

February 14, 2018

Senate Armed Services Committee
Personnel Subcommittee

Dear Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee,

Blue Star Families deeply appreciates the opportunity to testify in front of the Personnel Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 14, 2018. Thank you for including our perspective.

The following attachments are also submitted for the record:

1. Written Testimony
2. 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Comprehensive Report
3. 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Executive Summary
4. 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Comprehensive Infographic
5. 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Opportunity Costs for Service Infographic
6. 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Civilian Community Integration Infographic
7. 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Diverse Experiences of Service Infographic
8. 2017 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Benefits of Military Service Infographic



Written testimony to Personnel Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee by Blue Star Families

“Testify on Military and Civilian Personnel Programs and Military Family Readiness”

SASC Personnel Subcommittee

February 14, 2018

3:00 PM

Chairman Tillis, Ranking Member Gillibrand and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am Kathy Roth-Douquet and I am the CEO of Blue Star Families. Blue Star Families (BSF) builds communities that support military families by connecting research and data to programs and solutions, including career development tools, local community events for families, and caregiver support. Since its inception in 2009, BSF has engaged tens of thousands of volunteers and serves more than 1.5 million military family members. With BSF, military families can find answers to their challenges anywhere they are. With strong ties to all branches of service, active duty, veterans, and their families, BSF is nationally recognized for its annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey. The largest of its kind, the survey provides both quantitative and qualitative data that reveals a snapshot of the current state of the service members and their families. Conducted annually, the Military Family Lifestyle Survey is used at all levels of government to help inform and educate those tasked with making policy decisions that impact service members and their families-- who also serve.

Supporting Military Families Strengthens National Security and Local Communities

Military families are assets to national defense and local communities. They are central to the health and capability of the All-Volunteer Force and are good neighbors actively engaged in making their civilian communities great places to live.

The All-Volunteer Force continues to serve in uncertain and challenging times. With our nation’s sixteenth consecutive year at war drawing to a close, military families continue to endure multiple prolonged periods of separation from their service members. This past year continued to see new and emerging security threats in numerous regions while Department of Defense (DoD) grew the total force to support a mission that is not expected to shrink in the near future. The resulting operational tempo and substantial difficulties in balancing work and family is very concerning to service members and their families. Quality of life issues like time away from family, military family stability and the impact of military service on children are top concerns along with lasting concerns regarding pay, benefits, and spouse employment.

Research suggests that service members' top concern is for their family's well-being and family well-being is top consideration in whether a service member stays or leaves the force. In fact, our research shows that while 55% of service members and their spouses would recommend service to young people, only 40% would recommend it to their own child; both showing a decline from previous year's percentages. While the military has adopted a number of reforms to support military families in the past few years, there is still much more to be done.

Key Priorities for Military Families

Blue Star Families conducted its 8th annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey in April-May, 2017 with over 7,800 respondents including military spouses, active duty service members, veterans, and their immediate family members participating in the survey. The Military Family Lifestyle Survey's response rate makes it the largest and most comprehensive survey of active duty, veterans, and their families.

This year's survey results show military families are increasingly concerned about the continued sacrifices that accompany this prolonged period of conflict. It shows the country needs to get smarter about what a healthy All-Volunteer Force really looks like - and what it needs it to look like to ensure future success. The All-Volunteer Force was not designed for our current security environment or the modern service member - who may be single parents, have professional spouses, have children with special needs, and living in an increasingly diverse and inclusive society.

Analysis of the qualitative portions of this year's survey reinforced the quantitative findings. For example, extended family separations, frequent moves, and outdated expectations that military spouses sublimate their personal, professional, and familial priorities to support their service members military service are the most relevant topics identified as substantially reducing the quality of life and attractiveness of martial service. Simply put, military families have a strong desire and commitment to serve; however, responses suggest they remain rational actors who are increasingly assessing alternatives to maintaining a long-term commitment to military service.

Despite varied topics covered in this year's survey report such as family separation, civilian community integration, and mental healthcare, one clear and consistent theme emerged: the DoD must do a better job of incorporating military families into its current thinking and future planning. Rather than ad hoc measures meant to provide support during periods of acute warfare, military families must be understood as a structural component of the force. Even further, just as a strong defense requires diverse skills, strong military family support requires a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of today's military families. Thinking about the families in this way makes the country smarter about what it takes to ensure our nation's security and it improves the ability of the DoD to meet military family support needs.

