

# The Military Gets High-Quality Child Care; So Should PA

How the Department of Defense overhauled child care; addressing problems with quality, access, and affordability



## Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

### **Mission: Readiness**

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble

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The military understands the value of high-quality child care. A generation ago, the Department of Defense overhauled and upgraded its child care system for military families.<sup>1</sup> This investment served not only as a vital workforce support for military parents, but also helped ensure young people had a quality environment where they could learn and grow. Today, these child care centers and certified family child care homes are important resources for the military, and provide an example of best practices for child care systems that can be implemented in Pennsylvania, and across the country.

### **Recruitment and retention—changing with the times**

By the late 1980s, it was obvious to military leaders that the transition from the draft to the all-volunteer military was dramatically changing the composition of the force to

“With families struggling to access high-quality child care, it is time to rethink the system. The military’s transformation of its child care system provides a roadmap for improvements in Pennsylvania.”



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include more personnel with families, families with all parents working, and women. As such, child care quickly became a workforce readiness issue for the Department of Defense. Unfortunately, the existing child care system for military families was marred with long waiting lists, unsuitable facilities, inadequate standards and inspections, low pay and qualifications for teachers and staff, as well as serious child abuse allegations. The concern was that, with the changing face of the military, the problems associated with a low-quality child care system would quickly become a recruitment and retention issue. In response, Congress passed the Military Child Care Act in 1989, which served as the catalyst for much-needed reforms that led to the current high-quality system, cited by experts as a “model for the nation.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Today’s Military Child Care System emphasizes quality, access, and affordability**

The Military Child Care System (MCCS) is now the largest employer-sponsored early care and education (ECE) program in the country.<sup>3</sup> The military has embraced child care as a quality-of-life benefit for service members, designed to support mission readiness, morale, and retention. The total population of military children under the age of 13 is approximately 1.2 million, with one third of those children under the age of three, making child care an important part of military readiness.<sup>4</sup>

Across the country and around the world, 200,000 military children are growing and learning in these high-quality programs daily.<sup>5</sup> The different military branches run the programs under requirements set by the Department of Defense. Military child

care is comprehensive and high-quality, focused on children’s cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development.

## **The military offers diverse child care settings**

- Child development centers on military installations
- Family child care homes in government housing
- Centers and family child care homes in civilian settings
- Preschool offered in Department of Defense schools<sup>6</sup>

The Military Child Care Act of 1989 resulted in key investments in:

**Quality:** The military requires its providers to meet Department of Defense health and safety certification, as well as the standards of national accreditation. Nearly all (95 percent) military child development centers (CDCs) are meeting those standards, compared to about 10 percent of civilian centers. If a provider is deficient in meeting these quality measures, MCCS will work with them to ensure adequate compliance. Providers are subject to four unannounced inspections per year, and ongoing noncompliance can result in closure.<sup>7</sup> Military family child care homes are not required to meet standards of accreditation, but they are inspected and certified.<sup>8</sup> The education and training of child care instructors is another key indicator of

quality. As such, the MCCS mandates a training program (including on-the-job training) and demonstration of competencies as a condition for employment. This training is provided at no cost to the employee and is linked to a career ladder that leads to increased compensation for each step. Additionally, the military system offers higher wages and more benefits than civilian counterparts, which has dramatically reduced staff turnover.<sup>9</sup> Dedicated training and curriculum specialist positions were also required by the 1989 Act to help with staff training and compliance with standards. As a final measure of quality, the military established parental boards to increase the level of parent involvement and serve as another point of accountability.<sup>10</sup>

**Access:** The 1989 federal legislation required the Department of Defense to develop a strategy to address the growing unmet need for child care among military families. As part of that plan, the military routinely assesses the potential need for child care among families in all service branches. Based on these assessments, the military continues to build new child care centers and expand capacity at existing ones, expands its family child care program, utilizes resource and referral agencies to help families find care, and utilizes off-base licensed civilian care. These ongoing steps to determine and address demand have significantly reduced unmet need; however, demand still exceeds supply.<sup>11</sup>

**Affordability:** High-quality early care and education is expensive, and many military families are unable to afford these costs in full. All active-duty military families have access to the system and public funding is appropriated to help offset the cost. Fees for on-base programs are on a sliding scale, determined by family income. On average,

public funds cover 64 percent of the cost.<sup>12</sup> The average costs for military child care centers are lower than the average fees for civilian providers, with yearly costs averaging between \$3,000 and \$8,400 per child.<sup>13</sup> Comparatively, the average annual cost for child care in the United States is about \$9,100 to \$9,600, with care for infants costing as much as \$20,880 per year.<sup>14</sup> If on-base care is not an option, military parents can receive subsidies to help cover these costs for child care in private centers or home-based care outside of military installations as long as the programs meet certain standards of quality.<sup>15</sup>

## Problems with child care in PA

With 71 percent of Pennsylvania children having all available parents in the labor force, child care is an essential support for working families.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, problems in our civilian child care system involving quality, access, and affordability render the system less than optimal for children, families, and the Commonwealth's businesses.

Similar to the problems previously faced by the MCCS, Pennsylvania faces three major challenges:

**Quality:** Only 42 percent of child care capacity in Pennsylvania currently meets high-quality standards.<sup>17</sup> Among the shortcomings in quality are low wages often leading to high rates of provider turnover, resulting in a lack of stable, consistent caregiving for young children. Additionally, only 25 percent of the Commonwealth's child care programs have the quality "STAR 3" or "STAR 4" Keystone STARS designation, and only ten percent of child care centers in our state are accredited.<sup>18</sup>

**Access:** In Pennsylvania, 57 percent of all residents live in a child care desert,



defined as an area where there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.<sup>19</sup> Availability is especially limited for families who have infants and toddlers, work evening and night shifts, or live in rural areas.<sup>20</sup>

**Affordability:** Currently, parents pay an average of \$11,560 annually for center-based infant care in Pennsylvania, compared to \$14,437 for public college tuition.<sup>21</sup> Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is unaffordable for many families, especially those with low incomes.

When families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and ultimately, taxpayers. In fact, a recent analysis by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation found that employee absences and turnover due to child care issues cost Pennsylvania employers \$2.88 billion each year. These issues also cost the commonwealth \$591 million annually in lost tax revenue.<sup>22</sup>

### **Following the military's example**

Many of the military's reforms and

requirements can be applied to civilian child care centers and adapted for family child care homes, to ensure that these settings are meeting high standards, employing qualified staff, and providing high-quality care for children.

Following the military's example, Pennsylvania policy makers should:

- Have a clear understanding of the child care needs of the Commonwealth's working families, as well as the issues impacting the programs and professionals that provide these services and develop a long-range plan with significant stakeholder feedback to address these needs. Such a plan should also take into account infrastructure needs to expand, build, and/or improve sites.
- Ensure that high-quality child care is affordable and accessible for all Pennsylvania families.
- Further incentivize child care providers to meet high quality standards.
- Invest in the child care workforce by increasing compensation tied to demonstration of competencies.

### **Conclusion**

As Pennsylvania emerges from the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic, child care will be an essential component of our economic recovery. Pennsylvania's policymakers should look to the military's example on how to scale up the state's child care system to better support working families. Substantial increases in federal child care funding will provide policymakers an immediate opportunity to strengthen the system. As the military demonstrated, a complete overhaul of the child care system is not necessary; improvements to, and additional recurring investments in, the existing system that address quality, access, and affordability will have lasting impacts for Pennsylvania's children and families.

## Endnotes

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