

# The proud story of military child care

## An Exchange Trend Report

based on an interview with Barbara Thompson by Roger Neugebauer

To learn about trends in military child care in the United States, *Exchange* interviewed Barbara Thompson, the Director of the Office of Family Policy / Children and Youth in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

### **Exchange: When did the military get into the business of providing child care? Who got the ball rolling and where?**

**Thompson:** In the early '70s, child care became an official Department of Defense (DoD) function. Prior to that, care was offered at installation drop-in 'nurseries' operated by private organizations to provide hourly care for volunteers and during social events such as teas and luncheons. The nurseries received little, if any, financial or logistical support from the installation. Low parent fees were the primary source of funding. Many 'nurseries' were located in converted stables, quonset huts, basements, and attics. The need for child care as a workforce issue paralleled the change to the all-volunteer force and more women serving in the Armed Forces.

In 1988, a series of Congressional hearings were held on military child care programs. The hearings led to the enactment of the Military Child Care Act (MCCA) of 1989. The MCCA had a far-reaching impact on military child care and the early childhood profession. For example, early childhood professionals had been struggling

with the issue of low pay of child care workers. Military caregivers, like their civilian private-sector counterparts, received minimum wage and few benefits. They left child care jobs as soon as they could, with overseas areas having as high as 300% annual turnover.

The MCCA tasked DoD to test the effects of improved caregiver wages tied to successful training and performance. The test was successful and led to DoD becoming the leader in child care compensation.

In 1992, the House Armed Services Committee stated in the Congressional Record its goal that military child care be on the "leading edge of child care in America."

### **Exchange: Who is eligible to make use of military child care? Is it free or do users pay part or all of the cost?**

**Thompson:** DoD considers child care a workforce issue as it impacts the effectiveness and readiness of the force. Availability and affordability of child care is a real-time quality of life issue for service members. Eligible patrons include active duty and reserve component military personnel, DoD civilian personnel, wounded warriors, surviving spouses, those acting *in loco parentis*, and DoD contractors.



TOP PHOTO: THE MILITARY CHILD CARE LIAISONS AND THEIR PROGRAM MANAGER.

BOTTOM PHOTO: BARBARA THOMPSON, DR. JOAN LOMBARDI, AND LINDA SMITH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NACCRRRA



MCCA established policy that requires DoD to ensure appropriated funds available to centers are at least equal to the amount generated in parent fees. Parent fees for child care are based on total family income, not the age of the child. Fees paid by parents to child development centers and school-age care programs are called nonappropriated funds and are primarily used to pay wages of personnel (caregivers) who care directly for children. All other expenses, including some caregiver wages, are paid by appropriated funds. These funds go directly to the program to support training, administration, equipment, supplies maintenance/repair, and food service. Construction of new centers is paid from military construction (MILCON) funds — also appropriated funds.

Child care fee ranges are set annually by the Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) for all military CDCs. Installations are given nine income categories and corresponding fee ranges, which are used to determine their local fees. The average weekly fee paid by parents for child care in a military center in 2010 was \$102 per child per week. Fees range from a low end of \$44 to a high end of \$137 per week for the school year 2010-2011.

### **Exchange: Military Child Development Programs have attained a well-deserved**

reputation for being on the cutting edge of child care in America. How has DoD accomplished this?

**Thompson:** DoD is proud of our systematic approach to provide a quality experience for children. Several key reasons for our success include:

- **Wages and benefits that contribute to low staff turnover compared to the private sector.** Military child development center caregiver wages and benefits average approximately \$12 per hour compared to the minimum wages in the civilian community. While most civilian child care centers offer few or no benefits to direct care staff, most military child development staff have a full range of benefits. As a result, staff turnover has decreased dramatically, and the result is that children have the continuity of care so vital to their healthy development.
- **Required basic training of caregiving staff that is tied to wages and an 'up-or-out' caregiving personnel policy.** All training is competency-based and caregivers who do not meet the performance requirements are not retained. Our management staff, which include child development center directors, family child care directors, and other program directors, are required to have a bachelor's degree or equivalent. In lieu of degreed teachers in every classroom, each military Child Development Program has a professional early childhood educator called a Training and Curriculum (T&C) Specialist. The T&C Specialists provide training to staff and providers. The T&C Specialists also develop curriculum, model developmentally appropriate practices, and coach staff while they are learning to implement good caregiving techniques. Additionally, they assist caregivers working toward the nationally recognized Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.

- **Commitment for all military child development centers to meet national accreditation standards.** The combination of the DoD certification and the national accreditation standards provides a comprehensive review of all center programs. In the 1996 Defense Authorization Act, Congress codified the MCCA, and required that all programs meet the standards of accreditation. Currently 98% of the eligible DoD child development centers are nationally accredited and the remainder are going through the accreditation process, compared to 8% of civilian child care centers in the United States.