Our key priorities for the coming year are based on areas of need identified in our 2017 survey. We feel improvement in these areas also has the greatest potential to reduce the trend of increasing quality of life concerns that was a top trend in our 2017 survey.

The areas we will be focusing on are:

- Increasing understanding among the general U.S. population that operational tempo and family separations remain very high-- seventy-two percent of active duty and military spouse respondents indicated the current operational tempo (optempo) exerts an unacceptable level of stress for a healthy work-life balance, and forty percent of military family respondents report experiencing more than six months of family separation in the last eighteen months. Military families continue to experience significant challenges and make heavy sacrifices as a result of their service.
- Improving civilian-military community connections that improve local integration is important for the overall health and wellbeing of military families and is a smart recruitment and retention policy for DoD--fifty-one percent of active duty and military spouse respondents indicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging within their local civilian community and seventy-two percent of military family respondents indicated living in their current community for two years or less suggesting families experience substantial challenges integrating into their local, off-installation communities.
- Improving financial security and improving employment and career viability for military spouses--unemployed or underemployed military spouses. Military spouse unemployment sits around twenty-eight percent (compared to four percent for all married women with children under 18) and is a top obstacle to the financial security and successful retirement or transition planning for military families.
- Increasing modern understanding of the diversity of today's military workforce--while concerns about family was the top reason motivating male and female service members to exit military service, traditional expectations regarding gender roles continue to compound this issue for female service members, who indicated higher levels of stress and concern balancing work and family responsibilities. Related, developing better solutions to the lasting challenge of access and affordability of quality childcare is a continued top need--sixty-seven percent of military families are unable to reliably find childcare that meets their needs and it was cited as a top military spouse career obstacle.

Operational Tempo and Family Separations

The military lifestyle demands long hours, unpredictable work schedules and that families endure frequent and prolonged separations not just for wartime deployments, but also for training, temporary duty assignments, and additional responsibilities that frequently require travel. Service members and their families feel the current optempo is unsustainable and threatens the health of their families. For the first time, based on strong indications from 2016's survey results, respondents were provided a new "top issue" option: "Amount of time away from family." Forty-six percent of active duty service member and spouse respondents ranked this new option as their top issue of concern. Additionally thirty-four percent of active duty service member respondents ranked "family stability/quality of life" as their number three issue.

Seventy-two percent of active duty and military spouse respondents indicated the current optempo exerts an unacceptable level of stress for a healthy work-life balance. Forty percent of military family respondents report experiencing more than six months of family separation in the last eighteen months and deployments are cited as the top stressor associated with time in the military for both service members and military spouses. In qualitative portions of the survey, respondents identified several steps the DoD can make to alleviate the stress arising from large amounts of time away from family. Improving leave benefits and ability to take leave was the top response. Improving the service member's work schedule (while at home) to allow time with family, and improving leadership behavior/policies impacting military families were also top suggestions.

Concerns regarding the impact of a military lifestyle on dependent children's wellness appears to be increasing with two issues related to military child wellbeing ranked in the Top 5 concerns for both service members and military spouses for the first time in the nine year history of this survey. Thirty-two percent of service member and thirty-nine percent of military spouse respondents ranked dependent children's education as a top 5 issue of concern, and thirty-three percent of service member and thirty-six percent of military spouse respondents ranked impact of deployment on children as a top 5 issue of concern. Fifty-six percent of military family respondents feel the DoD support services are inadequate to support military children in coping with unique military life challenges. Military leaders can continue to prioritize military family programming as an essential component of readiness while operational tempos remain high and the global security environment remains uncertain. Similarly, mental health, childcare, and community integration support are critical needs and are excellent opportunities for the DoD, local and national leaders to enhance support to address these areas of concern.

Meeting the demands of an unrelenting optempo can take a toll on mental health for service members and their families. The Deployment Health Clinical Center released a study citing the rate of anxiety disorder diagnoses among service members rose from under 2% in 2005 to more than 5% in 2016, and the rate of depression rose from 3% in 2005 to more than 5% in 2015¹. Research also suggests that substance use disorders are likely to co-occur among veterans and service members with at least one other mental health disorder such as depression or anxiety, and that alcohol abuse is more prevalent among military service members when compared to civilians². Three year BSF Survey respondent trends for service member, veteran, veteran spouse, and post-9/11 veteran subgroups all indicate an increasing rate of those who have considered suicide. Just as physical health is a core requirement of service members for readiness, their mental health as well as the mental health of their family members are a critical component of mission readiness requiring additional support and early intervention.

