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The current Military Child Care Program (MCCP) does not meet the diverse needs of females within the military work force. To retain females in order to increase readiness, the Air Force must focus on reforming areas within the MCCP to meet 21st century demands. To enable this change, the Air Force must request Congressional support for military construction funding, seek ways to centrally fund the MCCP's Morale Welfare and Recreation funds permanently, increase the Child Care Aware of America subsidy, and legitimize the use of Au Pairs as a form of subsidized care. By doing so, this will allow military service to be a more attractive a career for females thereby, increasing diversity and force readiness.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
Air Force, Au Pairs, Child Care Aware of America, diversity, force readiness, inclusion, Military Child Care Program, military female, military women, retention, readiness

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THE AIR FORCE MILITARY CHILD CARE PROGRAM

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Executive Summary

Title: Readiness, Retention and Diversity & Inclusion: The Air Force Military Child Care Program

Author: Major Amanda R. Gross, United States Air Force

Thesis: The current Military Child Care Program does not support the United States Air Force's commitment to improve retention and diversity of military females among its ranks. To increase readiness and diversity, the Air Force must make serving a more attractive career for females by focusing on reforming the military child care program to meet 21st century demands of the female service member.

Discussion: Over the past 50 years, the demographics across the American work force have significantly changed. Currently, only 16.5% of service members are active duty females military-wide of which the Air Force has the largest percentage (20.5%). Throughout the past 50 years various acts, amendments and authorizations have been passed by Congress to ensure female equality in the work force. For example, the *Military Child Care Act of 1989* was created in order to provide an alternative child care option, ensure oversight to maintain standards and safety, and improve the training and wages for daycare staff members. As a result, the change to military child care was considered the "Golden Standard", a model for national child care reform. Furthermore, since 1989, the number of females actively serving in the military has significantly increased, in turn so has the demand for child care. Current data show that active duty females are 28% more likely to separate than male active duty service members, regardless of pay grade, marital status, race, ethnicity, education and years of service. The Military Child Care Program implemented across the Air Force has implications for force readiness and female attrition rates because one of the top reasons for separation is that the Military Child Care Program no longer supports the 21st century military, working mother. Since the *Military Child Care Act of 1989*, there have been incremental changes to the Military Child Care Program; however, none of the changes consider the diverse needs of females working in today's military. Because current Military Child Care Program does not meet the needs of female Airmen, it is not seen as an attractive career; therefore, the Air Force must take a holistic look at areas within the program to reform. In doing so, the Air Force will become a more attractive career for females and thereby increase female retention rates which will improve diversity and readiness across the force.

Conclusion: The current Military Child Care Program does not meet the diverse needs of females within the military work force. There is an unmet requirement for availability outside of the on-base care provided. To retain females in order to increase readiness, the Air Force must focus on reforming areas within the Military Child Care Program to meet 21st century demands. To enable this change, the Air Force must request Congressional support for military construction funding, seek ways to centrally fund the Military Child Care Program's Morale Welfare and Recreation funds permanently, increase the Child Care Aware of America subsidy, and legitimize the use of au pairs as a form of subsidized care. By doing so, military service will become an attractive a career for females thereby, increasing diversity and force readiness.

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THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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Preface

After being selected to attend the Marine Corps University for Command and Staff College, I knew I wanted to write my thesis on the Military Child Care Program. Throughout my short time in the Air Force, having traveled to multiple installations with a former Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel and Services (A1), Headquarters U.S. Air Force, there was not one base visited where the challenges of military child care were not at the forefront of every discussion. Coupled with my recent experience at the squadron-level as the Operations Officer working hand-in-hand with the Child and Youth Services Flight, and then becoming a parent of a child enrolled in the Child Development Center, I have developed a passion for improving the quality of care for both the staff members and the families of our youngest Airmen. Having personally experienced both the behind the scenes and parental frustrations of operating the on-base military child care program, I feel this to live up to the moniker as America's "Golden Standard" of child care. More than anything, I wanted an avenue in which to suggest options to enhanced the program, but make recommendations that will positively impact the military child care experience for all families regardless of rank and installation.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Kerry Fosher for your continuous guidance throughout this process. I appreciate your ideas, questions, and responsiveness when formulating this topic, in subsequent research, and throughout the writing process. In addition, I would like to thank my second reader, Lieutenant Colonel David Preston. Thank you for your perspective, feedback, and continued support throughout this academic year. Thank you both immensely!

In addition, I would also like to thank my Air Force mentors for providing constant feedback, thoughts, and ideas. I cannot thank various A1 leaders enough for constantly giving

me an opportunity of a lifetime which has allowed me to gain such a broad Air Force experience and understanding of our career field, and then further provide personal views and recommendations for this thesis. A special thank you to Lieutenant Colonel Williams. Although at the time I thought it was a punishment, I cannot thank you enough for pushing me into a flight that I had such little knowledge and experience in. It is through this experience that I have developed such a passion for the military child care program and your mentorship that has paved the way for this endeavor. I would also like to thank Dr. Shirley Collins for your expertise in all aspects of the Military Child Care Program. You have devoted so much of your time throughout the years to mentor me while in the Squadron and then by providing sound guidance for this thesis – I cannot thank you all enough!

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Major Braden Gross, who listened and supported me while writing this paper for ten months. I cannot thank you enough for everything as you took on so much during this time when I know you would rather be out flying. Emmett and I are so lucky to have your endless love and support.

