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A new Air Force command one day could call Offutt Air Force Base home, but the Bellevue installation faces tough competition from a Louisiana air base.

Offutt's world-class communications infrastructure makes it a prime candidate to house the Air Force Cyber Command, which the Defense Department officially created in November.

The new command will control Air Force operations in cyberspace.

It will operate similarly to the Virginia-based Air Combat Command, which coordinates Air Force missions in the air, and the Space Command in Colorado, which organizes the service's operations in outer space.

Offutt already is home to U.S. Strategic Command, which spearheads offensive and defensive cyberspace efforts across all military services, as well as numerous other missions.

That connection, in addition to Offutt's high-tech infrastructure, has impressed Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne as he looks for a permanent site for the Cyber Command, say members of Nebraska's congressional delegation.

"Offutt is the most logical, best location for this command because there's so many of the high-tech capabilities they need already in place," said Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

But Barksdale Air Force Base, near Shreveport, La., has an early claim on the new command.

The 8th Air Force, based at Barksdale, has been assigned to set up the Cyber Command. Officials there are recruiting computer specialists and planning the organization, so a fledgling version of the new command already operates at Barksdale.

"Right now, the 8th Air Force is essentially building an 'on-ramp' toward a major command. We're building up speed toward the command, like you build up speed to get on the highway," said Tech. Sgt. Kristina Barrett, a spokeswoman for the 8th Air Force.

In Bossier City, La., just outside Barksdale's gates, officials are working to become the new command's home.

Bossier City hopes to build a 58-acre, \$100 million technology innovation center near the base, in part to meet the Cyber Command's needs.

"We feel very confident that we've put together an exceptionally good proposal for the Air Force, which we intend to fully fund with our resources," said Bossier City Mayor Lorenz Walker.

Offutt supporters believe one of the Bellevue base's primary selling points is that the Cyber Command wouldn't need many upgrades to begin operations there.

Offutt's elaborate communications infrastructure -- a byproduct of StratCom's historic mission directing U.S. nuclear forces -- could serve the needs of the new command.

StratCom's own innovation center, a think tank on the University of Nebraska at Omaha's south campus, could fill the same niche as the project being proposed in Bossier City.

The Omaha metro area also offers a sizable pool of well-trained technology employees and is home to a number of private sector defense contractors, said Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb.

"The Air Force and the military have trained war fighters and not a lot of 'cyberfighters,' so they're going to have to use private sector folks for a while," Terry said.

"Offutt has a very good shot at getting this," added Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb.

No one is certain how many new jobs or how much funding the cybercommand might bring.

As opposed to more traditional Air Force missions, cyberspace specialists wouldn't necessarily have to work under the same roof -- they could be scattered wherever Air Force computer networks operate.

Nonetheless, a new command seems certain to bring a noticeable increase in personnel and recognition wherever it locates.

"It would help us define the communications and intelligence

missions here at Offutt Air Force Base. That sets us on our future track. That's why this one is important to us, not just jobs they bring," Terry said.

"It helps define this base as the center for intelligence and cyberoperations for the Air Force."

Air Force officials are expected to decide this fall where the new command will be headquartered, with the aim of having the cybercommand fully operational by 2009.