Recommendations

- **Fully fund and staff the Office of Suicide Prevention.** The Pentagon has reported suicide takes more lives of U.S. troops deployed to fight ISIL than those killed in combat. BSF encourages

¹ Deployment Health Clinical Center (2017). Mental Health Disorder Prevalence among Active Duty Service Members in the Military Health System, Fiscal Years 2005-2016. Retrieved from <http://www.pdhealth.mil/sites/default/files/images/mental-health-disorder-prevalence-among-active-duty-service-members-508.pdf>

² Institute of Medicine (2014). Understanding psychological health in the military. In L.A. Denning, M. Meisnere, & K.E. Warner (Eds.), *Psychology Disorders in Service Members and Their Families: An Assessment of Programs*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK222167/>

Congress to reconsider fully funding and staffing the DoD's Office of Suicide Prevention to support service Headquarters' ability to provide innovation and programming.

Civilian Community Integration

The end of the draft resulted in a stronger, more professional U.S. military; however, it has also decreased understanding of military service and sacrifice within the broader American society. Roughly, 0.5% of the American public has served on active duty at any given time since 9/11; this number is expected to continue to decline as a result of continued voluntary service and evolving technology. While the smaller percentage of Americans in martial service alone is not a cause for concern, the resulting decrease in understanding between the military and the broader U.S. society presents significant challenges for the future of American defense.

Nearly one-third (31%) of military family respondents in this year's survey indicated they had not had an in-depth conversation with a local civilian in the last month. Military spouse respondents indicated higher rates of engagement with civilians compared to service members, with 39% reporting an in-depth conversation with civilians at least once a week. Thirty-two percent of service member respondents indicated the same. Recent research underscores the negative impact of loneliness and social isolation on physical health, as "social isolation may represent a greater public health hazard than obesity³." For military spouse respondents, isolation from family and friends has been a constant top five stressor each year despite 94% of military spouse respondents indicating working with others in their neighborhood to fix problems or improve conditions is an important responsibility. This military spouse disconnect presents an opportunity for the civilian communities, DoD, and military installation leadership to create a more efficient pathway for service members and their spouses to engage locally and for the broader American society to gain deeper understanding of the military lifestyle.

Recommendations

- **Report on the feasibility of establishing an Office of Strategic Partnership in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).** We support the Secretary of Defense reporting to the Committees on Armed Services of the Senate and the House of Representatives on the feasibility of the DoD creating an Office of Strategic Partnerships. Modeled after the VA Office of Strategic Partnerships, such an Office would serve as a clearinghouse staffed with the political appointee to promote consistency and prevent mission stagnation. Potential activity would include forming a Joint Partnerships Committee who would host quarterly meetings with representatives from all Services. Quarterly meetings would allow for increased openness with Services and aim to determine where policies, power to enforce, and budgets would align. This Office would also serve as an access point for qualified non-governmental organizations to provide innovative solutions to challenges experienced by the OSD and Services.
- **Enhance and expand the Selective Service System to include all young American adults, and require Selective Service registrants to complete a modified, online military vocational aptitude test (ASVAB).** Today's Selective Service System is based on a pre-All-Volunteer Force recruitment strategy and is not useful for developing the increasingly adaptable force the nation

³ American Psychological Association (2017). So lonely I could die [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/08/lonely-die.aspx>

will need in the future. An enhanced Selective Service System would collect more detailed registrant information which could be used as a recruiting tool that allows the military to identify both men and women who have relevant skills. By requiring Selective Service registrants to complete a modified, online ASVAB, millions of younger Americans will be exposed to the possibility of military service and, with registrant permission, allow military recruiters an opportunity to engage students with proclivity to serve⁴. Such exposure will help in reducing the civilian-military divide and improve the future of American defense.

Financial Security

Financial considerations are a key factor in a military family's decision to stay in the military. Sixty-two percent of military family respondents reported they felt some or a great deal of stress as a result of their current financial situation, which is slightly higher than the broader American society where 56% indicated worrying about their finances within the last year⁵. When financial readiness is threatened by financial stress and insecurity, military readiness is compromised with potential to negatively impact service member's careers and the stability of military families. Forty-nine percent of all military family respondents also indicated they have less than \$5,000 in available savings. In 2016, 7% of respondents reported experiencing food insecurity in the past year.

