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

New report outlines “lessons learned” from military as PA policymakers look to scale up state’s child care system to better support families returning to work

Harrisburg, PA (June 17, 2021) Retired military leaders and child care experts gathered virtually on Thursday to release a new report from the national security organization Mission: Readiness. The new report documents how, a generation ago, the military overhauled and upgraded its child care system – viewing such investments as vital workforce support for military families. The report urges Pennsylvania policymakers to look to the military’s example on how best to scale up the state’s child care system to better support families returning to work. Participants also outlined a slate of recommendations on how best to utilize the substantial increases in federal child care funding through the American Rescue Plan to strengthen the commonwealth’s child care system and ensure more affordable access to high-quality care for working families.

The report recalls how in the 1980’s, the changing composition of the force to include more personnel with families, families with all parents working, and women made child care a workforce issue for the military. The existing child care system for military families at the time was marred with long waiting lists, serious deficiencies in quality, low pay and qualifications for teachers and staff, as well as child abuse allegations. It was obvious to military leaders at the time that, with the changing face of the military, the problems associated with a low-quality child care system would negatively affect recruitment and retention of troops.

In response, Congress passed the Military Child Care Act in 1989, which stimulated and invested in much-needed reforms that led to the current high-quality system that is often cited by experts as a “model for the nation.” Today, military child care providers are expected and supported to meet Department of Defense health and safety certifications and national accreditation standards. Additionally, a career ladder that links wages to training and improved competencies for teachers and staff has drastically reduced turnover and is considered a key factor in the quality and stability of the care given to children. The military continuously assesses the need for child care and develops long-range plans to expand capacity. Public subsidies and private fees charged on a sliding scale put quality child care within reach of all active-duty military families.

“The military has fully embraced child care as a quality-of-life benefit for its families. It supports mission readiness, morale, and retention,” said Lieutenant General (Ret.) Dennis Benchoff of Lancaster. “Pennsylvania’s working families are deserving of a similar high-quality child care system.”

Linda Smith, a principal architect of the Military Child Care System, now serving as the Director of the Early Childhood Initiative at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, DC, urged state policymakers to follow the military’s example by:

- Developing a long-range plan that addresses the child care needs of PA’s working families and the needs of providers;
- Ensuring that high-quality care is affordable and accessible for all working families;
- Further incentivizing child care providers to meet high-quality standards; and
- Investing in the child care workforce by increasing compensation tied to demonstration of competencies.

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

Participants noted that Pennsylvania’s child care system is facing some of the same types of challenges that the military system was facing around quality, access, affordability and workforce. According to the report, only 42 percent of Pennsylvania’s child care capacity meets quality standards, 57 percent of Pennsylvanians live in child care deserts, and the average cost of care is unaffordable for many working families. These problems are now compounded by the fact that the pandemic forced more than 600 Pennsylvania child care providers to close permanently and many cannot fully reopen due to their own staffing shortages.

Jen DeBell, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children urged state lawmakers to act now as part of the state budget process to utilize a portion of the new federal child care funding through the American Rescue Plan to strengthen the system and expand affordable access to high-quality care. Specifically she recommended:

- Expanding high-quality contracted slots for 3,000 more infants and toddlers;
- Advertising the Commonwealth’s subsidized child care program and ensuring that no family waits for services;
- Eliminating co-pays for families receiving subsidized care and ensuring child care providers are reimbursed for this lost revenue;
- Providing additional payment to subsidized providers to help recruit and retain staff; and
- Paying subsidized child care providers based on enrollment and not attendance, and apply this retroactively to providers who have suffered losses during the pandemic.

Debell also urged lawmakers to commission a workgroup composed of the four Appropriations Committee Chairs of the General Assembly and a representative of the Governor’s Office to develop a longer-range plan to address the child care needs of the commonwealth’s working families and the needs of providers in utilizing the remainder of the federal stimulus funding.

Rear Admiral (Ret.) Tom Wilson of Biglerville noted that as businesses seek to rehire their labor force and individuals look to return to work, the availability and affordability of quality child care is, once again, a concern for many working families and businesses. Wilson also emphasized that high-quality child care is not only important as a workforce support, but also as a child development investment as brain development from birth to age 5 sets the foundation for children’s future success.

“High-quality child care is an essential support of today’s working families and a critical investment in the future success of our children,” said Wilson.

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