

Department of Defense Military Family Readiness Council

“Report of the DoD Military Family Readiness Council for Fiscal Year 2009”

**Report to the Secretary of Defense and
Congressional Defense Committees
Title 10, United States Code, Section 1781a
As enacted by Section 581 of
The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008**

BACKGROUND

This report responds to Section 581 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2008, which provides for the DoD Military Family Readiness Council (hereafter “the Council”) to provide a report on military family readiness to the Secretary of Defense and congressional defense committees. The Council, also mandated by Section 581, convened on 01 October 2009, and again on 08 December 2009. Section 581 amended Title 10, adding sections 1781a and 1781b, referenced below.

INTRODUCTION

Membership of the Council includes:

- The Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) as Chair.
- The Vice Chief of Staff, U.S. Army; the Vice Chief of Naval Operations; the Vice Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force; and the Assistant Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps.
- The senior enlisted advisors of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps shall also serve as Council members, or their spouse in their stead.
- The remaining three Council members have been appointed from the National Military Family Association, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, and the Armed Services YMCA.
- The Section 562 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 mandated the appointment of two additional members; one from the National Guard, and another from the military services’ Reserve Components. The National Guard membership will rotate between the Air and Army National Guard every three years; the Services’ Reserve member will rotate among the four Services every three years. These additional members will be appointed in the Spring of 2010.

The following are duties of the Council per Title 10, U. S. Code, Section 1781a:

(1) To review and make recommendations to the Secretary of Defense regarding the policy and plans supporting military family readiness, as specified in Title 10, U. S. Code, Section 1781b;

(2) To monitor requirements for the support of military family readiness by the Department of Defense (DoD); and

(3) To evaluate and assess the effectiveness of the military family readiness programs and activities of DoD.

The Council is to convene at least twice annually and provide a report to the Secretary of Defense and the congressional defense committees no later than February 1st of each year. Each report is to include:

(1) An assessment of the adequacy and effectiveness of the military family readiness programs and activities of DoD during the preceding fiscal year in meeting the needs and requirements of military families.

(2) Recommendations on actions to be taken to improve the capability of the military family readiness programs and activities of DoD to meet the needs and requirements of military families, including actions relating to the allocation of funding and other resources to and among such programs and activities.

This report represents only the views of the Council and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Department of Defense.

FY 2009 ASSESSMENT OF MILITARY FAMILY READINESS PROGRAMS

The Council began its assessment by reviewing DoD's report on "Military Family Readiness Policy" and "Plans for the Support of Military Family Readiness," submitted to the congressional defense committees on 11 August 2009. That report included:

- DoD-wide goals and measurement systems for key programs and activities affecting military family readiness;
- A summary of policies providing access to programs and activities based on categories of Service members and their families, and geographic location; Plans for the support of military family readiness;
- A list of military family readiness programs and activities for each of the Military Services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD); and,
- The Report of the 2nd Quadrennial Quality of Life Review (QQLR), outlining the spectrum of DoD programs and initiatives.

The Council was subsequently briefed in detail on that report at its first meeting on 01 October 2009. The Council gave specific attention to how DoD assesses itself with its various goals and measurement systems for its programs and activities as outlined in that report, to include where measures of effectiveness are still being developed.

The Council also reviewed the top two concerns of each Military Service and national military family organization represented on the Council, as well as what each organization considered as its top two programs. The Council's discussions of these concerns and programs generated a preliminary version of its recommendations.

Between its 01 October and 08 December 2009 meetings, the Council continued its assessment of DoD's military family readiness programs and activities. In addition to ongoing assessments by their respective Military Services or national military family organizations, Council members reviewed data from the following venues and research efforts.

- Selected survey data from the Defense Manpower Data Center, which showed that there are signs of increasing stress on spouses and children.

