

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. National Guard Soldiers Refresh Knowledge Of Military Casualty Affairs

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Personnel with the Virgin Islands National Guard participated in training that would enable them to assist family members in the event that their loved one dies while on an active duty status, according to a release the Guard recently issued.

V.I.N.G. members learned about or refreshed their training on being a Casualty Notification Officer or a Casualty Assistance Officer. The three-day course titled "Taking Care of the Families, Casualty Notification and Assistance Training" at the Brigadier General (VI) Gerard A. James, Sr. Joint Force Headquarters at the Estate Bethlehem Military Compound on St. Croix was conducted January 31 through February 2, according to the release.

The training entailed taking care of families, including notifying children, interacting with survivors, processing of personal effects, grief, self-care, and assisting survivors, V.I.N.G. said.

“The participants will learn how to notify survivors when their loved one dies on active duty or during weekend IDT [inactive duty training]/battle assembly,” said Ignacio Gonzalez Ruiz, the casualty and mortuary affairs specialist out of Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico, and the instructor. “They learn to observe grief and bereavement by recognizing normal responses, supporting individuals who were recovering from loss and applying personal resilience principles,” said Ruiz.

“The CNO/CAO was a refresher for me, the course basically reminded me of how important it is when notifying families especially when we lost one of our Soldiers,” said Master Sgt. Valery Regisson, the senior human resource non-commissioned officer for the Personnel Directorate at V.I.N.G.

“The Army wants us to take pride in the process; to include how we dress and what we say upon our first encounter with the Soldier’s family,” she added. “The most beneficial information I took away was taking care of the families, providing them with all the necessary information about the benefits that the Army provides to the family,” added Regisson.

The class of 10 left with the knowledge of how to identify possible responses to grief reactions, steps required for dignified transfer, media access and family travel to Dover Air Force Base, Delaware, among other objectives. The St. Croix class included Col. Terrence Smith, Capt. Pauline James, Capt. Dion Christopher, Master Sgt. Valery Regisson, Sgt. 1st Class Kijah Todman, Sgt. 1st Class Lucita Peltier, Sgt. 1st Class James Gaston, Sgt. 1st Class Wrensford Ault, and Sgt. 1st Class Stacy Bowers-Williams.

The National Guard said it’s firmly committed to programs supporting the military family. In addition to interacting with survivors, the class learned about organizations and agencies that could assist the families, it said.

“The class also learned of the different organizations and benefits that are available to support the survivors,” said Ruiz. The participants were very positive about the class and the modules they trained on and the information they retained. According the Army Casualty Notification and Assistance Guide, “there is nothing more vital to our Warrior Ethos than honoring the sacrifice of those fellow Soldiers who have died in service to our Nation. And there is no greater way to render that honor than by helping a Soldier’s Family or loved ones in the aftermath of their loss.”

Ensuring the well-being of Soldiers, Airmen, their families and employers is key to maintaining a part-time, cost-effective force, the Guard said. The CNO/CAO course was conducted on St. Thomas at the Sergeant First Class Leonard Francis Readiness Center (armory) in Estate Nazareth February 14-16, 2018. Participants were Lt. Col. Sally Petty, Capt. Casandra Scotland-Brooks, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Diane Wescott, Master Sgt. Kelvin Bailey, Sgt. 1st Class Chandy Baptiste, Sgt. 1st Class Francis Callwood, Sgt. 1st Class John Narcisse, Sgt. 1st Class Steven Phillip, and Sgt. 1st Class Ann Swan.

"We shall never say "No" or "We can't" to the family. It is our duty once we are assigned as the CAO; we have to make the family our priority until they no longer need our assistance," Regisson said.

"I understand the tasks associated with being a CNO/CAO and I do believe that I can perform the duties using the tools provided," said one student. "The videos are new and contained detailed information that is relevant to real-life scenarios," said another.

The class also learned important information that could benefit service-members who are leaving or no longer part of the organization of their post-separation entitlements.

"One other information I took away from the training that I found very important was, the need to inform service members of their benefits upon separation or retirement from the organization," Regisson added.