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## **Retired Military Leaders Urge Prioritization of Early Care & Education to Ensure U.S. Defense Readiness**

*New report: High-quality child care can help address the problems that disqualify 70% of young Illinoisans from military service*

**Springfield, IL** — A group of retired U.S. Army and Air Force leaders gathered at the Illinois capitol Wednesday to release [a new report](#) focusing on a major challenge to American military readiness – and the ways that good child care and early learning programs can help.

“In our state, 70 percent of young adults between the ages of 17 and 24 do not qualify for military service, primarily because of educational shortcomings, physical health, or a record of crime or drug abuse,” said Major Gen. William Enyart, U.S. Army (Retired). “This is a startling challenge to our national security – and demands our urgent attention.”

“High-quality child care programs can help us get ahead of these problems, as our report shows,” said Major Gen. Randal Thomas, U.S. Army (Retired). “The research is clear: Strong early childhood programs can lay the foundation for successful learning, encourage children to live active and healthy lives, and instill good social skills that prevent later behavioral issues. And all of these, in turn, represent the foundation for building a strong, volunteer military.”

Generals Thomas and Enyart are members of Mission: Readiness, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of retired military leaders who support wise investments in children and youth as a proven strategy for improving national security.

Joining them Wednesday was Brigadier Gen. John Sheedy, U.S. Air Force (Retired). Together, they urged Illinois policymakers to prioritize resources for early care and education in the FY2019 state budget.

The new Mission: Readiness report, entitled [Child Care and National Security](#), highlights research showing that high-quality child care programs can support children’s success – and our future military readiness – in three categories:

- 1) **Education:** A long-term study of more than 1,300 children found that kids in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 than their counterparts in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.
- 2) **Physical health:** Obesity risk is shaped in the early years of life. Children who are overweight or obese in early childhood – which is the case for 20 percent of kids in the U.S. – are four times more likely than their peers to become overweight or obese adults. Child care that emphasizes healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children’s risk of obesity.

3) Behavior: The previously cited longitudinal study found that children in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15, compared with those in lower-quality child care.

Yet, despite the benefits of high-quality child care, the new report also shows that many Illinois families struggle to find affordable quality care. In fact, the average annual cost of center-based child care for infants in Illinois exceeds the cost of in-state college tuition.

For these reasons, the retired military leaders urged state legislators to protect and strengthen funding for early care and education, particularly the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). This critical program ensures that struggling families have access to high-quality child care when parents are working or attending school.

Last year, Illinois policymakers restored two sizeable cuts in eligibility for state-assisted child care for low-income, working families. These cuts had been made in 2015, and dropped program enrollment by as many as 50,000 kids, at first; caseloads still remain about 30,000 children shy of their previous levels, underscoring the need to protect program resources in order to extend services to more working families who still lack them.

The U.S. Department of Defense itself supports a Military Child Development Program whose services are credited by experts as providing a model for the nation. At military installations around the world, about 200,000 children of U.S. servicemen and women are growing and learning in high-quality early care and education settings.

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*Mission: Readiness is a nonpartisan organization of more than 700 retired admirals and generals, strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble. It is part of the nonprofit Council for a Strong America.*