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Introduction

On January 12, 2017 during his Senate confirmation hearing, at his confirmation vote,¹ and again in his *Guidance for Budget Directives in the National Security Presidential Memorandum on Rebuilding the U.S. Armed Forces*,² then Secretary of Defense James Mattis made it clear that his first priority as defense secretary was to “improve warfighting readiness”.³ Though there have been several defense secretaries since Secretary Mattis, all have continued to prioritize Department of Defense-wide readiness. Moreover, at his change of command in August 2020, General C.Q. Brown, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, delivered new Air Force priorities. Combined with the Secretary of Defense’s first priority for readiness, General Brown stated one of his top priorities as, “Talent Management, including increasing diversity... and taking care of Airmen and their families.”⁴

To ensure compliance with both leaders’ priorities, the Air Force took a thorough internal look at the various facets in which drive readiness and diversity. Part of this review highlighted the significant role of females in the force and how female retention drives both readiness and diversity. With this reemergence of research focused on women in the military, new and updated research analyzed the period of active war since September 11, 2001 and its impacts amongst various demographics – officer vs. enlisted, male vs. female, married vs. not married, and dual military vs. military with dependents.⁵ As 20.2% of the total active duty Air Force population, females are relied upon to serve in order to offset the decreased number of males volunteering to serve in today’s military.⁶ Additional data and subsequent results generally reflect the same outcome regardless if taken from 5-, 10-, or 15+ years in service baseline model. Overall, these results show that active duty females are 28% more likely to separate than male active duty service members, regardless of pay grade, marital status, race, ethnicity, education, and years of

service.⁷ Additionally, females with dependents are 17% more likely to separate than unmarried females without dependents.⁸

To combat consistent reasons for separation, the Air Force created numerous programs and policies to directly support female service members. These programs and policies include the Career Intermission Program, extension of postpartum leave from six to 12 weeks (i.e., to include secondary caregiver leave), delay in postpartum physical fitness testing from six months to one year, and postpartum deployment dwell time increased from six to 12 months.⁹ Although exceptional programs and policies that have received positive feedback, females are still consistently separating. Research has pointed towards taking care of dependents and not just the mother. Which raises the question, how can families better be supported in order to enable the service member to do their job?

To effectively support General Brown's priority, we must look at our families. Both the Congressional Research Service and RAND Corporation studies reflect that, despite its size, the military child care program only supports 11% of the total eligible population in need of child care assistance.¹⁰ Moreover, military service members have "consistently found that affordable and reliable child care is a top quality-of-life concern", specifically, "female service members have cited child care issues as a major stressor associated with their time in service, relative to their male counterparts."¹¹ RAND further states that their "evidence indicates that child care is a readiness and retention issue for many service personnel."¹² In summation, the Air Force requires more than programs designed to address the working mother; the Air Force must address the challenges directly associated to child care. There is an unmet need for availability outside of the on-base care currently provided. The current military child care program does not support the United States Air Force's commitment to improve retention and diversity of military

females among its ranks. To increase readiness and diversity, the Air Force must make serving a more attractive career for females by focusing on reforming the military child care program to meet 21st century demands of the female service member.

This thesis is broken into four main parts. Part one provides a basis for understanding the history behind a woman's role and impact in the United States work force and, specifically, within the United States military. Part two provides a history of the Military Child Care Program, its current state and problems. The third part discusses the impact of the Novel Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) on child care throughout the United States and within the military. The fourth and final part provides recommendations that can be implemented into the Air Force's Military Child Care Program regardless of installation.

Literature Review

To enable diversity and increase force readiness, the Air Force must focus on the reasons that drive females to separate. As indicated through research, the common theme is family, specifically dependent care.¹³ The current Military Child Care Program, implemented across the Air Force has implications for force readiness and female attrition rates, to include the following: (1) the reduction of readiness status of females; (2) the reduction of diversity amongst rank for mid-career and above females; (3) the reduction of gender diversity; (4) the inability to recruit females to offset the decreased numbers of males volunteering to serve in today's military; and (5) an inability to support families where both parents work fulltime.

Multiple research gaps emerged during this literature review. The first significant research gap focuses on the scope of the military related studies. A majority of these studies have been commissioned at the request of various departments or committees within the government and are limited in scope to the rates of retention but not to understanding the causes

of attrition. Furthermore, these studies do not correlate trends within the military to the trends within American society. As RAND researchers, Chandra and London, state, “As more and more scholars seek to understand military children and families – their strengths and vulnerabilities, their ability to show resilience and the systems that support them – the gaps in the data raise the question of how we can bolster the data infrastructure to support research with this population.”¹⁴

Admittedly, the Air Force did not begin to request specific data points or allow for open-ended questions in their departure surveys until 2017; therefore, it is too soon to determine reliable, long-term data points. However, over the past four years the available data does indicate three constant reasons for separation: work schedules (including deployments); organizational culture (e.g., the lack of female mentors/senior leaders, toxic work environments, sexual assault, and unequal treatment of females); and family (e.g., dependent care, change in career vs. family priorities, separation from family, missed opportunities due to pregnancy, and retribution for family requirements). Both the Congressional Research Service and numerous RAND Corporation studies all state that child care is a primary reason for female service members to separate.¹⁵

The second significant research gap can be found when reviewing available data within society. While examining the U.S. Department of Labor’s 2018 demographics, which comprises more than 250 professions to include librarians, waitstaffs and retail salesperson, etc., it is important to note that statistics do not include data on service members, male or female. Nevertheless, the information provided can be used to provide information on trends in the broader population from which military personnel are drawn. For example, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau and Bureau of Statistics reports that of the total male population

69.1% are employed, whereas, 93.3% of that are fathers.¹⁶ On the other hand, of the total female population, 57.1% are employed, whereas, 71.5% are mothers. Of the 57.1% female labor force, only 43% work fulltime opposed to the 57% fulltime working men. Furthermore, of the 43% fulltime females, 70% have children under 18 years of age, compared to the 92% for males.¹⁷ In summary, this illustrates that majority of the labor force consists of men and, regardless of children ages, definitively surpasses that of the female work force with children.

