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Oklahoma City welcome center gives haven to military travelers, families

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It's amazing what can be a difference maker. Maybe it's a game of Monopoly, or a clean cot and blanket, or even catching a ride to graduation at Fort Sill.

Since opening in June 2007, about 70,000 visitors have stopped in at the YMCA Military Welcome Center at Will Rogers World Airport. The center is open to those in the military, family members waiting for military loved ones, veterans and our allies.

The difference the center has made depends upon the visitor.

"Right now, I've got some airmen in here playing Monopoly," said Clyde Tullos, the center's director. "On a recent Friday, three military spouses came in who could not get down to Fort Sill on their own for graduation. We found them military family members here in the airport who gave them a ride to watch graduation."

Then there's the sleeping room, which includes seven military-style cots and blankets provided by a Vietnam Veterans chapter in Lawton, Tullos said. These are cleaned once to twice a day with the blankets washed and dried at the YMCA, the director said.

"We've had those who have been traveling 36 hours," he said.

"They can go in there and take a nap. We can't accommodate large numbers, but we can help seven at a time."

While the sleeping room can be used overnight for the military members, the center is open from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. Hours on Saturdays and Sundays depend upon the availability of volunteers. However, Tullos said they are usually open from about 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekends.

Tullos is the only paid employee. The center has 43 volunteers.

"We could use about a hundred volunteers," Tullos said of the center.

Those who stop by the center might log on to one of the two computers, play cards or Scrabble or call their family or friends on cell phones that are kept in a desk drawer.

They might watch the flat-screen television or start reading one of the used novels, which they can take with them.

And, they can get a soft drink, some cookies or a slice of pizza.

"The service members are very appreciative," Tullos said. "I've told someone before, it's only a cot and a blanket and I've had them tell me, 'It sounds like heaven.'"



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