MEMORANDUM FOR Command Chaplains and Strong Bonds Program Managers

SUBJECT: FY15 Strong Bonds Program Guidance – Update 1

1. References.
   c. Army Directive 2014-23 Conduct of Screening and Background Checks for Individuals Who Have Regular Contact With Children in Army Programs, 10 September 2014.

2. Purpose. This memorandum establishes guidance that details changes to current Strong Bonds operations and provides reminders of Army policy and procedures. Key changes to the program include a new prime vendor, contract modifications, childcare provider validation, registration, risk management, safety reminders and funding distribution.

3. General. The Soldier and Family Ministry (SFM) Directorate and the Sustainment and Information (S&I) Directorate share responsibility for the management of Strong Bonds. SFM is responsible for the training of instructors, curriculum selection, Readiness and Resilience (R2) integration and logic model analysis. S&I is responsible for event management and all funding processes. Both Directorates collaborate to ensure a total Strong Bonds training event is delivered to Unit Ministry Teams (UMTs).

4. Event Management. Strong Bonds is a multilayered and complex program requiring oversight from many different levels of leadership and command. S&I’s vision for 4th quarter FY15 is to begin to streamline business processes and provide fully funded events. The goal is to improve the quality of Strong Bonds training while reducing UMT labor and reporting requirements. However, local UMTs will always have a level of responsibility. Many Strong Bond processes are driven by Army directives, guidance and requirements and cannot be changed. S&I will make every effort to keep things simple. At the same time, local UMTs must ensure events are held in a safe environment and that funds received are used in a fiscally responsible manner.

5. Program Logistics Contractor. National Conferencing Inc. (NCI) is the current logistics support contractor for the Army Strong Bonds program. They are responsible for coordinating and contracting lodging, meals, childcare, transportation, and curriculum. The Installation Management Command G9, Army Lodging provides Contracting Officer Representative (COR) oversight of the Strong Bonds contract.
   a. Training site selection. NCI works with chaplains and assistants to review three or more potential training facilities to find the best location and support for the best value. Priority of effort is a training
location that meets safety, legal, regulatory, contractual and program criteria. Site selection includes providing quality rooms, meals, training rooms and childcare areas.

b. **Sub-contracting.** Training site, curriculum and childcare providers are sub-contractors that must follow all standards outlined in the contract, the annual Strong Bonds memorandum and updates. Issues with contractors or subcontractors should be immediately addressed with Strong Bonds Program Managers and NCI.

c. **Risk Management.** A key piece of local planning is conducting risk analysis under the supervision of Commanders. Supervisory chaplains and UMTs ensure that Army Risk Management procedures are applied in accordance with The Army Safety Program regulation and local policy.

6. **Childcare.** Per Army Directive 2014-23, each individual who provides childcare in an Army-sponsored or sanctioned program is required to undergo specific initial background checks and periodic reverification. The S&I Directorate is developing an enterprise contract to provide UMTs with a pool of validated childcare workers. Part of the validation process is a provider suitability interview. Local chaplains and assistants who have worked with childcare providers over the years will be asked to assist with the enterprise validation process by interviewing and recommending suitable providers. Updates to this program will be provided as it is developed.

7. **Funding.** The Strong Bonds program is resourced annually at Department of the Army level through the Manning Program Evaluation Group (MM PEG) as part of the Program Objective Memorandum cycle. The Office of the Chief of Chaplains (OCCH) builds and defends the annual requirement in coordination with the United States Army Reserves (USAR) and the Army National Guard (ARNG). In the year of execution, budgeted funds are separate appropriations for each component, validated and limited by the Management Decision Packet, and centrally managed by each component. Funding of Strong Bonds is limited to this process. The program is authorized for Soldiers and their immediate Family members.

   a. **Authority.** Title10 USC § 1789 and Army Regulation (AR) 165-1 paragraph 16-6 provide the legal and regulatory framework for Strong Bonds to utilize appropriated funding to procure event training locations, lodging, transportation, training materials, supplies, fees, childcare, and meals for Strong Bonds events.