The current Military Child Care Program structure is outdated and inadequately structured to meet the needs of the military working mother. After examining the Air Force current standards, it is evident the Military Child Care Program needs to be holistically reviewed for new ways to increase the availability and flexibility of care provided to military children. To better support this, the Air Force must request Congressional support for military construction funding, seek ways to centrally fund the Military Child Care Program's Morale Welfare and Recreation funds permanently, increase the Child Care Aware of America subsidy, and legitimize the use of au pairs as a form of subsidized care. By taking care of Airmen's families, the military will become a more attractive career option for females thereby, increasing diversity and force readiness across the United States Air Force.

Terms and Definitions

There are three primary types of child care, in-home, family care and child centers. To ensure proper evaluation, off-base in home care will be used in comparison to the military's Family Child Care operations. Furthermore, the use of family care will encompass both in direct care of family members and the use of au pairs. Finally, for the purpose of this study, child centers will be used with the subcategory of independent for-profit and not-for-profit, which includes chain centers that are nationally recognized and accredited. By using this category, it

will provide a similar baseline comparison to the on-base child care centers. Both off-base, in-home and child centers categories are the most similar to the militaries' Family Child Care and on-base care centers as they are all regulated by law and subsequent accreditation standards. Of note, it is important to highlight that the military does not formally recognize family care or au pairs as a standard for child care within the off-base in-home category.

Numerous definitions for various key terms have been identified and through careful research have been limited to the following meanings. The terms female and women are to be used interchangeably. The term *gender* is limited to only male and female; however, a transgender individual is grouped into the sex with which they identify. *Retention* is defined as the "rate at which military personnel voluntarily choose to stay in the military after their obligated term of service is ended."¹⁸ *Readiness* has been used in military lexicon since 1836 and is defined as the military's "ability to produce, deploy, and sustain forces that will perform successfully in combat."¹⁹ Finally, *diversity*, as defined by the Air Force is "a composite of individual characteristics, experiences, and abilities consistent with the Air Force Core Values and the Air Force Mission. Air Force diversity includes but is not limited to: personal life experiences, geographic background, socioeconomic background, cultural knowledge, educational background, work background, language abilities, physical abilities, philosophical/spiritual perspectives, age, race, ethnicity, and gender."²⁰ These terms in the described context will be used for this thesis.

Background

Women have played a role in the military since the American Revolutionary War and were formally authorized within units by 1901 with the establishment of the Army Nurse Corps. Additionally, through the *Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948*, services were

authorized to enlist and appoint women to their active and reserve components.²¹ By 1973, the United States changed from a draft and release force to an all-volunteer force.²² This shift led to the reliance on female recruitment to meet military end-strength requirements. Finally, with the *Defense Appropriation Authorization Act of 1976*,²³ women became eligible for an appointment to service academies and to fill non-combat career field roles, along with other requirements.²⁴ Though women have served in the American military since the creation of the United States and, despite Department of Defense (DOD) efforts to recruit them, the number of active duty female service members has only grown 14% since 1973. Currently, only 16.5% of service members are active duty females military-wide, of which the Air Force has the highest percentage of active duty female service members (20.2%).²⁵ To increase recruiting and retention rates, the DOD established the Department Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) in 1951 and more than 65 years later service focused committees were created, such as Air Force Women's Initiative Team (WIT). These committees are designed to focus on how to create a military that enables retention and is more attractive for female careers.

Over the past 50 years, the demographics across the American work force have significantly changed.²⁶ The U.S. Department of Labor notes between 1970 and 1980, the portion of women participating in the work force increased from 43% to 51%.²⁷ Multiple scholars have noted the major cultural shift in American society began towards the end of the Vietnam War, with the increase of women entering the civilian work force. This change prompted Congress to pass *Title IX of the Education Amendments*²⁸ and *Equal Rights Amendment of 1972*,²⁹ *Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974*,³⁰ and the *Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978*.³¹ Additionally, this spurred the beginning of multiple female related rulings by the Supreme Court of the United States such as *Cleveland Board of Education v.*

LaFleur,³² 1974 in favor of pregnant women's rights within the workplace. However, it was not until 1975 when the DOD discontinued involuntary discharges for pregnant women.

Furthermore, through Congressional mandates within multiple National Defense Authorization Acts numerous mandated case studies on military females began to emerge.³³ These case studies became an offshoot for additional studies commissioned by the DOD and individual services through corporations such as RAND, GAO, and SAGE, among other peer-review scholars at professional military education schools.

