

January 11, 2023

Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor
Honorable Don Harmon, President, Illinois Senate
Honorable Emanuel Chris Welch, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable John Curran, Minority Leader, Illinois Senate
Honorable Tony McCombie, Minority Leader, Illinois House of Representatives
Members of the Illinois General Assembly

Dear Illinois Leaders:

As retired admirals and generals, we are deeply concerned that a shocking number of young Illinoisans are ineligible to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, jeopardizing our national security. Earlier this year, the U. S. Department of Defense updated its data, stating that **77% of youth nationwide, aged 17- to 24-years-old, do not qualify for military service.** This is an increase of six percentage points from the previous such statistic, and it is expected that Illinois youth – who were previously at 70% ineligible – unfortunately reflect this upward trend. Obesity, drug abuse, having a criminal record, and poor education are all contributing factors that lead to youth lacking the option to pursue military service if they wish. To better-protect our national security, address the needs of our families, and improve the chance for youth to thrive in whatever career they choose, we must prioritize their physical, behavioral, and educational well-being from their earliest years.

In order to help our state's children succeed in life, the retired military leaders of **Mission: Readiness, Illinois, strongly support an increase of at least 20% in funding for critical early childhood programs for Fiscal Year 2024, and urge you to do the same.**

Numerous research studies show that high-quality programs for children from birth to age 5 significantly increase graduation rates, reduce childhood obesity, deter kids from crime, and lessen the likelihood that they are held back in school. A funding increase of at least 20% to early childhood programs would improve both the quality and access of these services, helping children from their earliest years. It would also be a step towards furthering the objectives of the state's bipartisan Early Childhood Funding Commission, and the recommendations it released in the spring of 2021. These recommendations include creating a new funding model, increasing resources, and consolidating administration of early childhood programs into one state agency.

Therefore, we respectfully request your support for the following policy priorities in the coming year:

- **Improve voluntary preschool and birth-to-3 opportunities by increasing the Early Childhood Block Grant in the Illinois State Board of Education budget by at least an additional \$119.6 million.** This would allow the state to continue to improve the quality of these programs, by increasing compensation for underpaid teachers and support staff. It would also accommodate further expansion of access to quality preschool programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents want it, maintaining priority on the most at-risk children.
- **Strengthen home-visiting programs in the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS)**

budget, through an increase of at least an additional \$3.6 million for Healthy Families Illinois and Maternal Child Home Visiting. Voluntary home-visiting provides “coaching” for new parents of very young, at-risk children. These programs are an extremely effective strategy for reducing exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and helping children to be successful later in life. One funding source for strengthening home visiting would be the resources coming to Illinois from settlements of lawsuits against pharmaceutical manufacturers and opioid distributors. Because reducing ACEs lessens the likelihood that children will later abuse drugs themselves, using some of the settlement money in this way would both help our youngest affected by the opioid crisis and address one of the issues contributing to military ineligibility.

- **Increase state general revenue fund support for the IDHS Child Care Assistance Program by at least an additional \$82.1 million.** The child care sector has been dealt a harsh blow by the pandemic. More funding would allow for increasing both compensation for child care professionals and families’ access to services that are vital to our economy. Rebuilding our child care system must be a top priority for our state, just as such services are a priority for our U.S. military.
- **Invest in IDHS’ Early Intervention programs, through an increase of at least an additional \$23.2 million.** These programs are crucial for helping children from birth to age 3 receive much-needed assistance to address developmental disabilities or delays. Like other programs in the early childhood sector, an increase in funding could be used towards increased compensation, thereby improving quality, service providers’ caseloads, and families’ access. As with home-visiting services, opioid-settlement proceeds are one appropriate source of funding for bolstering EI, considering these services often reach children born exposed to opioids.

Illinois’ economy, families’ livelihoods, and our national security are on the line with these budgetary decisions. Investing in and prioritizing early childhood programs is an effective way to address our challenges, help children succeed in whatever path they choose later in life, and make Illinois the best state to raise a family.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these priorities with you. Please contact Shea Felde from our staff to make arrangements. She can be reached at sfelde@missionreadiness.org or (630) 730-7389.

Respectfully submitted,

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