- Younger Service members and families are impacted more severely.
- Communication was shown to be essential: between spouse and Service member; between parent and child; and between the military and family members.
- DoD assesses that more information is needed regarding:
 - what factors enable or hinder military family participation in supportive programming;
 - how families experience different points of the deployment;
 - how multiple deployments impact families and children;
 - the risk and resilience factors associated with spouse, family, child and adolescent responses to deployment; and
 - how military life impacts the strength of couples' relationships.
- Focus group data from installation visits conducted by the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy.
 - Programs providing the most relief included Military Family Life Consultants, child care, health care (esp. behavioral health care), spouse employment, communication with deployed Service members, and team-building programs.
 - Military OneSource and MWR "family building" programs received positive feedback from families and installation service providers.
 - Child Development Centers, while high in quality, are not meeting demand.
 - Feedback from families and installation service providers indicate that behavioral health care is beginning to receive the proper level of attention.
 - Installation service providers expressed concern about "Joint Basing"; specifically, issues with the consistency of quality of life program funding across the Services at each Joint Base.
- Recommendations of the "Guard and Reserve Task Force" convened May 19-20, 2009, focusing on the needs of Reserve Component Service members and their families. A summary of concerns included:
 - Clearly communicating services to families, especially those geographically dispersed from installations, and those without consistent Internet access.
 - Yellow Ribbon programming, specifically, the consistency of information presented to different units.
 - Yellow Ribbon program eligibility and funding for designated family members or other supporting relationships outside the Service members' dependents.
 - Expansion of the Joint Family Support Assistance Program to meet increasing demand.
- Feedback from focus groups convened during the Joint Family Readiness Conference in Chicago, September 1-3, 2009, that explored current promising

practices, research, and communication about existing partnerships and activities. Concerns were summarized as:

- Communication across the DoD enterprise.
- Meeting child care demand, both daily and respite care.
- A perceived stigma and need for anonymity regarding access to mental or behavioral health services.
- A need for more funding for family readiness group programs.
- Families' knowledge of and access to good programs and services.
- Panel recommendations from the National Leadership Summit on Military Families, convened November 9-10, 2009. Actions recommended by Summit participants are summarized as follows:
 - Create a strategic map of all existing programs, to identify redundancies and assist with funding priorities.
 - Develop metrics of success centered on each program's contribution to readiness, recruiting, and retention.
 - Review and further develop behavioral health services to ensure access, availability, and education to encourage early identification, and to reduce stigma.
 - Design a strategic communications plan to
 - improve Service member and family awareness of existing resources and programs, especially among Guard and Reserve families;
 - communicate realistic expectations about military life and the role of programs in supporting families;
 - share information and best practices; and
 - optimize collaboration with community and non-government organization partners.

Having reviewed this data, the Council acknowledges the progress made by DoD in 2009 in the improvement of the adequacy and effectiveness of its military family readiness programs and activities. However, the Council remains concerned about a number of issues of varying breadth. The next section of this report details recommendations intended to improve the adequacy and effectiveness of programs and activities that address these issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOLLOWING THE ASSESSMENT FOR FY 2009

The Council recommends the following actions, based on its supporting assessments as annotated below. These are listed in order of their discussion and convenience; this order does not connote priority among them. All recommendations listed received the votes of eight of eight voting members present for the final voting at the Council's meeting on 08 December 2009.

