

March 19, 2024

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 the retired admirals and generals of Mission: Readiness Illinois, we are deeply concerned that a shockingly high number of young Illinoisans are ineligible to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, jeopardizing our national security.

Last spring, Mission: Readiness Illinois was provided the opportunity to share updated data from the U. S. Department of Defense with the Illinois House Veterans Affairs Committee: Unfortunately, **77% of youth nationwide, aged 17 to 24 years old, do not qualify for military service**, which represents an increase of six percentage points from the previous such statistic. Obesity, drug abuse, having a criminal record, and poor education are all among the contributing factors that lead to youth lacking the option to pursue military service if they wish. Numerous research studies indicate answers to this challenge, showing 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.

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.

Increasing funding to the following early childhood programs would improve the quality, access, and equity of these services, helping children from their earliest years. It would also build off the momentum of Smart Start's first year of successes, which in turn act to further the objectives of the state's bipartisan Early Childhood Funding Commission's recommendations released in spring of 2021. We celebrate the work that Smart Start has accomplished thus far and are eager to continue to advance those efforts.

Therefore, our nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of retired military leaders respectfully requests 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 (ISBE) budget by at least an additional \$75 million.** *This aligns with the FY25 recommendations from the Governor and ISBE.* This would allow the state to continue to improve the quality and stability 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 more 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents want it, maintaining priority on the most at-risk children, with an additional 5,000 slots.
- **Strengthen home-visiting programs in the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) budget, through an increase of at least an additional \$5 million for Healthy Families Illinois and Maternal Child Home Visiting.** *This aligns with the Governor's FY25 recommendations.* 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. Research shows that reducing ACEs lessens the likelihood that children will later abuse drugs, one of the factors disqualifying such a large percentage of youth from military service.

- **Increase support for child care services in the DHS budget by at least an additional \$158.5 million.** *This aligns with the Governor's FY25 recommendations.* Of this total, an increase of \$36.5 million for the Child Care Assistance Program would allow for expanding the program's services to more families in need. The other \$122 million would strengthen Smart Start Workforce Compensation grants. Both are much-needed as the state continues to rebuild our child care system following the lasting impact of the pandemic. Expanding and investing in these high-quality child care services, and the professionals providing said services, must be a top priority for our state, just as it is a priority for our U.S. military.
- **Invest in IDHS' Early Intervention programs, through an increase of at least an additional \$40 million.** *This request is \$34 million more than the Governor's FY25 budget proposal.* These programs are crucial for helping children from birth to age 3 receive greatly 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.

We would also like to note our **support for the work being done to create the Department of Early Childhood and the \$13 million in funding for FY25 proposed by the Governor's office for the first year to actualize this proposal (HB5451/SB1).** Streamlining the programs' administration under a single agency — from the current three — will help our state's youngest and their families by creating a more efficient, equitable, and accessible system.

Finally, we are greatly interested in the health of our state's children. A large part of that is making sure that all children have access to nutritious meals. Last May, the General Assembly passed the Healthy Meals for All bill, which was signed into law in August 2023. This law supports Illinois schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to any student who wants and needs it. **We support Illinois Alliance to Promote Opportunities for Health's (IAPOH) aim of moving towards the full-funding goal of \$209 million to actualize the goal of Healthy Meals for All (HB4785/SB3247).**

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 and help children succeed in whatever path they choose later in life.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these priorities with you. Please contact Sean Noble from our staff to make arrangements. He can be reached at snoble@missionreadiness.org or (312) 288-8229.

Respectfully submitted,

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