Military family financial stress is further compounded by the lasting threat of sequestration. BSF survey research shows changes to pay/benefits is currently a very sensitive issue, given the numerous changes in recent years. Military family respondents rely on government leaders to protect their earned benefits and respect their service. Sequestration and changes to military pay/benefits is the quickest way to decrease morale and erode trust between service members and national leadership. It is critical that the government stop whiplashing multiyear families with these solutions.

Findings suggest that retirement planning is an area where a large number of service members, military spouses, and veterans experience significant challenges and uncertainty. Ten percent of military family respondents indicated they are not currently contributing towards a retirement account. As with many military benefits, respondents indicated their understanding of this benefit was low. Fifty-one percent of those service member respondents who may be eligible for the new Blended Retirement System reported they did not understand the benefit. Among those eligible for the new retirement system, 55% reported they expected the new benefit to be less than they otherwise would have received. Most troubling for those who must make a decision regarding which retirement system to choose, 42% of service member respondents indicated they did not know how the new system compared to the old benefit.

Without a clear picture of their financial future, military families are less likely to stay long-term. Educating military families with the facts about the new retirement system and equipping them with the tools to invest and save wisely are critical to maintaining both financial readiness and willingness to serve.

⁴ Bipartisan Policy Center. (2017). Building a F.A.S.T. Force: A Flexible Personnel System for a Modern Military: Recommendations from the Task Force on Defense Personnel. Retrieved from <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/BPC-Defense-Building-A-FAST-Force.pdf>

⁵ Pew Charitable Trusts (2015). American's financial security: Perception and reality. http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/02/fsm-poll-results-issue-brief_artfinal_v3.pdf

Recommendations

- **Remove barriers to military families receiving nutrition assistance in the form of food stamps.** BSF supports any efforts to remove barriers for military families to receive access to nutritional assistance and supports the Military Hunger Prevention Act, H.R. 1078 (115) which would exclude the value of Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) from military families' income when determining eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. BAH is known to adjust depending on the cost of living in any given location and can fluctuate enough that it disqualifies military families from SNAP even though food prices may also be higher where they are stationed. As the IRS does not consider BAH taxable income and is not considered income for a multitude of other social welfare programs, we do not feel it should be considered income when considering eligibility for nutritional assistance.
- **Mandate the creation on a military family adjusted income index.** Include language requiring research on the difference between total household earnings of military families vs comparable-looking civilian families to measure so called “military family earnings penalty.” This index could be used in future considerations or quadrennial reviews of service member remuneration.
- **Oppose changes to Post-9/11 transferability that would end transferability for those with 16+ years of service.** While transferability is a retention initiative, denying transferability denies benefits to those who have chosen to continue to serve during 16+ years of war and also denies the benefit to the children of those who have chosen to stay.
- **Oppose repeal of deduction for moving expenses and exclusion for qualified moving expense reimbursement.**
- **Oppose repeal of the exclusion of gain from sale of a principal residence.**

Military Spouse Employment

The ability of military spouses to meet their own employment expectations is a significant factor with overall satisfaction with the military lifestyle and with individual service member retention decisions⁶⁷. Forty-six percent of respondents to our survey identified military spouse employment as a top obstacle to their family’s financial security and military spouse employment remains a top concern for active duty spouse respondents. Military spouse unemployment sits around twenty-eight percent (compared to four percent for all married women with children under 18), an increase from last year’s survey findings. Findings also indicate that the financial challenge presented by spouse unemployment and underemployment is further underscored by the finding that 52% of military spouse respondents earned zero income in 2016 and only 9% contributed equally or more. In comparison, of all U.S. households with children under 18, the share of married mothers who out earn their husbands is 15%⁸. Existing research suggests updating the DoD’s outdated and bureaucratically cumbersome personnel management system into a more flexible and decentralized model would allow the military to more effectively meet

⁶ Casetnada, L.W. and Harrell, M. (2008). Military Spouse Employment: A grounded theory approach to experiences and perceptions. *Armed Forces and Society*, 34(3), 389-412

⁷ Scarville, J. (1999). Spouse Employment in the Army: Research Findings. Retrieved from <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a222135.pdf>

⁸ Harrison, D. & Laliberte, L. (1997). Gender, the Military and Military Family Support. Weinstein, L. & White, C.C. (Eds.), *Wives and Warriors: Women and the Military in the United States and Canada* (pp. 35-54). Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.

operational needs and would also enable military families to optimize duty station assignment selection so that both service members and spouses are better able to progress in their careers.