As the work force continues to expand to include working mothers, so does the demand for child care. Employers from both the private and public sectors have recognized this demand through provisions for child care benefits for their working parent employees. Multiple studies have stated that “employers who address these needs are better to attract high-quality workers, encourage high productivity, elicit job satisfaction in current employees, and retrain high-quality workers”.³⁴ As highlighted previously, 70% of the female work force are mothers with children under 18, a significant increase from 47% in 1975; however, the lack of child care availability has not increased in order to support this demand.³⁵ The U.S. Department of Labor reports that only 13% of workers have paid family leave, 11% of workplaces offer child care assistance, and only 6% have flexible workplace benefits, all factors that have presented mothers a work versus home life dilemma.³⁶

It is important to note that numerous companies such as Adobe, Cisco Systems, Microsoft and SAS Institute all recognize this dilemma and are committed to creating policies and initiatives that support working parents to “create an inclusive” workplace. These companies' parental leave policies include fully-paid parental leave that range from 12 weeks to six months, with options to continue after the allotted time to work part time, and include no less

than four weeks of supporting caregivers leave.³⁷ Another commonality amongst these companies is the access to numerous child care programs that range from on-site daycare centers to resources for in-home babysitting. For the companies that do not provide on-site daycare, they do provide a monthly daycare stipend to offset costs. Each company has creatively explored new initiatives that are available to parents to include support programs for families with children with neurodiversity issues, a book lending program, access to breastmilk shipping services for traveling mothers, and college coaching for families. Further comparison between DOD to off-base child care can be found within Appendix A. Where these policies and initiatives that have been incorporated, each company claims to have positively impacted employee retention within the workplace.³⁸ Moreover, the Families and Work Institute found that more than 50% of companies who have created policies related to child care had lower voluntary turnover rate, had higher job satisfaction, greater commitment to their employer, and had overall higher job retention.

Military Child Care Program

History

By 1976, as women participating in the work force continued to increase, so did the demand for child care. This demand was reflective of that for military spouses who began working outside of the home and required on-base child care services. This demand soon triggered a military-wide survey, which indicated inconsistent practices and standards implemented at each installation, lack of training for child care workers, and child abuse cases. By 1978, the Department of Defense (DOD) issued the services a directive to incorporate child care centers into their non-appropriated fund Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) portfolio and to develop formal policies and procedures to run the program.³⁹ It was not until 1982, when

the services reported 53,000 children in 576 facilities in combination with a GAO deficiency report, did Congress began to appropriate funds to support the construction of new child care facilities.⁴⁰ Moreover, this report recommended the creation of minimum standards to implement across the DOD instead of service specific guidance, which eventually lead to the *Military Family Act of 1985*. Though this act created the Office of Family Policy within the Office of Secretary of Defense, it was not until the *Military Child Care Act of 1989* (MCCA) where significant changes were made.

The *Military Child Care Act of 1989* (MCCA) was created as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for 1990 and 1991.⁴¹ The MCCA was set to improve the quality of child care provided on installations, provide oversight to maintain standards and safety, ensure affordability and availability to military dependents, and improve the training and wages for child care staff members. It set standards across the DOD for health and safety, announced and unannounced inspections, parental participation and most importantly appropriated funds to subsidize on-base family home care and child development centers. The MCCA created the sliding scale for fees based on family income, a first of its kind. Additionally, the MCCA required at least one employee at each center be credentialed as a specialist in training and curriculum development. At the time, the change to the military child care program was considered child care's "Golden Standard", a model for national child care reform.⁴²

Through the *Military Child Care Act of 1989* and additional DOD guidance given in 1996, further mandated that all child care centers must meet the standards for accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Today 97% of all DOD child care centers are nationally accredited by NAEYC and adhere to both state requirements and individual service rules of instruction.⁴³ The NAEYC provides accreditation

based on ten standards where each facility is accredited for a five-year time period. The ten standards include: Relationships, Curriculum, Training, Assessment of Child Progress, Health, Staff Competencies, Preparation & Support, Families, Community Relationships, Physical Environment, and Leadership & Management. In addition, all child care centers must meet the DOD operational standards required to receive a DOD Certificate to Operate. Moreover, the DOD Certificate to Operate requires each center to pass all announced and unannounced public health, fire, and other forms of safety inspections. The Air Force further mandates on all centers to pass both the Air Force Services Agency inspections and any state inspection or accreditation requirements. Finally, as terms of employment, all military child care program staff members must undergo background checks and meet all training requirements.

Since 1989, the number of females serving in the military has significantly increased, in turn so has the need for child care. On the other hand, for more than 30 years, the military child care program has not been holistically reformed, minus a handful of incremental changes. The DOD has maintained that the primary reason for providing child care is to “enhance force readiness”.⁴⁴ To support this reasoning, the Authorization of Child Care Fee Assistance Program was created as part of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2000, which marked the first time the DOD was authorized to subsidize off-base civilian child care programs. This program was designed to provide a subsidy in the amount of the difference between what an eligible service member would pay for on-base care and the off-base care provider rate, with a cap. To receive this subsidy, the approved off-base child care center being used must still comply with the same DOD standards as on-base care. Because no single office was established to manage this program, it was further determined that this fee assistance program would be handled through the Child Care Aware of America, non-profit organization.

Following the creation of the Authorization of Child Care Fee Assistance Program in 2000, there have not been any further significant changes to the overall Military Child Care Program. There have been smaller changes, which included an increase to child care availability hours and child care placement priorities; however, due to the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) pandemicⁱ, the increase of child care center hours for care have been reduced, causing yet another strain to child care dependent families.

