

A few good retirees

By Steve Wright,
Gulf Region Division Public Affairs Reach Back

Starting with the first disaster after June 1, 2007, the start of the 2007 hurricane season, the Transatlantic Programs Center is the new home for the support staff of the Corps of Engineers Reemployed Annuitant Operation program. The RAO program is designed to provide a workforce of on-call retired federal employees to respond to natural disasters. Currently, the program has 85 members working in response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans with an additional 25 workers spread throughout the rest of the country.

TAC will deploy RAO members to natural disasters when and where needed, according to Scott Lowdermilk, Director of Plans and Operations.

"We will do the administrative support to prepare people for the reemployed annuitant program, and deploy them as needed to support disaster response activities of the Corps of Engineers," Lowdermilk said.

"Prior to deployment, we will bring the reemployed annuitants here, and screen their self-identification medical forms, ensure they have required shots, issue protective safety equipment, and provide appropriate briefings from our Reemployed Annuitant Operation and USACE Deployment Center staff. This will be much the same way we deploy people through the deployment center to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan," Lowdermilk said.

"If a surge of reemployed annuitants is required, we can also use the Administrative Personnel Processing Office to issue travel orders, process travel vouchers, and keep time and attendance records for deployed RAO members."

Natural fit

Lowdermilk said that the new program is a natural fit for TAC. "I attended a readiness conference and Lenny Kotkiewicz from USACE's Homeland Security Office briefed about the relatively new reemployed annuitant program. What caught my attention was his discussion of administratively supporting the reemployed annuitants in the field from Headquarters USACE by providing travel orders, processing travel vouchers and keeping time and attendance. Since we already have a staff to provide this type of support for the Corps' Iraq and Afghanistan missions, with a few minor adjustments, we could take on the support requirements for the RAO program and gain efficiencies by doing both the programs together," Lowdermilk said.

Lowdermilk said that the support for the Iraq and Afghanistan missions will decrease as Corps work declines in these countries. By taking on disaster response

responsibilities, TAC can serve civil works missions as well as military construction programs.

"It is beneficial for the Corps of Engineers to retain the deployment capabilities for future contingencies," Lowdermilk said. "Maintaining this capability positions the Corps of Engineers to be fully prepared to support disaster, reconstruction, or homeland security operations. We can deploy people quickly and with the necessary gear and equipment to support the national needs any place anywhere."

Not a new concept

The RAO concept has been around for a decade or more in USACE's Homeland Security Office, but it took a change in the law to make the program work, according to Don Binder, the RAO program manager.

"Ed Hecker, the USACE Homeland Security Office Chief, had the idea a decade ago, but it was difficult to entice retirees to come back to work because it wasn't economically beneficial for them to do so. Congress changed all this with Public Law 108-136, part of the National Defense Authorization Act of fiscal year 2004 with the phrase that requires annuitants employed in positions within the Department of Defense to receive both their full salary and full annuity," said Binder.

Program to expand

"The Act of Congress provided the opening we needed,



USACE photo

Reemployed annuitants supporting hurricane relief efforts along the gulf coast gather for a meeting.

and I was the first USACE annuitant to be rehired under the new program in September 2005. The plan went from a phased program implementation to a 'drop everything we were doing and make it happen' with Hurricane Katrina," said Binder. "The cadre has grown to 550. We hope to increase it to 1,000 this year and to 1,500 by next hurricane season."

The transition of the support work to TAC will allow Binder to concentrate on expanding the RAO program to meet the target of having 1,500 reemployed annuitants on the program roles by next summer. The responsibility for expanding the program and the selection of people for deployment will continue to be handled in headquarters.

Transition to TAC

"The transition of the deployment process to TAC is very exciting. Now we are doing orders and vouchers at my office in USACE headquarters and will transition this to TAC. In addition, instead of sending people directly to the disaster area, all deployees will deploy through TAC where they will be administratively processed, medically cleared, briefed on the mission and issued equipment. They will have a chance to ask questions. Also, very importantly, there will be a consistent application of the program requirements," Binder said.

Retiree appointment

According to Binder, each retiree is given a temporary one-year appointment. At the end of one year, a decision will be made whether or not to offer the annuitant another appointment for an additional four years making the total time five years. During the appointment, annuitants will be on call, but do not have to deploy every time asked to stay in the program.

"We know from our database who is deployed and who could deploy and said 'no.' I try to be somewhat circumspect for those who say no; because there are a number of things that happen to us that may make the timing wrong. So, if someone says no and gives us a good reason, then we will call on them the next time they are needed," Binder said.

Program benefits

This program offers annuitants a unique opportunity to actively serve again and provides USACE with the flexibility of having a cadre of experienced and knowledgeable workers on hand to respond immediately to disasters. This provides an added benefit to the Corps of Engineers in that there will be less disruption to the active workforce. For every annuitant working in a disaster area, a full-time employee will not have to deploy. In aiding this, TAC is expanding its support of Corps of Engineers' missions.