**Exchange: How many military child care centers are there today? How many children are served?**

**Thompson:** DoD has the largest employee-sponsored child care program in the country serving over 200,000 children (birth to 12 years of age) daily. DoD offers full-day, part-day, and hourly care; before- and after-school programs; and extended hour care for nights, weekends, and shift work. Generally military parents are young, often far from home, and without the support of families and neighbors. Child care for infants and toddlers is hard to find and expensive. Because over 60% of military spouses are in the work force, quality, affordable child care is an economic necessity and a quality of life issue for military families. By providing child care we help military families balance the competing demands of the family, accomplish the military mission, and improve the economic viability of the family. We have over 900 centers and 5,500 Family Child Care homes. These programs are located in the United States and overseas.

**Exchange: What types of services are provided by DoD?**

**Thompson:** DoD provides a wide range of services for children and families:

- **Child Development Centers** at over 300 locations provide child care for children 6 weeks to 12 years of age. Most child care facilities operate between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 6:30 p.m., Monday-Friday, depending on the mission of the respective installation.
- **Family Child Care (FCC)** programs consist of in-home care provided by certified providers living in government-owned or leased housing. Families rely upon FCC to provide flexible child care to include night, weekend, and unusual hourly care such as shift work. FCC provides approximately 17% of the DoD child care capacity.

*At the 1997 White House Conference on Early Childhood Development, President Clinton stated: "The Military Child Development Programs have attained a reputation for an abiding commitment to quality in the delivery of child care. The Department of Defense's dedication to adequate funding, strict oversight, improved training and wage packages, strong family child care networks, and commitment to meeting national accreditation standards is laudatory. I believe that the military has important lessons to share with the rest of the nation on how to improve the quality of child care for all our nation's children."*

- **School-Age Care (SAC) Programs** are offered for children (ages kindergarten to 12 years) before and/or after school and during holidays and summer vacations. DoD policies encourage the use of youth centers and other suitable facilities for SAC, rather than using child development center space. Partnerships have also been estab-

lished with local elementary schools to operate SAC programs.

- **Resource and Referral (R&R) Programs** for on-base programs are available at most military bases. Many offer referrals to child care in the local community. Since it is impossible to meet 100% of the need on the installation, R&R services are critical to our ability to refer families to quality, affordable child care off the base when care is unavailable on base.

*Dr. Shirlee Sveska, principal investigator of the GAO study on military child care, observed: "Military child care has undergone extraordinary changes over the last 15 years. I believe we have witnessed here a fundamental revision of attitudes about the community's responsibility for children. We have seen with this experience that widespread change and large-scale action is possible in a relatively short period of time when there is informed and committed leadership willing and ready to invest resources to make a difference in the lives of children."*

- **Child and Youth Behavior Military Family Life Consultants.** The Military and Family Life Consultant (MFLC) Program utilizes Child and Youth (CYB)-MFLCs to support faculty, staff, parents, and children in a variety of settings. CYB-MFLCs possess a master's or PhD in a mental health-related field and are licensed or certified by a state or territory to practice independently. They provide non-medical counseling support to children and adolescents up to age 18, with parental consent, on topics such as identifying feelings, problem solving, bullying, conflict resolution, self-esteem, coping with

deployment and reunification, and managing anger. CYB-MFLCs also provide consultation, training, and educational presentations/workshops to program faculty, staff, parents, and children.

- **Specialty Programs for Infants and Toddlers.** The Department recognizes the importance of high-quality early care and education. Extensive research conducted over the past 20 years has clearly demonstrated strong positive relationships between a variety of quality measures and various dimensions of children's development and well being. The military's holistic and systemic approach to meeting the child care needs of military families, especially those with very young children, is considered to be a model for state and local agencies.

- **Baby Signs®.** In 2007, the DoD enthusiastically embraced the Baby Signs® Program at selected pilot sites across the Department of Defense. Focusing on language and cognitive skills, the program gives infants and toddlers a way to communicate before they can express themselves verbally by providing them with the signs they can use most easily to communicate their needs, thoughts, and feelings. The training formally introduced DoD trainers to the Baby Signs® Program and allowed them to brainstorm ways to successfully implement the program and provided educational resources and support materials to staff and parents.

**Exchange: Who monitors the quality of military centers?**

**Thompson:** DoD believes that the quality of military programs is directly linked to strict oversight and adherence to standards. DoD has one of the most stringent inspection processes in the nation. All programs, including centers, school-age care programs, and family child care (FCC), receive comparable inspections,

personnel background checks, and training. Oversight includes four comprehensive unannounced annual inspections for all facilities and programs; one by a representative of higher headquarters. One component of the inspection process includes surveying parents to ensure customer satisfaction. There is a mandatory correction of deficiencies within 90 days or the program must either apply for a time-restricted waiver with adequate compensatory measures or close. (As a result, facilities and programs are in good repair, and there is high-quality, institutional grade equipment that contributes to the cognitive development of children.) These inspections result in DoD certification of the program that is closely monitored. Contributing to comprehensive program oversight is the DoD Hotline, a well publicized and accessible world-wide medium. Identified or anonymous callers can report either child abuse or safety violations at Military Child Development Programs or facility deficiencies. These reports are diligently tracked until a satisfactory response is completed.

