



February 1, 2021

Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor  
Honorable Don Harmon, President, Illinois Senate  
Honorable Emanuel Chris Welch, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives  
Honorable Dan McConchie, Minority Leader, Illinois Senate  
Honorable Jim Durkin, Minority Leader, Illinois House of Representatives  
Members of the Illinois General Assembly

Dear Illinois Leaders:

As retired admirals and generals, we are concerned that far too many young Illinoisans are ineligible to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, ultimately jeopardizing our national security. Three main limitations disqualify 70% of 17 to 24-year-old Illinoisans from military service: obesity, poor education, and criminal records. The COVID pandemic continues to exacerbate these challenges, which also pose barriers to young people's opportunities for success in many other areas. To better-protect our national security and improve the chance for youth to succeed in whatever career they choose, we must prioritize their physical, behavioral, and educational well-being from their earliest years. To this end, we respectfully request your support for the following policy priorities in FY2022:

1) **Concentrate more resources in the early years of children's lives**

Numerous studies show high-quality early learning programs that reach children from birth to age 5 can dramatically boost graduation rates, reduce childhood obesity, deter kids from crime, and lessen the likelihood they are held back in school. Recognizing these benefits, Governor Pritzker convened a bipartisan, statewide commission to develop a roadmap and plan for a fully resourced, equitable, and more efficient system of early childhood care and education in Illinois. We commend the work of the **Early Childhood Funding Commission** and are we're eager to engage with the Governor and the General Assembly to begin moving forward with its forthcoming recommendations. A parallel effort we support, the **Illinois PN3 Coalition**, has set an ambitious goal to expand high-quality services to thousands more low-income infants, toddlers and their families by 2025. The policy priorities below incorporate some of the interim steps required to move Illinois towards achieving these goals:

- **Improve voluntary preschool and birth-to-3 opportunities by increasing the Early Childhood Block Grant in the Illinois State Board of Education budget by an additional \$50 million in FY22.** High-quality preschool and birth-to-3 programs can help prevent childhood obesity, boost graduation rates, and reduce the likelihood children are held back in school. An additional investment in this grant would allow the state to continue improving the quality of this program and make progress towards providing voluntary access to a quality preschool program for all 3- and 4-year-olds, with a priority on the most at-risk children.
- **Strengthen home-visiting programs in the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) FY22 budget, by appropriating at least \$20.9 million for Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon.** Voluntary home-visiting provides "coaching" for new parents of very young,

Illinois Office: 70 E Lake St Suite 1116 Chicago, IL 60601

at-risk children. These programs are among the most effective strategies for reducing exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences and helping children to be successful later in life. This \$4 million budget increase would put Illinois on a trajectory to reach the PN3 Coalition’s goal of reaching an additional 15,000 children and families by 2025. *We also urge passage of HB 354 to expand the Illinois Medicaid program to include coverage for home-visiting services.*

- **Maintain state general revenue fund support for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) at least at \$431 million in FY22.** The child care sector has been hammered as much as any other sector of the economy by the pandemic. Almost all child care programs were forced to shut down in March 2020 before being allowed to reopen with a number of restrictions months later. As we look towards a full reopening of the economy, rebuilding our child care system has to be a top priority so that parents can return to work. Illinois has implemented a number of initiatives to assist child care programs in weathering the COVID storm, but the need for continued, enhanced assistance will remain for the foreseeable future.

**2) Maintain physical fitness and physical education as a state priority in grades K-12.**

High-quality physical education (PE) in schools is critical to maintaining a healthy body weight and ensuring that young people will be mission-ready for the military, or whatever future career they may choose. Research shows that high-quality PE can also help students learn in the classroom. In 2017, Illinois relaxed schools’ daily PE requirement to three days per week. We strongly encourage our state leaders to strengthen PE policies as soon as possible while schools continue to re-open to meet CDC recommendations of 150 minutes per week in elementary school and 225 minutes per week in secondary school.

The decisions we make now will have a profound impact on the future of Illinois’ youth and our national security. Our state will need to do its part to ensure that children reach adulthood academically prepared, physically fit, and mission-ready.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these priorities with you at your earliest convenience. Please contact Tim Carpenter from our staff to make arrangements. He can be reached at [tcarpenter@missionreadiness.org](mailto:tcarpenter@missionreadiness.org) or 312-339-0583.

Respectfully submitted,

**Lieutenant General Randall L. Rigby**  
U.S. Army, Ret., *Lake Barrington*

**Vice Admiral Nancy Brown**  
U.S. Navy, Ret., *Pittsburg*

**Major General William L. Enyart**  
U.S. Army, Ret., *Belleville*

**Major General James Milano**  
U.S. Army, Ret., *Geneva*

**Major General Johnny Miller**  
U.S. Army, Ret., *Tamms*

**Major General James Mukoyama**  
U.S. Army, Ret., *Glenview*

**Major General William Cobetto**  
U.S. Air Force, Ret., *Hillsboro*

**Brigadier General William Austin**  
U.S. Army, Ret., *Effingham*

**Brigadier General Stephen Curda**  
U.S. Army, Ret., *Chicago*

**Brigadier General Roger Machut**  
U.S. Marine Corps, Ret., *Schaumburg*

**Brigadier General Avrum Mark Rabin**  
U.S. Air Force, Ret., *Springfield*

**Brigadier General James Schroeder**  
U.S. Air Force, Ret., *Geneva*

**Brigadier General John “Jay” Sheedy**  
U.S. Air Force, Ret., *Pawnee*