

The US Military Child Care System: A Model Worth Replicating

Based on an interview by Roger Neugebauer

I believe that the military child care system — which not only recognizes that children need good care, but also that such care cannot be provided without a sound structure, that recognizes that the skills and compensation of a child's caregiver is central to their development — should be replicated and funded in every state.

Helen Blank, with Children's Defense Fund at the time of this quote

Who would have thought that we would look to the military for our child care models? But in fact, the military is not only the largest provider of employer child care in the Nation, but certainly among the highest quality providers.

Not always a rosy picture

Military child care has not always been a model system. As recently as the early 1980s, child care services of the military were inconsistent, with many programs having serious deficiencies: supply was inadequate with thousands of children on the waiting lists; oversight was minimal; programs were operated by volunteer groups in unsafe facilities that often failed to meet basic health and safety standards; and, caregivers were poorly trained and poorly paid.

Finally, in the late 1980s, Government Accounting Office reports and Congressional hearings exposed the seriousness of the situation. Congress responded by passing the Military Child Care Act (MCCA) of 1989, which recognized the need to develop a system that would promote development and well-being of children of military families. The goal of MCCA was to move on three fronts at one time, quality, availability, and

affordability. Specifically MCCA called for standardizing the training and compensation of caregivers, upgrading the quality of the curriculum, increasing the number and scope of program inspections conducted on an unannounced basis, and making fees affordable.

Military child care today

In combination, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps provide care for over 200,000 children daily in 900 centers and 9,000 family child care/child development homes at over 300 geographic locations both in the USA and overseas. Child care is provided through a "single point of entry system" which includes child development centers, family child care/child development home networks, school-age programs, and resource and referral services. At one point in the last three years 100% of military centers were accredited by NAEYC. Each child development program has at least one Training and Curriculum Specialist to ensure quality standards are consistently met.

There is still room for improvement, of course. Even with a major expansion push — there were over 200 new military child care facilities constructed between 1985 and 1998 — there is still unmet demand for care which intensified dramatically due to increased deployments. As a result, in addition to further construction, the military is reaching out to purchase high quality community-based child care. In addition, all four Services continue to work at improving staff recruitment and training systems to maintain and build upon the gains made so far.

Similar to any federal program, military child care goes through periods of budgetary shortfalls. However, what is unique about the military approach to cutting costs is that quality is sacrosanct. The military has developed strict unit cost figures which determine how much must be allocated in resources per child for care to be of high quality. When funds are short, the Services cut the number of units funded, but do not cut back on unit costs.

To make care affordable, Congress, in accordance with the MCCA, subsidizes around 50% of the overall cost of care. Families pay for child care on a sliding fee scale based on total family income.

The leadership team

The individuals pictured on the cover of this issue (listed below as they appear from left to right on the cover) comprise the military child care system's headquarters leadership team.

- Sharon Peterson is the director of the Child and Youth Program for the Commander, Navy installations.
- M.-A. Lucas is the chief of Child and Youth Services for the U.S. Army.
- Michael Berger is the deputy branch head of U.S. Marine Corps Family Team Building.
- Toni Koppen is the chief of Family Member Programs for the U.S. Air Force.
- Janice Witte is the director of the Office of Children and Youth at the Department of Defense (DoD).

This team brings a wealth of experience to their work. Together, they have

invested more than 120 years at all levels of military child and family services.

The DoD provides the overall policy support for military child care to assure operational consistency throughout. Program managers are responsible for carrying out these policies through day-to-day oversight over operations and budgeting. Each Service is given considerable latitude to tailor implementation to meet its unique challenges and mission requirements. Program managers meet monthly to share their experiences and explore mutual challenges. The leadership team researches and engages in partnership opportunities among the Services to gain efficiencies that benefit the system.

Deployment challenges

Conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have placed extreme burdens on military families. The military has responded with initiatives to relieve the stresses of families with deployed family members:

- Congress allocated additional emergency funding to provide over 1.5 million hours of extended care for families with deployed spouses — care during extended work hours, care for mildly ill children, and increased respite care.
- The DoD has established an online family support service to provide 24/7 information referral services to families.
- Since a significant number of those deployed are from the National Guard and Reserves, and are not located in communities with military child care services, the DoD and the Services are working with NACCRRRA to locate and pay down the cost of child care in communities where called up Service members live.
- The Army reduces fees for families of deployed soldiers and provides computer labs for children to communicate with deployed parent(s).
- The Marine Corps partnered with outside consultants to provide targeted

counseling services to children with anxieties about deployed parents.

- The Navy has developed two pilot projects where they have established group homes that are open 24/7 to meet the needs of families of the deployed and shift workers. The success of these pilots resulted in two additional 24/7 programs. Other Navy installations can offer this service within their existing delivery system.
- The Air Force purchases spaces in licensed family child care homes to provide free extended services to children after ten hours of care, and to ensure that families using family child care homes pay no more than if they were using on-base centers.

Ultimately the success of military child care programs is due to providing quality, available, and affordable child care, measured by a reduction in lost duty time and increased retention of the workforce — a worthy goal for employer-sponsored, on-site child care.