BSF supports legislative proposals such as Senator Kaine’s Military Spouse Employment Act of 2018 which seeks to improve military spouse competitiveness for federal employment and offer military spouses more opportunities. In 2016, 79% of military spouse respondents who applied for a GS position indicated they were not hired. Federal employment opportunities are key positions for military spouses as employment often exist close to nearly all installations, is frequently portable, and for bases overseas may be the only option due to SOFA. If passed, such legislation would be one of the strongest steps the federal government can take to improve military spouse employment challenges that arise as a result of military service.

Recommendations

- **Support the Military Spouse Employment Act of 2018 introduced by Senator Kaine.**
- **Require federal hiring managers to report on any military spouse applicants for open federal positions and if they were not hired, a reason as to why they were deemed unqualified or otherwise not hired.** Also expand hiring capabilities to federal hiring managers to allow for “expedited hiring authority” to quickly employ military spouses.
- **Develop legislation similar to the Lift the Relocation Burden from Military Spouses Act introduced by Representative Stefanik and passed with the 2018 NDAA at a state level.** Proposed legislation would reimburse states for licensing fees if those states agree to waive the cost of military spouse relicensing.
- **Expand Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) offered to veterans to include military spouses.**
- **Remove repeal of the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) from the proposed TC&JA.** Instead, the WOTC should be expanded to include military spouses. The WOTC has been a critically important tool assisting in solving the problem of veteran unemployment and would be a game-changer for spouse unemployment. (DOL) statistics show 35,904 veterans were certified for WOTC during the three-year period before the Veterans Opportunity to Work Act. By contrast, 278,611 veterans were certified during FY 2013-15, an increase of more than 700 percent.

Increasing Modern Understanding of the Diversity of Today’s Military Workforce

The All-Volunteer Force implemented in 1973 was not designed for the modern service member - a force that is married, has children and increasingly diverse. As a result, modern service members are experiencing increasing difficulties balancing work and family. This challenge is especially acute for female service members and female spouses who must operate in a military culture designed to meet the needs of male service members and their families ⁹.

⁹ Southwell, K.H., & MacDermid Wadsworth, S.M. (2016). The many faces of military families: Unique features of the lives of female service members. *Military Medicine* 18(1), 70-79.

Women comprise of 16% of today's active duty force and analysis of future defense needs suggests this is likely to grow in order to sustain an All-Volunteer Force¹⁰. Research has shown that even in families where both partners attempt to share household responsibilities, women often assume a larger load of the work at home, creating the burden of "second shift" that men don't equally feel^{11 12}. In this year's survey, "issues related to children (time away from children or worries about impact of military life on children)" was identified as the top stressor for female service member respondents while male respondents ranked deployment as their top stressor. While top stressors for both groups can be understood as related to the high optempo and frequent family separations that are associated with service, the fact that each gender expressed this stressor differently suggests substantially different experiences of service between genders - even when experiencing the same stressors. Furthermore, existing research indicates that when forced to choose between a career and a family, females in heterosexual dual military marriages are more likely to consider leaving the military¹³. This was also seen in this year's survey with 41% of female and 35% of male service member respondents indicating concerns about military family as the top reason motivating them to exit military service in the next two years.

Similarly, respondents in this year's survey indicate that the military culture substantially heightens gender roles and compounds spouse employment challenges already incumbent in the military lifestyle. Survey responses over multiple years have consistently shown that the most significant obstacles to spouse employment are not related to job availability or employment readiness. The top three reasons for not working among military spouse respondents who want to work were identical to those identified in 2016: service member job demands (55%), childcare (53%), and family commitment (43%).

Childcare continues to be a top need for both military spouses and female service members. Sixty-seven percent of military family respondents indicated they are not always able to obtain the childcare they need. Similarly 67% of female service member respondents reported the same (compared to 33% of male service member respondents). Male military spouse respondents were also far less likely to indicate childcare challenges as a factor in employment or education decisions, with 40% of male military spouses vs 17% of female military spouses reporting their employment or education decisions had not been impacted by childcare challenges.