1. Measure Total Force compliance with having Family Care Plans in place prior to deployments. The Council recommends that DoD incorporate metrics on the implementation of Family Care Plans.
 - This recommendation is intended to measure Total Force compliance with having Family Care Plans in place prior to deployments, as a complement to policy set forth in a Department of Defense Instruction soon to be published.
 - The Council assessed that as overseas contingency operations have continued, the number of child custody cases may have increased. The Council also assessed that custody issues are routinely resolved by Family Care Plans.
2. Assess the needs of medically retired severely injured Service members related to child care.
 - The Council assesses there may be a program or policy gap in the provision of child care for medically retired severely injured Service members.
 - This recommendation stemmed from the frequent need for respite child care among military families supporting a severely injured Service member who is unlikely to return to his or her prior physical capacity.
3. Review reintegration programs in light of today's operational tempo and dwell time realities.
 - There was substantial discussion among members of the Council on whether reintegration challenges were being addressed by present programs at the proper level, frequency, and milestones in the lives of military families.
 - The Council assesses that there is not a clear roadmap of care for members and families who need help. There are multiple service providers available, but the member/family may not have enough direction about where to go first.
 - DoD should consider developing a matrix or other decision aid to help achieve the clarity desired by military families.
4. Explore empowering peer-based care to address the needs of families who are newly bereaved, capitalizing on existing strengths of military families.
 - The Council assesses that, while the Military Service casualty offices have done outstanding work in supporting military families suffering loss, DoD can build on this success by incorporating some of the successful practices of non-governmental organizations.
 - This recommendation stems from the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors' ongoing success in training the surviving loved ones to support those who are newly bereaved.
5. Leverage existing technology and social networking tools to a) pursue improved communication with families, and b) integrate the delivery of benefits from across federal agencies.

- The Council assesses that websites provided by the Military Services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) have been instrumental in reaching constituents in the virtual realm. However, further use of the “new media” is needed to effectively communicate with the next generation of Service members and military families.
 - The Council assesses that integration of the delivery of benefits across federal agencies is particularly important in the case of next of kin of deceased Service members. Technology exists now to provide those beneficiaries with accurate information from multiple federal agencies almost immediately following the death. The Council recommends this opportunity be explored and resourced, as appropriate.
6. Review instruction for and delivery of school-age, pre-school and hourly child care both on-and-off installations.
- The Council assesses that DoD has a significant gap in meeting its constituents’ child care needs, as this is a consistent theme in the feedback from military families.
 - The Council concurs with present efforts by DoD to expand the availability of nationally-accredited child care both on- and off-installations, and recommends a review of these instructions as a means of ensuring all resources are considered.
7. Ensure adequate transition services in light of the diverse needs of separating Service members, including those of wounded warriors.
- The Council assesses that many transition programs are generic, and not sufficiently stratified or tailored to meet the diverse needs of individual Service members concluding their military service.
 - The Council will review the strategic action plan generated by the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Wounded Warrior Care and Transition Policy (ODUSD(WWCTP)) when promulgated.
 - The Council recommends that transition programs be made to be adaptable to the needs of individual Service members and their families.
8. Sustain current spouse employment programs and initiatives, including continued funding of the My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA) program.
- The Council assesses that military spouse employment, including the ability of these spouses to resume their careers after relocation, continues to be a significant contributor to the financial and psychological readiness of military families.
 - The Council recommends that current programs continue to be funded, including the “MyCAA” program, which provides funding for licensure and

certification programs supporting careers that can be resumed without disruption after relocation.

9. Submit a Unified Legislative Budget (ULB) proposal to adjust travel policy and regulations to better accommodate participation of non-dependent family members and designated representatives at Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program events.

- The Council assesses that the present travel policy and regulations contribute to mixed messages being provided to military families invited to Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP) events. Unit commanders often require their Service members to attend, and encourage families to attend, but are unable in many cases to provide compensation for travel, lodging, and incidental expenses incurred by families during these events.
- Further, the social support networks of these returning warriors often extend outside enrolled dependents: e.g., parents, grandparents, and friends. This broader network is not afforded any compensation or incentive for their attendance at YRRP events.
- The Council concurs with the previous and ongoing assessments of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, and recommends that office submit a ULB proposal to effect changes in these regulations that would compensate or incentivize the attendance at YRRP events of extended family or other designees named by the Service members involved.

CONCLUSION

The DoD Military Family Readiness Council submits the preceding recommendations for consideration by the Secretary of Defense and congressional defense committees. The Council will convene again in the Spring and Fall of calendar year 2010 to facilitate its next round of assessing military family readiness programs and activities. The Council's next report is due no later than 01 February 2011.