

# U.S. Army Medical Center of Excellence



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FORT SAM HOUSTON, JOINT BASE SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

CONTACT: TISH WILLIAMSON, DIRECTOR, COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

OFFICE: 210-221-8475/8472 or CELL: 210-336-0449

EMAIL: [usarmy.jbsa.medical-coe.mbx.dcomm@army.mil](mailto:usarmy.jbsa.medical-coe.mbx.dcomm@army.mil)

## Soldiers Depart for Annual Holiday Block Leave Travel from San Antonio Airport

Starting in the early morning hours of December 18, 2021 nearly 1,000 Soldiers from the U.S. Army Medical Center of Excellence (MEDCoE) will depart Fort Sam Houston via the San Antonio International Airport for their two-week holiday block leave (HBL) period.

The majority of HBL dates fall within a departure window of December 17-21 and a return window of January 1-3. This annual event allows MEDCoE Soldiers, who are stationed on Joint Base San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston completing various Army medicine training courses, the opportunity to spend the Holiday season with their families and loved ones. For many trainees in courses like Advanced Individual Training (AIT) or the Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC), this leave is their first opportunity to return home after joining the military. They will now return to their communities, in uniform, as representations of the Army profession.

With safety considerations for COVID-19 and variants, traveling Soldiers are required to wear their masks as well as uniforms until they reach their final destination.

Maj. Gen. Dennis LeMaster, MEDCoE Commanding General said, unlike 2020 when there was initial uncertainty if Soldiers would be allowed to travel using commercial air, this year the decision was much easier.

“Since our Soldiers did such a great job of adhering to mask mandates and keeping themselves and their Families safe during holiday block leave in 2020,” LeMaster said, “I had zero reservations with permitting leave this year; especially now that the vast majority of our trainees are fully vaccinated.”

To comply with the Secretary of Defense’s August order requiring all Service members to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, active duty units were expected to be fully vaccinated by Dec. 15, 2021 barring any valid exemption requests.

In addition to the many safety measures soldiers were already used to following during training, when traveling MEDCoE leaders and planners will take extra precautions to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 to ensure the safety of the soldiers as well their friends and families during their visit. Soldiers are instructed to follow the Centers for Disease and Prevention guidelines for safe travel from Fort Sam Houston all the way to their final destination. That means wearing masks, social distancing as much as possible, frequent hand washing and use of hand sanitizer during the trip.

The large number of service members departing from one location is an excellent time for photo opportunities, news interviews and coverage. The majority of Army medical trainees will depart by 12 p.m., though there are flights through-out the day.

LeMaster will be available for media interviews at the airport, Saturday, December 18, from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m., along with MEDCoE Public Affairs. Other MEDCoE senior leaders will be available for interviews throughout the day, to include Cmd. Sgt. Major Gilberto Colon, the MEDCoE’s training brigade command sergeant major, is available for Spanish speaking interviews with prior coordination. News media interested in interviews with MEDCoE leadership or soldiers should coordinate for interview time/location by contacting the MEDCoE Public Affairs Office at 210-221-8475, 210-336-0449 or email [usarmy.jbsa.medical-coe.mbx.dcomm@army.mil](mailto:usarmy.jbsa.medical-coe.mbx.dcomm@army.mil).

News media requesting access to the airport terminal to conduct interviews must ensure they coordinate with Tonya Hope, SA International Airport at 210-400-7428.

