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BRAC migration to Md. has begun

About 300 families have moved from N.J. for jobs at APG

By Mary Gail Hare

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They are here and, in some cases, fairly easy to spot.

The first of thousands of families relocating to Maryland with the nationwide military realignment known as BRAC have arrived from New Jersey.

"That might be why New York Giants' flags are flying in Ravens country," said Bruce England, executive director of the Susquehanna Workforce Network, which provides employment resources and programs to businesses in Harford and Cecil counties.

Fort Monmouth in New Jersey is closing and transferring many of its jobs to Aberdeen Proving Ground. About 300 New Jersey families have relocated to Maryland in the past six months, England said. More than 700 are expected this year, with the largest move set for 2010, a year ahead of the required September 2011 BRAC completion date.

Many families have been trekking to Maryland, southern Pennsylvania and Delaware, house hunting in areas within commuting distance of APG

"We know there is keen interest in moving to Harford and Cecil counties," England said. "A lot of it has to do with closeness to the base."

Fort Meade in Anne Arundel County is also expanding, but officials there say they have yet to see a surge of families moving because of BRAC. Most of the jobs are from the Defense Information Systems Agency in Arlington, Va., and since many of those employees now live less than 30 miles away, they are not feeling an urgency to relocate, said Bob Lieb, special assistant for BRAC to County Executive John R. Leopold.

"We don't expect any significant movement of BRAC personnel until early 2010," Lieb said, adding Arundel may initially see more commuters than movers.

Since the 2005 announcement that APG would expand and Fort Monmouth would close, Harford County has prepared for an influx of as many as 30,000 people.

After checking out homes, schools and other amenities in Harford County and its environs for

nearly three years, Kathy and Bob Sukiennik, an electronics engineer who has worked at the New Jersey base for nearly 20 years, moved into a Churchville home last fall. The area's friendliness impressed the couple. How often does a school host a welcome party for new students, she asked?

"Even at the grocery store, everyone is so nice," she said. "There is none of that New York aloofness."

Army officials said nearly 50 percent of the work force at Fort Monmouth would relocate to APG in the next two years.

"People from Monmouth are driving through your area all the time," said Scott Cheseldine, a new APG employee and Harford resident, who spoke at a recent BRAC conference in Edgewood. "The move is on our minds. Nobody has had a bad experience here. Now that I am here, I am inviting them down."

At the conference, which drew more than 400 participants, a panel of first movers described their experiences and discussed their homebuying decisions. Panelists with school-age children said the local education system played a major role in where they would live.

"Education was critical, since we are coming from a school system that is fifth in the nation," said Michael Lombardi, who has moved to Cecil County.

Most said they had made the two-hour drive from New Jersey several times before deciding on where they would live and they all relied on the Internet to help them in their home searches.

"You have to do your real estate homework," said Dele Omole, an emptynester whose wife recently found a job in Baltimore. "We settled on Bel Air as the best commute for both of us."

Since Danny Demarinis will be working at both posts for the next few years, he chose Elkton, to be near family and "commutable" to either Monmouth or APG, he said.

"I found Cecil County to be a really affordable area," he said.

One panelist wanted to return to his southern Pennsylvania roots, and another sought the conveniences of city life. After finding a home in Lancaster County, Ed Patches created a PowerPoint presentation to convince his wife of the advantages to moving, he said.

"We got a bigger house with an extra bath and a two-car garage for \$3,000 less than we sold our New Jersey home for," he said. "We are paying \$2,000 less in property taxes, and I have less lawn to mow."

Baltimore can be an option for younger movers or emptynesters, said Derek Demaree, who resides near the Johns Hopkins University campus.

"Public schools in the city are considered challenging," he said. "But if you are looking for city

life, Baltimore offers it."

The Sukienniks found a newer, larger and less costly home than they had in New Jersey.

"We are a 20-minute drive from everything we need," said Kathy Sukiennik, a stay-at-home mother of two.

Before deciding, the family visited local attractions, including the Skipjack Martha Lewis and Steppingstone Museum in Havre de Grace, took their children to parks and looked at schools.

The Sukiennik children have settled into their new school, and their father has joined the staff at APG. When the children are a little older, their mother said she would like to return to work, maybe at APG. She has 20 years of experience in marketing at Fort Monmouth to offer a new employer.

She has found only one drawback to the family's long planned move.

"I miss the ocean," she said. "It used to be only 15 minutes away."

BRAC jobs

The federal Base Realignment and Closure process is bringing thousands of jobs to two Maryland military bases:

--- Aberdeen Proving Ground is expected to gain up to 10,000 jobs, many of them civilian contractor positions. About 7,000 jobs are with the Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) cluster, most of which are moving from Fort Monmouth, N.J., which is closing.

--- Fort Meade is expected to gain about 5,400 jobs, more than 4,300 of which will transfer from the Defense Information Systems Agency in Arlington, Va.

The BRAC moves are to be completed by September 2011.

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