Types of Military Child Care Available

The military child care program consists of four types of care. The first type of care is the Child Development Center (CDC), which is an on-base, Department of Defense (DOD) operated child care center for children six-weeks to five years of age. Each center varies in facility capacity and number of children support per installations. The second type is Family Child Care (FCC) based care. This is an in-home certified child care service for children four-weeks to 12 years of age. Each home can provide care for no more than six children maximum. The third type of care is School-Age Care (SAC). This type of care is both facility or in-home based for children six to 12 years of age. Care is provided for those attending Kindergarten or grade school who require supervision before or after school and due to school closures during the standard duty day. The fourth type of care is Supplemental Child Care. This type of care, though government mandated varies by installation. This care includes hourly child care, fee assistance programs, or respite care alternatives. It is important to note that au pairs and family caregivers are not included in the military child care programs definition as a viable alternative for child care. To reiterate, for the purpose of this paper, the CDC and FCC types of child care will be used in comparison to off-base care options.

ⁱ The SARS-CoV-2 virus was identified in late 2019. The disease caused by the virus reached pandemic level in early 2020 and was still causing significant disruption as of the time of this thesis, in the spring of 2021.

Challenges

The evidence is conclusive that there are various challenges within the current military child care program structure that must be addressed to positively impact female retention. By tackling key issues impacting female retention, the Air Force can expect an increase in overall force readiness. “The Department of Defense (DOD) operates the largest employer-sponsored child care program in the United States, serving approximately 200,000 children of uniformed service members and DOD civilians, employing over 23,000 child care workers, at an annual cost of over \$1 billion.”⁴⁵ As previously stated, despite its size, the military child care program only supports 11% of the total eligible population in need of child care assistance. A wide-array of consistently raised concerns with the current state of the Military Child Care Program, most notably captured in multiple reports through the Congressional Research Service, RAND, and various Women’s Initiative Teams (WIT).

Allowing women to serve increased the total number of married active duty service members by 50%.⁴⁶ Additionally, the number of dual military couples and single parents has doubled. Currently, 47% of active duty spouses are employed (i.e., fulltime or part time); however, 53% of those not employed stated, “challenges in finding adequate child care are a disincentive to seek employment.”⁴⁷ Regardless of the employment status, military families have different child care needs compared to their civilian counterparts, due to permanent change of station, extended work hours, deployments, and shift-work. However, due to the near 20 years of continuous deployments, civilian spouses find themselves in single parent status, further creating a similar child care challenge.

All these challenges are only exacerbated for dual military spouses and single military parents. To further this, statistics show that active duty females are 28% more likely to separate

than male active duty service members, regardless of pay grade, marital status, race, ethnicity, education, and years of service.⁴⁸ In addition, females with dependents are 17% more likely to separate than unmarried females without dependents.⁴⁹ Research through the Congressional Research Service has concluded that there is a readiness impact due to “insufficient child care varies by family type... child care challenges may impact retention decisions... [and] that it is likely or very likely that child care issues would lead them to leave the military.”⁵⁰

In February 2019, defense officials testified that there are nearly 11,000 total children on the Department of Defense on-base child care waitlist, of which 3,200 are children from within the Air Force.⁵¹ Former Chief Master Sergeant, of the Air Force Kaleth Wright stated, “Recruiting the best Airmen possible, training and retaining the Airmen of today, and ensuring our Airmen and their families are taken care of directly impacts readiness...we must continue to improve child care availability and affordability [and] some places are strictly capacity issues and in others, there is not enough qualified staff.”⁵² More recently, the new Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, JoAnne Bass stated, “We have about an 18 percent capacity on-base to take care of children that are within the age of going to childcare or school”.⁵³ It is important to highlight that these are non-Novel Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) statistics and due to COVID-19, the current waitlist has only been exacerbated due to the reduce number of slots available and decrease of children per room. Regardless of pre-or post-COVID-19, it the DOD must seek for a long-term solution to continue to reduce on-base waitlists.

In addition, as the Air Force’s WIT concluded, through employee turnover rates, dilapidated infrastructure, outdated practices, and waitlist timeframes, the military child care system no longer supports the 21st century female work force.⁵⁴ Furthermore, military families have funneled concern and advocacy through Department Advisory Committee on Women in the

Service (DACOWITS) and the Air Force’s WIT for “expanded awareness, access to, operation hours for, and improvements or enhancements of other aspects of military child care services.”⁵⁵

Novel Coronavirus-19 Impact

The Novel Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) has had a profound impact on child care across the United States and within the military. This impact has exposed additional realities of the way in which the military approaches child care. There have been a number of articles recently written that describe the impacts to females in the work force due to COVID-19. The New York Times, published an article, “Pandemic Will ‘Take Our Women 10 Years Back’ in the Workplace”, describing the new dilemma for working mothers and the impact of them staying home has had on the progress towards gender equality not just in the United States, but around the world.⁵⁶

A second, similar article, highlights a study that as daycares and schools close, the burden to stay home to be a fulltime provider and teleworking employee has rested heavily on the mother. When “parents decide one of them should give up a job, it is usually the lesser paid parent, most often the mother.”⁵⁷ This repeatedly has presented a hard choice for the rich but an impossible for the poor. As of February 2021, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce reported that nearly two million females have dropped out of the work force and more than one third have yet to return.⁵⁸

Regardless of the articles or study cases found, there is no research or contradicting public opinion has been found that shows an opposite opinion. This research tells a persistent story – there is a consensus that child care needs to be improved, there are flaws in the current system and that the world still views child care as a primary maternal job to be done when care is limited.

