

Hearing on Military Families

Bill Number: Oversight

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Witness:

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Testimony:

Deployment issues are a key topic to all military families. As part of a volunteer force, individuals choose the life of a soldier because they believe that they are part of an organization that can make a difference in the world and in them as individuals. Their career choice is not an easy one—for them or their family. The money is not great, the housing often substandard, the relocations difficult, and the time away from their family increases yearly. Yet they remain on duty, serving despite hardships, proving again and again that they are the best Army in the world.

While the families feel nothing but pride and support for all soldiers, they all at some point begin to question when the constant separation becomes too much to bear as a family. Within our Group, units redeployed from Afghanistan only to begin preparation for deployment to Iraq. As we make plans for welcoming home soldiers returning from Iraq, we are planning the departure ceremonies for units re-deploying to Afghanistan. We continue to hear plans to further reduce the size of the Army and know that our soldiers will spend even less time with their families. We hear of efforts to change accompanied tours to Europe to a “rotation”. . . a friendly euphemism for another deployment. Most Americans think that a military mission is done when the press stops reporting it—families know that it takes years to complete the job and bring everyone home. Pride and loyalty hold the military family together—but at some point in the near future soldiers may face ultimatums from their families as the amount of time together becomes less than the amount of time apart.

I believe that the issue of single parents or both parents facing deployment is being viewed from the wrong angle by most observers. The Army is a voluntary career choice and all single soldiers or dual military couples with children are at all times aware of the potential for deployment and are required to provide extensive legal documentation of a valid care plan that will activate upon deployment. If they can not provide this plan they are released from active duty. The parents who deployed had plans in place and executed them. The real problem is the number of soldiers whose care plans, when notified of deployment, suddenly were not valid. These soldiers knowingly, willingly lied to their command and provided false legal documentation. The units deployed without these soldiers, perhaps compromising their mission. Soldiers are informed adults who must make difficult decisions regarding their families. The life of a soldier is not an easy one, especially for single parents or dual military couples. If they decide to pursue it, they must be prepared for separations and have a valid plan to care for their children. If they do not have someone they trust, ready to assume the role of parent at any time requested, they must pursue another career. Civilians make job decisions based on the amount of time they will be away from their family—soldiers must make the same tough decisions. The Army life is not for everyone.

Contrary to popular belief, the return of a soldier from a long deployment is more difficult than their departure. Redeployment briefings are normally offered at family readiness group (FRG) meetings when rumors start that soldiers are coming home. FRG leaders hope that each family will attend at least one briefing, but can not enforce it. FRG leaders, chaplains, and social workers from the hospital jointly present these briefings, but there is no standard format or books to use. The resources available on military installations are insufficient to provide the ongoing support needed by many soldiers and their families.

On-post schools are one of the positive aspects of a deployment and military life. Children are surrounded by peers going through the same thing they are. Teachers and counselors are experienced with deployments and trained to watch the children for signs of excessive stress. Teachers have constant access to families and support from military units and the installation. Exceptional discipline is maintained, in part because the military parent can be held accountable for their child's actions. Fort Campbell is fortunate to have outstanding community support—but the off-post schools can not compete with the on-post schools' ability to prepare children for the constant deployment and redeployment of soldiers. Funding continues to be reduced for on-post school systems at a time of increasing soldier deployments--when they can least afford to cut corners or reduce programs. A bare bones educational system is not enough for the children of soldiers. The funding to ensure that teachers and counselors are trained and available in sufficient numbers to meet the students' needs is critical on all military installations.

On-post schools are also better prepared to ensure the continuity of education for each child as a family transfers throughout a military career. Department of Defense guidelines ensure that all schools on military installations have similar curriculums. Improvements have been made and agreements coordinated with many off-post schools near military bases to ease the transition of military students. However, gaps continue to occur. Constant moves are extremely difficult on children—gaps in curriculums or the calculation of credits for graduation make the moves even more traumatic.

The most positive aspect of this deployment has been the way that the installation, military rear detachments, families and the local community have pulled together. Large scale deployments are difficult on everyone. Communication and mutual support has been outstanding. Most military families are extremely self sufficient, but they need to know what is going on. The relatively few families that needed support (emotional, health, financial) received the help they needed quickly and from many sources. A positive environment willing to listen and assist when needed was immediately established and maintained.

The key negative areas of this deployment were casualty notification and tracking of casualties in the medical system. Embedded media provided real-time coverage of events. Families knew immediately that an accident or casualty had occurred and by watching closely could often narrow the event to a specific unit. While no one argues that all casualty notification must be 100% accurate, the time from the incident until the Department of the Army approves notification of the next of kin is unacceptable given today's media and communication capability. (A death in our Group occurred at about 5 a.m. local time—approval to notify the wife was received too late to notify her that day, but by the 6 a.m. notification the next day the spouse had already been called from Iraq.)

Injured soldiers are nearly impossible to track in the multi service medical system. Today's military family demands and deserves a casualty notification system that recognizes the impact of instant media and communication.