

Sub-Committee on Children and Families

Armed Services Sub-Committee on Personnel - Supporting Our Military Families

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Witness:

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Testimony:

Chairman Chambliss, Chairman Alexander, and members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you matters of vital and mutual interest: the welfare of our brave men and women in uniform and their families. I welcome this chance to share good news with you; news about taking care of people.

Those who volunteer to serve our country in uniform expect to make sacrifices. However, since 60 percent of military members now have families, they must, as we would expect, give due consideration to the well-being of their spouses and children. If we are to keep dedicated men and women whom we have trained so well, we must ensure that they and their families are provided with pay, health, education, and other benefits that provide them with a Quality of Life that is, at the very least, competitive with what they would experience outside the military.

To that end, the Department, in its new Social Compact, has entered into a written commitment to improve life in the military, underwrite family support programs, and work in partnership with families to accomplish the military mission. Several new initiatives have germinated in the nourishing environment created by the recognition that the military's most valuable asset is its people.

Many of these new initiatives have leveraged the power of public-private partnerships and technology to deliver services. One that I am most excited about is an information service available to members and their families 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year.

Earlier this year, we entered into a contractual partnership to pilot a program providing information and referral services to Marines and their families. From anywhere in the world, an active duty or reserve Marine or family member using toll-free telephone, email or Internet can communicate with a professional counselor regarding myriad topics, including parenting and child care; educational services; elder care; relocation; health and wellness; and financial and legal information. Communication is confidential and services provided include a comprehensive array of pre-paid educational materials, such as books, CDs and videos. Simultaneous translation in 140 languages is available, as is assistive technology for low-vision users. Early reports about this program are very positive and we expect eventually to make these services available to all military families.

In the decade since Desert Storm, the Department has worked diligently to ensure that Service members and their families are provided with the best support possible, especially during periods of mobilization and deployment. We have sought and employed the best knowledge and tools at our disposal to provide education, training, outreach, and personal support to help military families cope with the demands of frequent separations

and the realities of a vocation in which one or both parents may be placed in harm's way; in some cases, on short notice.

Last October, we issued guidance to the Services outlining the full array of services and issues to be addressed in deployment support. The guidance covered responsibilities not only for the period of deployment, but also for the phases before and after deployment. The guidance addressed such issues as total force accessibility to services, outreach to parents, use of technology, support for high-risk families, strengthening volunteer unit-based support activities, and providing comprehensive return and reunion programs.

We established a Joint Services Contingency Planning Group to assess requirements and resources needed to support the total force during deployment. The effort was highly successful: establishing a forum for sharing ideas, eliminating redundancy, and identifying gaps in programs and services. Partnerships were formed with non-profit organizations to identify and implement strategies to ensure that resources and services are made available to those Service members and families that most need them.

Through an important partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs, we are working collaboratively with their Readjustment Counseling Service Centers to provide support for our returning National Guardsmen and Reservists. These "Vet Centers" offer broad readjustment counseling services to our military veterans and their families. The centers are community-based and located in all 50 states and the territories. They have a strong track record in providing valued employment assistance and advice about educational opportunities, as well as individual and group counseling.

The Department relies heavily on its professional reserve components. After National Guardsmen and Reservists complete their tours of active duty, it is our responsibility to ensure that they receive the information, counseling and other support they may need for successful reintegration with their families and transition back into their civilian jobs. Personnel who work at Vet Centers know how to do that well. Our job is to ensure that our de-mobilizing members are aware of and linked to this important resource that the Department of Veterans Affairs offers to our veterans.

I am happy to report that all four Services have made great strides in preparing Members and their families for dealing with deployments; facilitating ongoing contact between deployed Members and their families; working with all components to integrate and augment support programs; using technology to provide accurate and timely information; assuring the viability of Family Care Plans; and developing web-based resources.

Working with commercial airlines, we have even secured discounted fare options for military members who, on short notice, needed to transport their children to primary caregivers.

All parents are challenged by the need to satisfy the competing demands of work and family. That is doubly true for parents whose "work" is ensuring that military missions are successful. The Department is committed to maintaining a high standard for its child and youth programs and offering the full spectrum of services, including day care through family childcare, accredited child development programs, and school-age care programs. As of December 2002, the Military Services were providing 176,000 childcare spaces, using a combination of delivery approaches to maximize availability within existing resources. We are working to add more spaces each year.

To ensure the continuity of services in unforeseen circumstances, the Military Services are expected to have contingency plans in place so that they can adjust programs and

services to meet family needs as quickly as possible. Additionally, the Services, using emergency supplemental funds, have begun offering several new or expanded services, including care for mildly ill children, increased respite care at rates below normal hourly fees, and care during weekends, evenings and extended hours.