Within the Air Force, there is a variation from installation to installation on how care is being provided, from the reduction in hours of operation to the decrease in children per classroom. Some installations are simply not allowing new children to enroll from the waitlist, regardless of openings available, which is only increasing the length of time and number of children on the overall waitlist. There is no set standard or best practice currently implemented after more than a year since COVID-19 restrictions began.⁵⁹ As the pandemic continues, it is important to emphasize that there is still a child care requirement. The Air Force must continue to seek alternatives to provide child care availability through the Military Child Care Program otherwise this will be a decision point to remain in the force or not for some. Although COVID-19 is new to the world, it will not be the last public health emergency that will be faced.

Recommendations

Regardless of the source, there is conclusive evidence that the current military child care program does not meet the diverse needs of females within the military work force. There is an unmet need for availability outside of the on-base care provided. To retain females in order to increase readiness, the Air Force must focus on reforming the military child care program to meet 21st century demands. To enable this change, the Air Force must request Congressional support for military construction funding, seek ways to centrally fund the Military Child Care Program's Morale Welfare and Recreation funds permanently, increase the Child Care Aware subsidy, and legitimize the use of au pairs as a form of subsidized care.

These recommendations are based on various discussions and have been socialized with Military Child Care subject matter experts, current and previous Force Support Squadron commanders, other Force Support leadership, and through reading multiple surveys and forums. The intent behind these recommendations is to provide realistic, thought provoking ideas to fill

the gap in research and the unmet need for child care within the Air Force. By no means are these recommendations all-conclusive, right or wrong, rather they are simple concepts that can be further developed for implementation. New ideas always pose obstacles and encounter resistance, and some will require Congressional support; however, these recommendations are all within the realm of possible.

Recommendation (1)

The Air Force must leverage lawmakers support for on-base care center expansion through the prioritization of Military Construction projects. The military child care program is funded through both non-appropriated and appropriated funds. Non-appropriated funds (NAF) are generated through fees paid by military child care customers and other self-generating programs on each installation. Appropriated funds (APF) are allocated through Congress in the annual defense budget to support military construction distributed to Operation and Maintenance (O&M) and Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) accounts.

Prior to the Novel Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic, the Air Force child care and youth centers waitlists amassed 3,200 children awaiting on-base child care. Recognizing on-base child care challenge connection to military construction, Senator Patty Murray, Democrat-Washington, pushed for funding stating, “some [centers] are in good condition, but just don’t have enough space. Others are in bad need of repair... it’s really appalling,”⁶⁰ further describing some as dilapidated. To support this, in December 2019, Congress approved a defense policy bill for \$121 million towards military child development centers, with \$31.5 million allocated to the Air Force.⁶¹ This money was given to the services to allow each branch to determine how and where to spend the money first. Meaning, once the funds are distributed to installations, it can further be redistributed to potential needs that are not dedicated to child care center new

construction. When properly dispersed and utilized for child care facility construction to create more classrooms, the waitlist can be reduced, which eases the child care stress on military parents. However, when funds are used for renovations or other on-base military constructions projects, the waitlists continue to remain stagnant.

The Department of Defense (DOD) maintains that “child care benefits [compensation] help to support its recruiting, retention, and readiness goals.” These systemic issues that have been risen to give Congress concern. These issues range from proficiently trained child care workers, the structure of benefits for service members, and appropriated fund resources available for the child care program in the annual defense budget. Even with Congressional funding allocated to support military construction of child care centers, it was not an adequate solution to this long-term problem. The Air Force must leverage lawmakers support for on-base care center expansion through the prioritization of Military Construction projects, where money is not just distributed to the services but are coded for sole child care construction purpose of child care new construction. Moreover, when allocating money, \$121 million given total is not sufficient enough to support all of the needs within the DOD. Funds must be increased and distributed with the sole purpose of military construction for on-base child care. By mitigating on-base child care challenges, the female attrition rate across the Air Force should decrease while increasing mission readiness.

Recommendation (2)

The Air Force must seek ways to centralize the non-appropriated funds (NAF) generated by the Military Child Care Program on a permanent basis. This precedent has been set by the Air Force lodging fund, which centralizes funds specifically generated through the lodging account and redistributes the funds across the installations. This allows for installations with less

generated revenue to still receive necessary funding for facility renovations, construction, and payroll.

In the case of the Military Child Care Program, by centralizing child care generated Morale Welfare and Recreation funds (MWRF), the funding can be redistributed to installations where the revenue does not offset operational expenses. For example, in general, a pilot heavy or space operations base usually has an officer heavy population. Based on the pay to tuition scale, those installations seem to generate more child care funds, compared to an installation, which has a larger enlisted population. If funding was similar to the lodging fund, regardless of revenue within the MWRF, the funds could be distributed more equally across the installations to combat the various funding related challenge at that installations in the negative. This also guarantees that MWRF generated are solely allocated towards the Military Child Care Program and not across the full range of installations' MWR-related activities. By centralizing child care generated MWRF, these funds can be used to facilitate the construction of more child care facilities in an effort to reduce the child care waitlist. By reducing the waitlist, the Air Force continues to support Airmen in the challenges of child care. It should be noted that the Air Force has operated this way during the Novel Coronavirus-19 to help offset primarily employee related expenses; however, it is recommended to continue this practice as the status quo.

