

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 1, 2024

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Reed and Ranking Member Wicker,

We write to affirm our shared commitment to the All-Volunteer Force, the foundation of America's national defense for the last five decades. Policies and programs established to support servicemembers and military families are no longer keeping pace with America's national security requirements or the needs of our sons and daughters who are essential to the common defense. We seek your partnership in addressing military quality of life deficiencies in the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

In response to these concerns, last year the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee charged us to examine these matters and recommend appropriate reforms. During the 118th Congress, the committee's bi-partisan Military Quality of Life Panel conducted a detailed inquiry which revealed an alarming erosion of military quality of life and the underlying programs that support it. Earlier this year, the panel published its findings highlighting the following concerns:¹

1. **Military Compensation.** Military pay and benefits have failed to keep pace with the rapid growth in inflation. Sudden and significant increases to the cost of living have outpaced annual military pay raises and triggered economic, food, and housing insecurity for servicemembers and military families, especially within the enlisted ranks. Furthermore, as local jurisdictions increase the minimum wage in response to prevailing economic conditions, competition for military recruits will continue to intensify. Illustrating this point, the state of California -- home to the largest concentration of military personnel in the Department of Defense -- recently raised the minimum wage for fast food workers to \$20 per hour, well above direct compensation for most junior enlisted servicemembers.²
2. **Housing Quality.** The panel revealed the effects of chronic underfunding and mismanagement of DoD's Facilities, Sustainment, Restoration and Modernization (FSRM) accounts. During the panel's first public hearing last fall, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) testified to the shocking disrepair of DoD's unaccompanied housing facilities which pose unacceptable health, safety, and readiness risks to servicemembers. Widespread deficiencies in unaccompanied housing documented by GAO include sewage overflows, mold, methane gas leaks, unsafe drinking water, inoperative heating and cooling, rodents and insect infestations, and worse.³
3. **Healthcare Access.** The panel similarly observed unacceptably long wait times for medical appointments, now cited as a leading reason for job dissatisfaction in the ranks. Surveys report that 40% of servicemembers and dependents indicate they have waited two months or longer to see a specialist, with acute shortages observed in overseas locations and for critical specialties like obstetrics and behavioral health.⁴

¹ House Armed Services Committee; *Report of the Military Quality of Life Panel*, April 8, 2024;

<https://armedservices.house.gov/improving-quality-life-servicemembers-and-their-families>

² <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2024/10/03/californias-20-fast-food-minimum-wage-is-a-win-win-win-research-says/>

³ Government Accountability Office Report: *Military Barracks: Poor Living Conditions Undermine Quality of Life and Readiness*, September 19, 2023; <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105797>

⁴ https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/BSF_MFLS_Comp_Report_Health-Care-Access-042424.pdf

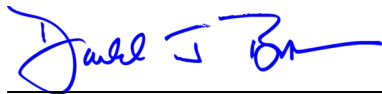
4. **Childcare Access.** The work of the panel also affirmed the importance of reliable access to affordable childcare as essential to readiness and retention, especially for single parents, dual military, and the growing proportion of dual income families in general. The nationwide shortage of childcare workers is particularly acute in the military, especially in high-cost and remote areas like San Diego, Hawaii and Alaska. The panel also observed that wait times for DoD Child Development Centers (CDCs) frequently exceed six months with staff vacancy rates at or exceeding 20% for the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force and Space Force.⁵
5. **Spouse Support.** Throughout this process, the panel conducted extensive outreach to military spouses from every service representing a variety of ranks, duty stations, and military occupations. Military spouses confront many unique challenges not shared by their civilian counterparts and these challenges expand exponentially with a decision to start a family and as the military member advances in rank and responsibility. Military spouse unemployment is currently estimated to be 21%, more than four times the national average and consistently among the highest of any cohort in the country.⁶ Frequent moves, isolated locations, and other bureaucratic obstacles make finding and keeping a job difficult for military spouses and is why one in five military families now cite spouse employment challenges as a primary reason they consider leaving military service.

Perhaps most concerning, the panel repeatedly heard first-hand how military families – traditionally a bedrock source of military recruiting – are less likely to recommend military service for their own children, predominantly due to quality of life concerns.⁷ This is an urgent indicator that we must promptly correct with meaningful results, not just supportive rhetoric.

To begin the work of reversing negative trends in military quality of life, the panel’s bi-partisan recommendations were adopted as the basis of H.R 8070, the Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025. Title XVIII of this Act includes the panel’s recommendations and passed the House of Representatives with a bi-partisan majority on June 14, 2024. It is disheartening to see that these recommendations were not included in the Senate-introduced version of the NDAA, S. 4638. On behalf of the brave men and women who serve our country, and the future of the All-Volunteer Force, we urge you to include these provisions in the final FY25 NDAA.

We are grateful for your steady leadership in these dangerous times and for the opportunity to partner with you to enact these needed reforms.

Sincerely,



Don Bacon
Chairman
Military Quality of Life Panel

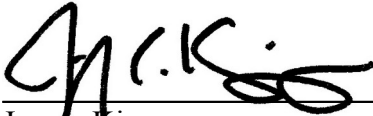


Chrissy Houlahan
Ranking Member
Military Quality of Life Panel

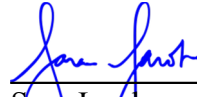
⁵ Department of Defense, *Child Care Briefing to the HASC Military Quality of Life Panel*, Nov 29. 2023.

⁶ Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics, *2021 Active Duty Spouse Survey (ADSS)*;
<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Presentations/2021-active-duty-spouse-overview-briefing.pdf>

⁷ "Fewer active-duty military families encourage young people to enlist," Federal News Network, March 19.2024;
<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/defense-main/2024/03/fewer-active-duty-military-families-encourage-young-people-to-enlist/>



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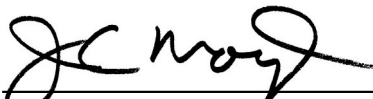
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