASYMCA branch to find out more services that are available.

For those wanting to support their local ASYMCA, monetary donations are tax-deductible. They are always accepting additional non-perishable foods, and ink or printable fabrics for their quilts and pillows.

A variety of festivities are planned to commemorate the history of ASYMCA, both nationally and locally. For example, this year the ASYMCA will celebrate its 150th anniversary in Washington, D.C. ASYMCA Hawaii will celebrate with its military appreciation carnival at Central Oahu Regional Park on July 29, 30 and 31 with rides from E.K. Fernandez, games, prizes, food and more.

As far back as the Civil War, Armed Services YMCA volunteers went to the battlefields alongside America's finest. As stated on the ASYMCA website, Abraham Lincoln, America's 16th president, commended Armed Services YMCA leaders for their "benevo-lent undertaking for the benefit of the soldiers."

Although 1861 is the official date of the YMCA support to the military, the support can be traced back even to a small peacetime effort on board a naval training vessel in Portsmouth, Va. In 1856, the YMCA's Portsmouth Association received the govern-ment's endorsement to place books in the training ship's library and later received permission to hold meetings.

This YMCA work with the armed forces occurred just five years after the YMCA general movement had taken root in this country, after being transplanted from England in 1851.