Recommendation (3)

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, child care for infants in Virginia costs \$14,063 per year, which is 11% higher than in-state tuition for a four-year public college and 1.9% less than the average rent,⁶² accounting for one of 33 states where infant care costs more than in-state tuition. Child care for a 4-year-old averages \$10,867 per year, which is the 10th highest out of 50 states.⁶³ Moreover, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that child care

is only affordable if it is 7% of the family's income.⁶⁴ Even with the slide scale of tuition, off-base child care for the military service member exceeds 7% of the family income with a subsidy.

The Air Force must increase the Child Care Aware (CAA) Child Care Fee Assistance subsidy provided to Airmen utilizing off-base child care. The current subsidy was designed to provide the amount of the difference between what an eligible service member would pay for on-base care and the off-base care provider rate, with a cap. This cap has not been increased to offset the increase of off-base child care costs over the past two decades. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, national average for child care has increased 101.46% (\$20.29 per day) between 2000 and 2020.⁶⁵ This increase requires Congressional support, which will prolong the time and effort required to seek this change.

The military compensation package is comprised of basic pay, special and incentive pay, retirement pay, and in-kind benefits such as housing allowance, food in-kind, health care, and child care which falls under the category of Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR). The rationale behind in-kind pay is that providing noncash benefits “promotes military readiness by reducing some of the strains associated with family life, such as having to identify easily accessible, affordable, high-quality child care services”.⁶⁶ Child care benefits are found to be the best incentive for individuals without nearby family. Benefits packages offered to military service members need to be as good or better than those available in the civilian sector in order to recruit and retain.

The Department of Defense (DOD) child care services policy is to “ensure that child care services support the mission readiness, retention, and morale of the total force during peacetime, overseas contingency operations, periods of force structure change, relocation of military units, base realignment and closure, and other emergency situations.”⁶⁷ At the same time, DOD states

child care is not an entitlement and service members are not guaranteed child care support from the DOD and should have other adequate arrangements for their dependents. Regardless of this contradiction, it is important to emphasize, that employer-sponsored child care has “significant positive effects on individual performance, productivity, or job satisfaction”.⁶⁸

More recently, due to recurring closure and phased reopening following the onset of Novel Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) and in accordance with the DOD’s child development program reopening guidance in the “era of coronavirus”, many centers are operating with fewer spaces due to social distancing and health requirements. Knowing this, then Secretary of Defense Mark Esper testified to congress that there are currently 1.2 million military children affected by remote learning due to COVID-19 causing a military “child care dilemma”. In response, lawmakers stated,

We urge you to work with community leaders, veteran service organizations, and state and local governments to develop and implement creative solutions... further, we ask that renewed guidance encouraging creative scheduling and maximizing teleworking be provided to commanders at all levels. With gratitude for our military families, we remain eager and ready to assist with additional resources or authorities as required to provide for their well-being.⁶⁹

The combination of lawmakers stating they are standing by to assist with additional resources and studies which have further shown that the expense of off-base child care has grown three times in the past two decades. Efforts have been unsuccessfully made to increase the cap in care subsidy in multiple National Defense Authorization Acts to better offset expenses. Subsequently, this has only driven the need for on-base child care, creating further child care challenges. Whereas, multiple studies show that there is a direct correlation between child care challenges on recruitment, readiness, and retention of Airmen, specifically female Airmen. For some families, the current CCA, Child Care Fee Assistance Program subsidy does not offset expenses enough to justify remaining in the military.

Recommendation (4)

The Air Force must advocate through the Department of Defense (DOD) to Congress to legitimize the use of au pairs as a form of subsidized care.⁷⁰ The Child Care Fee Assistance Program through Child Care Aware (CCA) helps to ensure children on the on-base waitlist have a child care option to attend off-base with a subsidy to help offset the cost differential. Current Child Care Fee Assistance Program rules dictate that to receive off-base subsidized care, the “center” must be approved through CCA and comply with the same DOD standards as on-base care. Not included in approved child care is the use of comparable in-home care that the Family Child Care (FCC) provides. Fee assistance plays a significant role in off-base living, waitlists, and opportunities to seek other “types” of care such as Montessori and religious based; however, it does not support the flexibility that the on-base FCC homes provide to support parents who work shift hours. As more females join the force and work non-standard hours, the need for flexible child care options increases. Moreover, due to the military lifestyle where most Airmen do not live within proximity to family, combined with FCC waitlists, Airmen are left seeking off-base options that provides flexibility, which is often found through the use of au pairs.

Au pairs should be reviewed and validated as approved care by CCA. The use of au pairs can undergo the same stringent requirements as care centers do in order to be approved for usage. There are various reputable au pair agencies that coordinate the hiring of au pairs throughout the United States. The process these agencies use for hiring can be viewed as more stringent than that of off-base care centers, which are more in line with the Air Force hiring process. Similar to the restriction of care centers approved, CCA can restrict the number of approved agencies available to source an au pair.

Overall, it is important to acknowledge that not all au pairs are created equal. The hiring process, like that of all on/off-base providers should meet the same basic criteria. Like on-base care, au pairs undergo a background check and training. Au pairs provide flexibility for parents for up a maximum of 10 to 12 hours per day for a maximum 40 to 45 hours a week, pending agency regulations. These services can be utilized throughout the day, evening or night timeframes, which support the shift worker. Pending agency and level of experience, an au pair weekly wage can cost between \$140 to \$400 per week, which does not include the near \$20,000 annual fee or the fees associated to living expenses to house the au pair. The proposed inclusion would consist of a subsidy based on the monthly fee for an au pair and will not include the au pair annual fee.

