

REFRIGERATOR DOOR

USO supports military personnel, families

For 60 years, the USO has been a welcome "home away from home" for people serving in the U.S. armed services all around the world.

The United Service Organizations, formed during World War II, is best known for its morale-boosting entertainment for troops stationed overseas. But the non-profit, privately funded USO does much more than put on a good show. In the Chicago area, the USO of Illinois provides a spectrum of assistance, social services and emotional support to more than 200,000 military members and their families each year, said Lisa Moeller, executive director of the USO of Illinois.

"Our mission is to enhance the quality of life for military members and their families through entertainment, recreation and spiritual support," Moeller said.

USO of Illinois runs four centers in the Chicago area, at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, O'Hare and Midway airports and downtown Chicago. It relies on volunteers to staff its centers.

The Great Lakes center serves as a "positive alternative to other activities" for Navy recruits, most of whom are under 21 and away from home for the first time, said Rod Stiles, director of the Great Lakes center. The spacious, newly remodeled center, decorated in red, white and blue, has a recreational room, movie theater, computer room, library and kitchen.

The USO also takes the young recruits on tours of Chicago, gives them donated tickets to sporting events and organizes dinners and talent shows for them, said Moeller. The organization also assists military families with such tasks as finding nearby grocery stores and providing counseling to families dealing with a personal crisis. The USO has even secured baby furniture for a recruit who was a struggling single mom.

The centers at O'Hare and Midway help personnel en route to a new assignment or going on leave, said Moeller. Some just want a quiet place to relax



Sailors Eddie Latimer (left) of Philadelphia and Peter Olszewski of Long Beach, Calif., play pool during the grand opening of the USO center at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in August.

Photo for the Tribune by Erik Unger

during a layover, while others need help finding lost luggage, replacing an airline ticket or getting hotel reservations.

"It's ingrained in the military to go to the USO," she said.

The downtown USO center, currently on Michigan Avenue, will move to a new home on Navy Pier in May. There military members will be able to

check their e-mail, pick up a map of the city or get a book filled with discount coupons to local attractions.

The USO of Illinois annual fundraising gala is Nov. 2; tickets are \$350. For information on the gala, to donate money or volunteer your time, contact USO of Illinois at 312-781-0730.

—Julie A. Jacob