**Exchange: What does the future hold? What new initiatives are being instituted?**

**Thompson:** In 2001, the House Subcommittee on Military Construction directed DoD to develop a plan to provide 28,000 new child care spaces through construction. The Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) tasked each Military Service to designate a representative to participate on a DoD task force to develop a child care plan to expand the availability of high-quality, affordable child care to meet the needs of the Department's families.

The DoD Military Community & Family Policy has developed an initiative to expand child care capacity for Reserve Component families, geographically dispersed active duty military families, and active duty families who are unable to access child care programs on the installa-

tion. This Child Care Expansion initiative is designed to improve quality child care programs by increasing the quality of civilian programs. DoD and state representatives will work in partnership to increase awareness of quality indicators for creating and maintaining safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate learning environments for children. The initiative will strive to improve the communication between various partners and agencies across the federal government and within the states to ensure limited resources are used effectively.

The Child Care Expansion initiative will initially be piloted in select locations within 13 states. The states were identified through an analysis of multiple factors that included a strong Joint Family Support Assistance Team (JFSAP), an active network of community partners, high mobilization and deployment rates, demographic data of military families with children residing in concentrated areas, and interest in improving the quality of child care at the state level. The pilot states are Alaska, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Vermont, and Washington.

Each pilot state will be provided a Child Care Liaison who will serve as the initiative's single point of contact within the state. Child Care Liaisons, with the exception of Alaska, will maintain an office in the state capital. The Liaison will connect to the regional Defense State Liaison Office (DSLO). Each Liaison will work to assist in developing state-specific strategies that recognize the unique challenges and assets of the state and local communities. With assistance from HHS, the liaison will interface with the State Advisory Councils designated or established by the Governor. In addition, the Child Care Liaison will coordinate efforts of state and local officials, installations, and community partners, and work with the State government on Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) related issues.

One component of this initiative is the Effectiveness Rating and Improvement System (ERIS). DoD identified the key child care standards that directly relate to a quality assessment instrument. The ERIS can be used to evaluate child care facility-based programs (for children ages birth to 12 years) in the community. ERIS standards represent practices that support organizational performance and positive service delivery outcomes. The ERIS is based on the research of Dr. Richard Fiene (affiliated with Penn State Harrisburg School of Behavioral Sciences and Education), widely recognized standards and models of excellence, and national best practices. These standards have been developed through formally gathered information, use of expert panels and advisory work groups, informal discussion with human service organizations, review of current published research and professional literature, and utilization of existing DoD policies and internal certification processes. ERIS standards provide realistic recommendations for community providers to achieve a high level of quality child care. DoD is working with a number of federal partners, including the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and USDA, who play a key role in developing strategies and implementation guidelines. In addition, analysis is ongoing of state licensing standards and lack of oversight congruity with DoD sub-

sidy programs in pilot states. This will guide efforts to provide training and technical assistance to programs serving military families in designated areas.

Helen Blank, Director, Child Care Division, Department of Programs and Policy, Children's Defense Fund, says: "Most of my speeches refer to the military child care system as a model that should be emulated in every state in this country. I believe that their child care system — which not only recognizes that children need good care, but also that such care cannot be provided without a sound structure that recognizes that the skills and compensation of a child's caregiver is central to their development — should be replicated and funded in every state. The military not only focuses on ensuring that child care is available and affordable to its families, but also ensures that each child will get a supportive and nurturing child care experience. It is fortunate for military families, but unfortunate for civilians, that the best chance a family has to be guaranteed of affordable and high-quality care in this country is to join the military."

*Special thanks to  
Dr. Kimberly Moore,  
early childhood advocate and consultant,  
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members for this cover shoot.*

## Recent Reports on Military Child Care

National Women's Law Center, Be All That We Can Be 2000:

[www.nwlc.org/resource/be-all-we-can-be-lesson-military-improving-our-nations-child-care-system](http://www.nwlc.org/resource/be-all-we-can-be-lesson-military-improving-our-nations-child-care-system)

National Women's Law Center, Be All That We Can Be 2004:

[www.nwlc.org/resource/be-all-we-can-be-lessons-military-improving-our-nations-child-care-system-2004-follow](http://www.nwlc.org/resource/be-all-we-can-be-lessons-military-improving-our-nations-child-care-system-2004-follow)

NARA 2008 Child Care Licensing Study:

<http://naralicensing.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=205>

NARA — Call to Action:

[www.naralicensing.org/associations/4734/files/NARA\\_Call\\_to\\_Action.pdf](http://www.naralicensing.org/associations/4734/files/NARA_Call_to_Action.pdf)