   b. **Policy.** Per guidance from the MM PEG, local command funds should not be utilized to augment the Strong Bonds Program. Alternately, commanders may fund Soldier and Family programs that are not Strong Bonds, pursuant to Title10 USC § 1789 and AR 165-1, 16-6.

   c. **Fully funded events.** The goal is fully funded events for a maximum of 30 couples, 30 Families or 60 single Soldiers. UMTs, CYSS providers and other childcare provider rooms are additional to Soldier rooms. Event funding will be increased to ensure Soldier and Family participation is maximized. It should be noted that the quality of events is expected to go up, but the number of events will be reduced due to funding limitations. When possible UMTs are asked to consider conducting events close to home base so childcare providers can drive to the event versus staying overnight.

   d. **Cost Consideration.** All supervisory chaplains and UMTs are asked to think about costs when planning Strong Bonds events. Factors that significantly increase costs include: resort locations, distance from units, childcare provider rooms and types of meals. Strong Bonds is a training event not a retreat. UMTs should make every effort to reduce costs so that more Soldiers and Families can receive training.
8. **Program Modifications.** Recent modifications to the Strong Bonds program and logistics support contract include the following:

a. **Registration.** All participants must register online. UMTs are asked to have all participants registered NLT 15 days prior to event execution. The individual Soldier can register or the UMT can register all the participants. Registration guidelines are due to several Army requirements that SFM and S&I are required to track and to enable post training event surveys.

b. **Mileage.** The mileage restriction is removed. However guidance to NCI is to alert S&I when Strong Bonds Charlie events are outside 300 miles of unit location and Alpha/Bravo events outside a two hours drive. It is understood that some units are in remote locations and must travel to reach an adequate venue. Units are asked to select suitable choices close to their home base. The USAR and ARNG Soldiers are subject to mileage restrictions as identified in the Joint Force Travel Regulation. All UMTS should make every effort to keep travel to a minimum to reduce costs.

c. **Meals.** Utilizing on-site meals is encouraged. In cases where units utilize an off-site location for meals, arrangement of transportation to/from the event location is authorized. Meals may be catered in to the training location if allowed by the host facility.

d. **Childcare.** Off-post Strong Bonds’ childcare is defined as group off-site childcare. This type of care requires that parents and children must be co-located in the same facility or training site throughout the Strong Bonds event. “Date Nights” where parents leave their children at the hotel or training site and have a meal at another location is not permitted. Parents and children must be in the same facility or training site at all times. This is regulatory and cannot be waived.

e. **Receipt (Validation) of Services Received.** All UMTs must validate services within 5 days of invoice receipt. This enables S&I to pay the invoice within the required 30 days.

f. **After Action Reporting.** To eliminate redundancy and facilitate 100% After Action Report (AAR) submission, a single AAR on Strongbonds.org will be initiated by the logistics contractor. The logistics contractor will complete sections 1-18 and unit ministry teams will be responsible for completing the remaining sections of the report. The local Strong Bonds Program Manager (SBPM) will submit the AAR on the website NLT 24 days after an event with final review and approval completed by the Component/ACOM/ASCC/DRU SBPMs NLT 30 days after an event.

9. **Customer Service.** Customers have a voice. In this case, our customers are the Soldiers and Family Members who attend Strong Bonds training and the UMTs that conduct the event. The S&I team is committed to providing outstanding customer service. Our motto is “Promoting a Culture of Performance and Service.” With that in mind, the S&I Strong Bonds support team is providing an international service with requirements that vary from country to country and even within the United States. Please allow our team to come alongside your team. Let us know when issues arise. We will work to solve challenges. Together your team and ours can provide excellent relationship training to our Soldiers and Families.

10. **Point of Contact (POC) is the Strong Bonds Resource Manager,** DSN: 223-1910, COM (703) 693-1910 or email: jeffrey.p.bartels.mil@mail.mil.

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