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Visions of prized livestock at the local fair, horseback riding, agricultural clubs and fancy blue ribbons are probably what comes to mind when thinking about 4-H and Alaska’s youth. But Alaska 4-H has evolved to meet the needs of kids today, and one innovative program is back to help an ever-growing segment of the population — military youth with an active duty mom or dad being deployed.

Developed in 2000 by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service 4-H program and members of Eielson Air Force Base, Operation Bug Out is a mock deployment exercise that gives kids a chance to personally experience what happens when a soldier is being deployed on an assignment. This model program is used by 4-H program leaders at Air Force stations across the nation.

The mission of the exercise is to ease the stress kids commonly experience when one or both parents are deployed or involved in a military exercise.

Extension 4-H and Youth Development Agent Candi Dierenfield and Jacalyn Dunn of Eielson’s Family Advocacy Program have been instrumental in reviving the program and has been actively planning this year’s mock deployment exercise to be carried out for the first time in a few years.

“The last time Eielson saw Operation Bug Out was in 2002. Bringing the program back to Eielson has been our most important task this year, and we expect a huge turnout,” Dierenfield said.

Dierenfield anticipates close to 100 participants ages 9-14 being involved in the exercise. Over 45-plus active duty volunteers will also be on hand to help with various activities and to mentor youth from their squadron. The youth will get to tour the facilities where their parents work, try on gas masks and chemical gear, and even get to participate in a simulated air transport mission.
The upcoming Operation Bug Out is set for August 5, 2005, at Eielson Air Force Base. Funding for the program comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Alaska Children Youth and Families at Risk grant for both Eielson and Elmendorf Air Force Bases.

Throughout 2005, Extension is celebrating its 75th anniversary of service to Alaskans. From food preservation and master gardener classes to helping kids become better adults or helping homeowners build energy efficient houses, Extension offers educational programs that have immediate and practical applications for Alaskans.

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