

Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe

Commissioner & Adjutant General

www.DMVA.Alaska.Gov



Alaska National Guard

*Department of Military
and Veterans Affairs*

Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska

STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

020-079

Aug. 31, 2020

By David Bedard

176th Wing Public Affairs

A lighthouse in the storm

176th Wing director of Psychological Health is here to help

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — A single COVID cell is no more than 140 nanometers in diameter — about 1/500th the width of a human hair — but it has come to dominate daily life the world over.

Beyond its physical health impact, Diann Richardson, 176th Wing director of Psychological Health, said the invisible microorganism also has psychological health impacts as Airmen, civilian employees and family members have been forced to change their daily habits such as looking after and teaching children who would otherwise be at school.

Like COVID, emotional and psychological struggles are invisible. Richardson said, like the virus, the mental health impact can range from mild to health-threatening.

Having recently moved from her office at the 176th Wing headquarters to Building 10480, Richardson said she is ready to serve anyone who is looking to make positive change.

“My role, in a nutshell, is to be a mental health resource for members, for the command, and for consultation with family members — I have worked with all facets of the wing including service member’s children and spouses,” she said. “I do a lot of triage. I ascertain what type of assistance someone needs. Sometimes, I just link someone to a useful podcast or stress management app. Sometimes, I teach a useful anger management strategy. If someone needs more intensive therapy, I link them with a provider who would be a good fit for their unique situation.”

Holding a master’s degree in social work from Florida State University, Richardson is a walking, social-work practicing encyclopedia of numerous resources, techniques and tools.

“After working in the field of clinical social work for over thirty years, I have seen many problems which are overwhelming to people that are relatively manageable to deal with if they had the right tools,” she said. “And, at this point in my career, nothing really surprises or shocks me about human behavior — I have no problem talking about very uncomfortable subjects with people.”

Though she said her role in the wing does not involve therapy to the wing's 1,500 members and family, she is knowledgeable of how to provide a "warm handoff" to help, ranging from an online resource to a mental health provider.

"We talk about a way forward," Richardson said. "It might be as simple as visiting a website. Others have issues stemming many years from childhood, so a deeper dive might be helpful. I am making recommendations for the next steps, but the person in my office is in the driver seat of their mental health care."

In a profession where Guardsmen can be separated from family for months and can find themselves in harrowing situations overseas, sometimes greater interventions are called for. Even setting the unique challenges of military service aside, seeking help for restless feelings is more common than one might think.

"Roughly 20 percent of the population in America has some sort of anxiety disorder," Richardson said. "Just Google the word anxiety, and 400,000,000 results emerge. How is someone supposed to process relevant and helpful information specifically for their or a family member's needs from that amount of data? When people contact me, I can gear them to what's effective for their situation — either techniques they can do on their own or perhaps a counselor who specializes in anxiety disorders."

She said she often serves as a sounding board for members who come to see her.

"Sometimes venting about an issue is super helpful, and they don't need any other resource," Richardson said. "Particularly in this time of COVID, some people are experiencing and believing things that further isolation and disconnection. When I consult with members during this time, I see a lot of similarities in people's experiences. Just knowing you aren't alone goes a long way."

The pandemic has posed an unusual challenge to many whose healthy outlets for venting may have been cut off or compromised.

"We don't have any blueprints on how to deal with this because it's never happened in our lifetime," Richardson said. "Even the strongest among us are struggling. It is tough to continually thrive in a vice of uncertainty. We are having a lot of grief and loss mourning the way it was before COVID."

She said everyone needs to be honest with themselves about their mental state, and they need to get creative about alternative ways to cope. Richardson said she had this conversation with herself.

"I have self-awareness of the things I need to do to be better, to be happy, to be healthy and thrive, to be a nurturing mother to my children and a kind partner to my husband," she said. "In COVID, I have to tweak former coping tools. I didn't ask for the world to change so rapidly and have some strong feelings about all the resulting adaptations needed, but I also want to be a thriving person, so I am choosing adapting."

She recommends learning stress management, learning a new coping skill, or learning mindfulness, and she said she is happy helping members with those resources.

"There are some interesting and fun ways we can all do better," Richardson said. "For instance, playing a drum can greatly reduce anxiety and pain. Engaging in a creative hobby is a way to learn mindfulness."

The move of Richardson and the entire 176th Wing Wellness Center to the other side of the airfield serves the purpose of consolidating wellness experts like the chaplain and Yellow Ribbon Program coordinator. It also overcomes the perceived stigma of seeing wellness professionals.

“Even people who willingly wanted an external perspective to a personal dilemma said they did have some concerns being seen by senior leadership when my office was in HQ,” she said. “Visiting the wellness center is an opportunity to get out of the headquarters building or a hangar and come to a neutral place, and we’re all bound by confidentiality over here.”

One not-so-secret weapon Richardson deploys is her partner, Bolt, a golden retriever perhaps better known throughout the wing than his owner. Bolt is a highly trained, nationally certified therapy dog.

“A therapy dog like Bolt, is a very well-trained dog that knows basic commands, is friendly, patient, confident, gentle and comfortable in many different situations,” she said. “Additionally, he provides comfort and love to others, can interact with a variety of people, is not aggressive, and listens.”

Though just as often seen rummaging in desk dustbins foraging for food as he is spotted greeting people he meets, Richardson said the dog is a valuable member of her team.

“Bolt is my coworker,” she explained. “Bolt is an asset in my job as 70 percent of what I do is prevention, which means going into the squadrons, getting to know people, and being a relatable and reliable entity. My goal is really just to be another member of the wing whose role is to encourage positive mental health for those that run the mission and the people they care about.”

You can follow Bolt’s adventures in and out of the wing at Instagram @bolt_thetherapydog

Whether through easing tension by offering up Bolt as a friend, acting as a sounding board, giving an effective resource, or referring to outside counselors, Richardson is putting her 30 years of experience fighting invisible enemies in the cause of mental wellness.



Contact Richardson during duty hours at (907) 551-0283 or (907) 306-9941, or email at diann.richardson.1@us.af.mil. She can be visited in person at Building 10480, Suite 104, Room 109.

###

PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.

2. **Story link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <https://www.176wg.af.mil/Media/Article-Display/Article/2326521/a-lighthouse-in-the-storm-176th-wing-director-of-psychological-health-is-here-t/>

Diann Richardson, 176th Wing Director of Psychological Health, regularly works with therapy dog, Bolt, as part of the licensed clinical social worker's outreach to the wing. Following several months of socialization and training, the golden retriever became a nationally certified therapy dog. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)