In 2012, the GAO conducted a study on military child care reporting that military families face two main barriers to obtaining DoD-subsidized child care: lack of awareness of available resources and insufficient availability among those resources. According to DoD officials and based on GAO's group discussions, a substantial number of military families remain unaware of subsidized child care that may be available to

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (2015). 2015 Demographics: Profile of the military community. Retrieved from Military OneSource Website: <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2015-Demographics-Report.pdf>

¹¹ Hochschild, A. (2012). Revised Edition. *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home*. New York: Penguin

¹² Pew Research Center (2015). Raising kids and running a household: How working parents share the load. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/11/04/raising-kids-and-running-a-household-how-working-parents-share-the-load/>

¹³ Huffman, A. H., Craddock, E. B., Culbertson, S. S., & Klinefelter, Z. (2017). Decision-making and exchange processes of dual-military couples: A review and suggested strategies for navigating multiple roles. *Military Psychology (American Psychological Association)*, 29(1), 11-26.

them, particularly off-installation care, despite DoD's efforts to provide information at pre-deployment briefings and through other outreach efforts. BSF survey research suggests that the bureaucracy in learning about and accessing military childcare is substantial and a barrier to families obtaining the child care they need. Further, families who are geographically isolated from an installation, such as reservists and recruiters, are also less likely to be aware of subsidized care.

If the DoD is committed to attracting and retaining talented men and women, then it is essential that DoD prioritizes the responsibility to create a work environment where both men and women are afforded equal time and opportunity to work and attend to responsibilities at home. Additionally, DoD can expand opportunities for affordable childcare to all military families, promote access to civilian childcare providers through referrals and subsidies and improve flexible work hiring initiatives to employ military spouses in a manner that allows military parents to better balance home and work responsibilities.

Recommendations

- **Increase dwell time, allow military service members to 'turn down' a move for family stability, and allow service members to take leaves of absence for family reasons.** BSF encourages the Committee to support any moves towards innovation by the Services.
- **Support the progress of S.1434 Availability of Child Care for Every Servicemember and Spouse Act (ACCESS Act) / Sec 558 (c) Childcare Coordinators For Military Installations.** Community childcare coordinators located at each base would serve to bridge the communication gap between military families and the installation. Similar to the role of a School Liaison Officer, community childcare coordinators would act as an expert in local childcare options-- on and off base-- and extend support to help military families locate the best available available childcare that meets the diverse needs of their military family. The community childcare coordinator would also be responsible for liaising with the local civilian childcare providers to help them better understand the needs of military families and the possible opportunities caring for military family might provide. Finally, the coordinator would be responsible for measuring and tracking the inventory of childcare in a local area as this information is crucial and not currently collected in an effective way to help DoD understand and plan regarding childcare capacity.
- **The DoD and other stakeholders can link child care resources to spouse employment resources such as including a possible tab on employment websites so that spouses looking for employment would have better visibility of child care options.** Regulations and requirements imposed by military installation childcare units (e.g., complicated waiting list policies and eligibility restrictions based on employment status) are an unintended barrier to accessing child care for the purposes of seeking employment or furthering one's education. A frequently cited child care challenge is that access to on-base child care is dependent on a spouse's employment status, yet spouses may be unable to obtain jobs or enroll in education programs without first having access to reliable child care.
- **Simplify on-base child care enrollment, increase capacity across military-certified providers including occasional care capacity, and increase career to child ratio in order to align with state laws where federal ratios are lower than those mandated by the state.** Nationally, military families spend an average of \$108 per week for DoD-subsidized civilian child care, which equates to 8.7% of the average military family's income. Civilian child care agencies and

providers that meet the quality requirements that enable military families to receive DoD subsidies could augment child care options on installations and expand access to child care for families who do not live near installations or where installation based child care has reached capacity.

Conclusion

Blue Star Families believes that military families are assets to both our national defense and local communities. They are central to the health and capability of the All-Volunteer Force and are good neighbors actively engaged in making their civilian communities great places to live. Service members may be employed by their respective services—but they work for all Americans. Thus the responsibility for supporting military families is certainly a duty of the Department of Defense; however, a healthy nation also shares in this responsibility. Our country can help support military families by learning more about the unique nature of military life and increasing civilian and military collaboration on a number of levels. We can do this by supporting a number of positive military lifestyle factors such as: the employment of military spouses; military child education and wellness; financial and retirement savings education; military childcare; local civilian community engagement; strong mental health; and veteran employment.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.