

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 6, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

We write regarding the Department of Defense's (DoD's) child care program,¹ which provides high-quality care for tens of thousands of service members' children in the United States and abroad.² Families need safe, reliable, and affordable child care so parents can go to work or school, and children can receive the long-term benefits of early education. Military families are no exception, and indeed face unique challenges finding care due to non-standard work hours, sudden relocations, and long deployments. But if they cannot find child care, they may not be able to serve, harming military readiness and national security. We write to you today to commend you on your commitment to invest in child care, and to urge you to expand on this work to ensure all of the nations' military families have access to the affordable, high-quality care they need.³

Two-thirds of active duty military families – serving both at home and abroad – have children living at home.⁴ Without care for these children, service members' spouses may need to cut hours or stay home to care for their children. Many service members would struggle themselves to fulfill their everyday duties, like completing drills or other activities at night or on weekends, or reporting to a new post, and many would leave the service entirely⁵ – a consequence that the military cannot afford, particularly during this period of low recruitment and retention.⁶

¹ Government Accountability Office, "Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families," February 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf>

² Military One Source, "Military Child Care Programs," <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/benefits/military-child-care-programs/#:~:text=Requesting%20child%20care.age%20care%20programs%20outlined%20above>

³ *Id.* p. 22.

⁴ Government Accountability Office, "Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families," February 2023, p. 16, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf>

⁵ *Id.*, p. 19; RAND, "Examining Child Care Need Among Military Families," Susan M. Gates, Gail L. Zellman, Joy S. Moyni, p. xii, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2006/RAND_TR279.pdf

⁶ NBC News, "Every branch of the military is struggling to make its 2022 recruiting goals, officials say," Courtney Kube and Molly Boigon, June 27, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/every-branch-us-military-struggling-meet-2022-recruiting-goals-officia-rcna35078>

Recognizing that child care is so essential to military readiness, DoD has invested in high-quality child care and early learning for decades with bipartisan support in Congress.⁷ Today, DoD’s child care program is the largest employer-based child care system in the country and “widely considered among the best such programs in the country,”⁸ serving over 100,000 military children.⁹ DoD runs on-base Child Development Centers (CDCs) for children five years or younger, School-Age Care (SAC) for children 6-12 years old, and in-home Family Child Care (FCC).¹⁰

Without DoD’s investments in child care, military families would face astronomical child care costs – if they could find child care at all. While the DoD currently provides quality care with costs on a sliding scale, ranging between \$3,000 and \$8,400 per year in 2019,¹¹ national average costs for civilian child care run over \$10,000 per year¹², or about 14% of the median family income¹³ and double the 7% that is considered affordable.¹⁴ And that is for the families lucky enough to find a slot – over half of all American families live in neighborhoods classified as child care deserts, where there are simply not enough providers to meet demand.¹⁵ Therefore, it is no wonder military families rely on the DoD child care program.

But even with the program’s successes, there are improvements DoD can and should make. Many military families, especially those with junior service members, still report difficulties finding affordable care.¹⁶ The DoD says these challenges stem from supply constraints, such as difficulty finding space for children and staff shortages.¹⁷ Reports suggest that waiting lists for some CDCs, the most popular choice for military families, are six to seven months long,¹⁸ requiring families to turn to civilian-based partners, which are often more

⁷ New York Times, “Lessons on Child Care, From the Military,” Alisha Haridasani Gupta, August 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/child-care-lessons-the-military.html> Congressional Research Service, “FY2023 NDAA: Military Child Care Programs,” January 17, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11998/4>

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families,” February 2023, p. 1, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf>

¹⁰ *Id.*, p. 9.

¹¹ New York Times, “Lessons on Child Care, From the Military,” Alisha Haridasani Gupta, August 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/child-care-lessons-the-military.html>

¹² ChildCare Aware, “Catalyzing Growth: Using Data to Change Child Care,” 2022, <https://www.childcareaware.org/catalyzing-growth-using-data-to-change-child-care-2022/#LandscapeAnalysis>.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, “Income in the United States: 2021,” Jessica Semega and Melissa Kollar, September 13, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2022/demo/p60-276.html>

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, “Child Care and Development Fund Final Rule Frequently Asked Questions,” 2016, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/faq/child-care-and-development-fund-final-rule-frequently-asked-questions>

¹⁵ U.S. News, “‘Desperation’: Child Care Struggle Worsens in Rural U.S.,” Claire Rush, October 12, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2022-10-12/desperation-child-care-struggle-worsens-in-rural-u-s> Center for American Progress, “America’s Child Care Deserts in 2018,” Rasheed Malik, Katie Hamm, and Leila Schochet, December 6, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/americas-child-care-deserts-2018/>

¹⁶ Government Accountability Office, “Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families,” February 2023, p. 20, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf>

¹⁷ *Id.*, p. 21-22.

