

NEWS

Boots stay on the ground in Central Texas

by [Harper Scott Clark](#)

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KILLEEN - A survey published by the Heart of Texas Defense Alliance shows that 31.6 percent of soldiers completing service at Fort Hood would prefer to stay in the area.

The area is defined as anywhere within 30 miles of Fort Hood.

The report, published quarterly, is in its ninth cycle, said retired Col. Bill Parry, executive director of the Defense Alliance, and covers the first quarter for fiscal 2009.

During fiscal years 2007 and 2008 the percentage that indicated they would stay varied between 30.5 percent and 38.5 percent.

“That’s a very high percentage,” Parry said. “If desirable employment is available it goes even higher.”

During those same nine quarters an additional 20 to 25 percent who said they were not staying indicated they would stay if the right job for them waited outside the gate.

Three groups represent soldiers being separated from service - retiring soldiers, soldiers getting out for medical reasons and those leaving the service before eligible for 20 years retirement called ETS for Expiration of Term of Service.

Parry said the survey began as a study by the Greater Killeen Chamber of Commerce in 2007 called Operation Economic Transformation.

The city of Killeen had applied for an advance-planning grant from the Office of Economic Adjustment and passed the project to the Chamber to complete. An Austin firm was hired to put the initial report together, he said.

“It looked at the possibility of how the local economy could diversify itself so that it would not be so dependent on Fort Hood with its gains and losses,” Parry said. “But they determined you really can’t divorce yourself economically from Fort Hood.”

Parry said one of the recommendations in that study was to routinely survey the intentions of soldiers separating from the Army to see who might stay. The Defense Alliance agreed to take the project and run with it because of its close identity with Fort Hood.

“To do this we entered into a memorandum of agreement with the Chamber, the Texas Veterans Commission, the Texas Workforce and the Army Career and Alumni Program at Fort Hood,” Parry said.

Parry said during nine quarters of doing the survey they collected responses of more than 5,000 soldiers getting out of the Army.

“It’s a good sample,” he said

Parry said every week the Texas Veterans Commission conducts the Transition Assistance Program, called TAP, for soldiers getting out. It shows them how to write a resume, look for a job, dress for an interview and learn basic job-hunting skills.

“Its not mandatory,” he said. “But about 65 percent of soldiers go to it. They fill out a 12-question survey that asks how long they have been in the Army, why they are getting out, their education level and do they intend to stay in the area.”

The data is one source of input used by the alliance and its partners.

What is it about the area that makes them want to stay?

“Every soldier has a different story,” Parry said. “A lot is the national economy. Unemployment is lower in Texas than the rest of the nation as a whole and very much more stable in this metropolitan statistical area.”

Parry said the cost of living in Central Texas is low. Some of the jobs don’t pay as much as soldiers would like, but they look at what it would cost them back home compared to Bell County and staying seems attractive.

John Crutchfield, executive director of the Greater Killeen Chamber of Commerce, said the reality is that soldiers tend to like it here.

“We have what I call low barriers to entry,” Crutchfield said. “People can move to this region and become a part of things in whatever way they want fairly easily compared to other places.”

Crutchfield said with so much retired military in the region it’s open and diverse and people find they have similar experiences and backgrounds.

Medical care is one of the big calling cards with Tri-Care widely accepted outside the gate and the Darnall Army Medical Center on post.

“I think we will see more of a military retired complex here like San Antonio and I think we will see some private sector investment over time as medical care gets better,” Crutchfield said.

Parry said from his experience soldiers have a tendency to look hard at their hometowns after returning from deployment. Sometimes the hometown folks don’t seem to understand, he said.

“It’s not that they don’t care,” Parry said. “But they don’t appreciate what they have been through. It’s the band of brothers concept.”

Parry said he looks back and considers his closest friends to be the friends he made in the Army.

“And a lot of soldiers think like that,” he said. “To a degree, part of this is the memorial at Fort Hood. These soldiers lost friends in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Gold Star spouses stay. People are comfortable here. This is home.”

For a copy of the report go to: <http://www.hotda.org/index.html>, under links click on Veterans Inventory Initiative, click on 2009 and then click on 1st Quarter 2009.pdf