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Group plans to make military feel at home

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A group of volunteers wanting to make troops feel more at home unveiled Friday a campaign declaring the Fayetteville area a place for soldiers to relax and feel appreciated.

Road signs, highway billboards and other advertisements will soon appear showing the new, diamond-shaped logo: a silhouetted soldier giving a salute on a blue background with the word "Sanctuary."

Several dignitaries, including U.S. Rep. Robin Hayes, spoke at a ceremony at the Fayetteville Independent Light Infantry Museum. One, Col. John McDonald, commander of Pope Air Force Base, shared an experience he had two years ago while shopping with his family at JC Penney.

He was wearing casual street clothes, but because of his short haircut, it was obvious he was a member of the armed forces. No one could have guessed his rank just by looking at him.

When his wife got to the checkout, she started shuffling through her purse to find her identification. The clerk stopped her.

"Ma'am, you don't need to worry about that," she said. "Your check is good here."

The colonel said that treatment spoke volumes about the community's military friendliness.

A group called the Army's Army says those kind of stories are common. They have more than 500 volunteers whose purpose is to help military families feel more connected to the community. Volunteers guide them finding a home, a dentist and a church — a sort of virtual casserole welcome for new neighbors.

Jim Konneker, a retired plant manager who leads the group, said volunteers have been collecting private and public donations to kick off the campaign.

"To show them that we really care, and that we are really proud that we are a military community, and we'd like for them to move here," he said.

More than 25,000 people are expected to come to the Cape Fear region in the next five years as part of the base-realignment process.

At Friday's ceremony, elected officials who have lived alongside military families all their lives shared anecdotes highlighting why the community should be a military sanctuary.

"We want to be different," said state Rep. Margaret Dickson, a Democrat. "We want to be special because you are special to us."

Breeden Blackwell, chairman of the Cumberland County Board of Commissioners, said the logo and signs were appropriate. "It's an example of our huge regard to the military," he said.

Brig. Gen. Art Bartell, who was representing Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin of the 18th Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, said Cumberland County was a military-friendly place to live, a real home away from home for many of the soldiers assigned here.

"It is no surprise that soldiers want to serve here at Fort Bragg over and over again," he said.

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