¹⁸ *Id.*, p. 21.

expensive, farther away,¹⁹ and have far weaker inspection standards than on-base care.²⁰ Today, because more than 11,000 children are on waitlists for care, some military parents must commute hours each day for child care so they can get to work.²¹

One of the biggest factors impeding capacity is the inability to recruit and retain child care staff, in large part due to national child care workforce shortages exacerbated by the pandemic.²² Nationally, the child care industry is still short 48,500 workers compared to pre-pandemic,²³ and it appears the DoD child care program is no exception to this problem. Testifying before the Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee in March, Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Gil Cisneros highlighted these challenges: “Since the pandemic, we have had trouble, difficulties trying to hire more childcare workers to work in our child development centers.”²⁴ Cisneros acknowledged that the recruiting barriers are tied to the DoD’s ability to offer fair, competitive wages for child care workers. In fact, the pay scale for child care workers has not been adjusted in 30 years and currently tops out at \$55,000, half that of military kindergarten teachers with equivalent experience and credentials employed by the Department of Defense school system.²⁵ When asked about the discrepancy, Cisneros explained, “It is a national problem. And I think being able to pay a competitive salary is part of that. That has to be there to get a solution to resolving this problem.”²⁶

We support the steps that DoD is already taking to expand child care capacity, including funding to build seven additional CDCs and the announcement of a new national staff recruitment effort.²⁷ However, more work is needed to deliver for our military families. We urge you to prioritize building up the number and capacity of CDCs and community partners committed to increasing child care supply, and to address low wages that hurt worker hiring and retention, thereby limiting child care availability.

The DoD child care program, when implemented to reach its full potential, can be a model for the entire child care sector. Every family deserves affordable, accessible, and high-quality care for their children – care that affords them the safety and security to provide for their family, and in this case, our nation. To ensure we meet the needs of military families, we ask that you answer the following questions by August 28, 2023.

¹⁹ *Id.*, p. 20.

²⁰ *Id.*, p. 9. .

²¹ CBS News, “Some Special Forces soldiers are struggling with lack of child care: ‘The family is being left behind,’” October 4, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/child-care-special-forces/>

²² U.S. Department of the Treasury, “The Economics of Child Care Supply in the United States,” September 2021, p. 17-18, <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/The-Economics-of-Childcare-Supply-09-14-final.pdf>

²³ Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, “Child Care Sector Jobs,” July 11, 2023, <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/brief/child-care-sector-jobs-bls-analysis/>

²⁴ Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Personnel, “To Receive Testimony on Military and Civilian Personnel Programs in the Department of Defense in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2024 and the Future Years Defense Program,” March 15, 2023, p. 23, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/23-11_03-15-2023.pdf

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families,” February 2023, p. 22, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf>

1. How many families are currently served by CDCs, SAC, and FCC? How many families receive fee assistance for civilian care? Please describe by service.
2. How many military families are on waitlists for CDCs? And how long do families typically remain on the waitlist before receiving a child care slot? Please describe by region and service.
3. What are the 10 bases with the highest percentage of military families with children 12 or under who are on waitlists for CDCs? What is the average wait time for those families? Please disaggregate by service.
4. What percentage of military families with children who are 12 or under live off-base versus on-base? Please describe by region and service.
5. What are the top 10 bases in the United State with the most military personnel living off-base? In each of those 10 bases, how many military families have children who are 12 or under? Please describe by region and service.
6. The DoD’s appropriations include funding to build seven new CDCs in fiscal year 2022.²⁸ What is the status of construction, and when are the centers expected to be running? How many additional children will be served by these CDCs?
7. Does the DoD have plans to construct additional CDCs beyond the seven planned for fiscal year 2022? If so, what criteria will DoD use when determining where to build new CDCs?
8. What are the top five largest bases in the United States without CDCs? How many military families with a parent working on those bases have children under 12?
9. DoD officials told the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) that the inspection requirements for community-based partners are “subject to state licensing requirements and oversight,” and thus are not subject to the same robust inspection requirements by the DoD that apply to CDCs, FCCs, and SACs.²⁹ Has the DoD always had this policy? Without frequent DoD inspections, how does the DoD ensure the quality of off-base care?
10. A 2020 DoD report showed that 135 CDCs are in need of repair.³⁰ How many CDCs are currently in need of repair, and what is the status of those repairs?
11. How many child care workers have left CDCs since the start of the pandemic? How many additional child care workers is the military child care program short?
12. DoD officials told GAO that the agency has launched a new national child care staff recruitment effort called Come Grow with Us.³¹ What are the main initiatives

²⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families,” February 2023, p. 22, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf>

²⁹ *Id.*, p. 9.

³⁰ Office of U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth, “Lawmakers Tee Up Proposals to Improve Military Child Care Facilities, Address Barriers to Care,” press release, May 3, 2021, <https://www.duckworth.senate.gov/news/in-the-news/lawmakers-tee-up-proposals-to-improve-military-child-care-facilities-address-barriers-to-care>

³¹ Government Accountability Office, “Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families,” February 2023, p. 22, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf>

of the program, and has it helped DoD hire more child care workers? Please describe.

13. Does the DoD plan to adjust the pay scale for child care workers? If so, when?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Personnel



Rick Scott
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Personnel



Ted Budd
United States Senator