

Hearing on Military Families

Bill Number: Oversight

Hearing Date: June 2, 2003

Witness:

Michelle Taylor

Caretaker of Children of Two Deployed Parents

Clarksville, TN

Testimony:

Hi. My name is Michelle Taylor, my husband Kirk is a Major in the Division's Plans Section. As an Army wife of 15 years and geographic single parent for two of the last three years, I'm here to share my thoughts and observations concerning support for the families of deployed soldiers.

Overall, I have to commend the efforts of the Installation staff and leadership. I am convinced that they have all put their best foot forward in attempting to handle the myriad of issues that arise when an entire Division deploys. Army Community Services and the Family Assistance Center are both examples of the larger effort to take care of the families and communities left behind. In addition, the hospital has remained responsive despite the deployment of many of its medical staff.

However, the lynchpin of support is provided through the family support groups that exist to support families at the grassroots level. This is essentially a self-help resource in that the more a spouse attends and participates, the greater the benefit he or she receives. Family support groups exist year round and the familiarity it breeds amongst its members aids in the early identification of families who are in need. This early "screening" helps the more experienced group members steer others to resources before the situation becomes a crisis. I have been frustrated at times by the seemingly lack of information flow down to the company-level, but I suspect that the problem resides largely in the adage "We don't know what we don't know."

Another source of enormous support resides in our church communities. As you might expect, many of the post chaplains (including all the Catholic chaplains) deployed in support of the troops. The foundation of community that resides uniquely in our church community, regardless of faith, has truly helped to catch family members who fall through the family support group safety net.

Lastly, the local communities of Clarksville, Oak Grove and Hopkinsville have responded in their always-gracious manner. The knowledge that the community at large values the sacrifices of both the soldiers and their family members is reassuring and takes a little of the sting out of the series of separations we've recently experienced.

The most obvious response as to how you and your fellow members of Congress can help is easily summed up in one word: Money. More specifically, we need help in several areas to include:

- o Improvements in the Tri-Care System and delivery of health care services. The long wait for non-life threatening (but essential to quality of life) care is unacceptable.
- o Changes to the maintenance and development of on-post housing is also needed. As an off-post family (the result of a 12-month waiting list upon arrival to FT Campbell), gaining access to several of the available programs is problematic.

o Funding for child-care facilities is also needed. Spouses with young children are far less likely to attend family support group and other like organizations when they have to also spend their meager disposable funds for child sitting services.

o While the Government has relieved soldiers in the Iraqi theater of war of the federal tax burden, others are not so lucky. Many hardship (unaccompanied) tours do not enjoy the same relief. A good example is our forces serving in Korea. Despite my husband's commitment to living a very Spartan life-style during his last tour, the assignment to Korea was a financial hardship based solely on the need to maintain two "households". This additional financial burden was managed on a Major's salary, but the same cannot be said for our younger soldiers and families.

Lastly, I'm tired. I would not trade the friendships and experiences that our family has enjoyed as a result of my husband's service, but the pace of deployments has reached a point that I personally find unacceptable. I'm proud of Kirk's service to our Nation. He is my hero, but he is also a husband and father. The Army needs people like my husband to lead soldiers where it matters most, at the tactical unit level. I will accompany Kirk where the Army sees fit to assign him next, but I will not encourage another move to a tactical unit. I find that sad, but the bottom-line is that assignment to a Divisional unit right now is a near guarantee of prolonged separations with little hope for change in the near future. Senator Alexander, thank you for joining us and allowing us to give voice to our concerns. The Army is a close knit family, and when possible we take care of our own. Whatever help you and the members of Congress can provide is greatly appreciated. Thank You.