During periods of deployment, youth programs take on added significance, especially when parents are deployed to areas in which armed conflict or open hostility may be encountered. Children are not only stressed by the fear of physical harm to their parents, they also lose the benefit of the guidance, support, and nurturing that parents would be providing to their maturing offspring. Our 474 youth centers provide safe and secure environments where military youth can connect with their peers and participate in recreation and sports programs. We have been able to expand our programs considerably through partnerships with Boys and Girls Clubs of America, 4-H Clubs and other national organizations. For example, Boys and Girls Clubs of America has, over the past year, generously provided over \$5.8 million in program grants, gifts, scholarships and marketing initiatives.

Let me now speak to the issue of schooling for children of military personnel. After health and safety, perhaps no concern related to their children's development is as great as a parent's desire that their children attend good schools and receive a high quality education that will open the doors to collegiate studies and success in chosen professions, or satisfaction in the world of work.

The Department operates an excellent K-12 school system for 106,000 military dependent students at 224 schools overseas and in seven states in the Continental United States.

However, 1.5 million school-aged children of active duty, reserve or National Guard families attend schools not affiliated with the Department of Defense. About 600,000 of these children come from active duty families and attend public schools. It is not uncommon for these students to attend six different schools before high school graduation; some have reported attending 10 or 11. As they move from school to school, students and their families encounter difficulties with credit transfers, exit exams, athletic eligibility, and unique graduation requirements such as formal study of state history.

We are addressing these issues and others related to frequent relocations through identification and information sharing on a website (www.militarystudent.org) that will be operational later this summer. Also, through meetings with school leaders, parents, students and military commanders, we have found some "best practices" to be shared with other schools and communities. Last year, we published a booklet titled "Promising Practices" and have sent copies to school districts that enroll our students. The demand for additional copies has exceeded our supply. We plan now to include the booklet on our website so the good information it contains will be available universally.

Further, we are working with the Military Family Research Institute of Purdue University to study the impact that frequent moves or deployments of one or both parents have on the social, emotional and educational success of children from military families. Our study will encompass a cross-section of children from elementary-school through high school and from all four Services. The results of the study will enable us to work with schools to develop additional support programs and teacher training.

Educators, counselors, and mental health workers associated with public schools are generally not aware of the unique issues and challenges that confront military dependent

students. To be effective, they must become aware of military child issues and appropriate interventions.

We have initiated several partnerships to help us address these issues with educators. We have expanded our partnership with the Department of Education's Office for Safe and Drug Free Schools to include work with the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (sponsored by UCLA, Duke University, and the Department of Health and Human Services). Together we developed the following information booklets: Educator's Guide to the Military Child During Deployment, Educator's Guide to the Military Child During Post Deployment: Challenges of Family Reunion, and Parent's Guide to the Military Child in Deployment. The first deployment guide is currently featured on the Department of Education's website. All three guidebooks will be available on the DoD website later this summer. We are considering publication of the booklets to ensure that the information is seen and used by educators and parents. The Department wants to be a good partner to local schools and is seeking ways in which we can help promote excellence in public schools, especially in those schools that educate our children. More generally, we know we have a symbiotic relationship with the communities near our installations. Just as life at our installations changes when troops are deployed, local communities are also affected significantly when large numbers of people are withdrawn from the community. Citizens have been very generous with their time and skills to be good neighbors to family members left behind. We are grateful that during deployments over the past two years local business and community service organizations have felt very connected to military families and have sought ways to help. Through cooperative efforts with the USA Freedom Corps we have been able to channel the volunteerism of many local businesses and individuals to those families of deployed personnel who most needed assistance.

The Department has resolved to recognize communities that are particularly friendly to military members and their families. These are communities in which our families would be content to live even if they hadn't been assigned to that location. We are working with a contractor to develop a Quality of Life Quotient, and then to evaluate certain weighted factors. With this, we will be able to rate communities. A few of these factors are the following: Affordable Housing; Health Care; Availability of Quality Child Care; Employment Opportunities for Spouses; the Quality of Schools; Opportunities for Adult and Continuing Education; and Traffic and Safety. Using the Quality of Life Quotient as a guide, we will be able to identify Communities of Excellence. This initiative will also enable civilian communities to target efforts to make their communities excellent places to live, work and raise a family.

We are committed to meeting the quality of life needs of our Service members and their families. Our Service members have high aspirations and strong family values. They desire a fulfilling life for themselves and their families. To recruit the best and brightest, we must provide an inviting environment. To retain those we have trained and whose skills we vitally need to keep, we must ensure continuing challenges and opportunities to grow both intellectually and professionally. To maintain a modern military force at a honed state of readiness requires high morale bred of satisfaction with working and living conditions that make being a part of the military family more inviting than living outside of it. We are confident that if we treat our people well, they will stay with us. When they finally retire or leave active duty, they will depart with positive memories of the military

lifestyle and be our best advocate to future generations. As such, the Department will receive an excellent return on its training investment, and ensure that tomorrow's military is as strong, dedicated, and vital as is today's. Now, more than ever, our national security and way of life depend on it.

Thank you Chairman Chambliss, Chairman Alexander, and members of both subcommittees, for the opportunity to testify before you today. I very much appreciate your continued interest in and support of Quality of Life programs and initiatives that benefit military members and their families.