By including this option, which provides greater flexibility for off-base care when FCC is not an option, it will help to increase female retention and overall readiness. As RAND states, “The data are clear that child care needs and preference vary a great deal across families, which suggests that providing a range of option is more likely to meet these varied needs and to contribute most effectively to readiness and retention”.⁷¹

Conclusion

Since the Military Child Care of 1986 and through the Authorization of Child Care Fee Assistance Program in 2000, significant changes have not been made to the Military Child Care Program. Surveys repeatedly reflect that the challenges associated with child care are one of the top reason’s females separate from the Air Force regardless of how many years of service. Studies have shown the current Military Child Care Program structure is outdated and does not meet the needs of the military working mother. Through review of the Air Force’s current Military Child Care Program, it is evident there is a need for change in order to increase the

availability, and flexibility of care provided to our military children. Additionally, it is evident that there is an unmet need for availability outside of the on-base care provided.

Overall, the current military child care program does not support the United States Air Force's commitment to improve retention and diversity of military females among its ranks. To increase readiness and diversity, the Air Force must make serving a more attractive career for females by focusing on reforming the military child care program to meet 21st century demands of the female service member. To enable this holistic change, the Air Force must request Congressional support for military construction funding, seek ways to centrally fund the Military Child Care Program's Morale Welfare and Recreation funds permanently, increase the Child Care Aware subsidy, and legitimize the use of au pairs as a form of subsidized care. In doing so, the Air Force will become a career that supports the family which will increase female retention and increase in overall force readiness.

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⁵² Kaleth Wright, "House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Chief Master Sergeant Kaleth Wright" (speech, United States Senate Armed Services Subcommittee, March 8, 2017).

⁵³ Brian Everstine, "Bass: Addressing Childcare Shortage Will Take a Whole of Air Force Approach." *Air Force Magazine*, September 22, 2020.

⁵⁴ US Air Force. *Parental Issues Wing Survey Results*. Washington, DC: United States Air Force Women's Initiative Team, September 8, 2020.

⁵⁵ US Air Force. *Parental Issues Wing Survey Results*.

⁵⁶ Holly Corbett, "How Companies are Supporting Working Parents in the COVID Economy," *Forbes Magazine*, July 30, 2020.

⁵⁷ Corbett, "How Companies are Supporting Working Parents in the COVID Economy."

⁵⁸ Julia Fanzeres, "Calls to Help US Women Falling Out of Labour Force Grow Louder." *Bloomberg Report*, February 24, 2021.

⁵⁹ US Air Force Women's Initiative Team, "CDC memorandums during COVID" Facebook thread, January 2021.

⁶⁰ Karen Jowers, "How this \$121 Million may Jump-Start Fixes to Military Child Care Needs." *Military Times*, December 11, 2019.

⁶¹ Jowers, "How this \$121 Million may Jump-Start Fixes to Military Child Care Needs."

⁶² US Department of Labor: Economic Policy Institute, "Child Care Costs in Virginia, 2020," accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states>.

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- ⁶³ US Department of Labor: Economic Policy Institute, “Child Care Costs in Virginia, 2020.” “The U.S. and the High Cost of Child Care: A Review of Prices and Proposed Solutions for a Broken System,” Child Care Aware of America, accessed November 2018, [The US and the High Price of Child Care: 2019 - Child Care Aware® of America](#).
- ⁶⁴ US Department of Health and Human Services, “Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Program; Proposed Rule, 80 Fed. Reg. 80466–80582,” accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-160R>.
- ⁶⁵ US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates,” accessed November 2020, [Occupational Employment Statistics Home Page \(bls.gov\)](#).
- ⁶⁶ Gail L. Zellman, Susan M. Gates, Michell Cho, Rebecca Shaw. *Options for Improving the Military Child Care System* (RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2008), 3-4.
- ⁶⁷ Hristy N. Hamarck, *Military Child Development Program: Background and Issues*, CRS Report for Congress R45288 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 19, 2020), 2, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R45288.pdf>
- ⁶⁸ Hamarck, *Military Child Development Program: Background and Issues*, 3.
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- ⁷⁰ Gail L. Zellman, Susan M. Gates, Michell Cho, Rebecca Shaw. *Options for Improving the Military Child Care System* (RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2008), 6.
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Appendix A

Comparison of The Military Child Care Program to Off-Base Child Care

Type of Child Care Centers

The Military Child Care Program has comparable services to off-base child care. The Department of Defense (DOD) only classifies two types of child care, child care centers and in-home family care. The Military Child Care Program encompasses the Child Development Center (CDC) and in-home Family Child Care (FCC). The “civilian sector” off-base child care, consists of three elements, in-home, family care and care centers. In-home care is considered the use of family care, which both includes direct care given by a family member and the use of an au pair. Off-base child centers include chain centers both public and private (i.e., religiously affiliated, Montessori, and national child centers). It is important to note that the military does not formally recognize family care or au pairs as a standard for child care within the off-base in-home category.

Accreditation and Certification Requirements

The use of accreditation is a reliable option to ensure quality assurance within child care. The Military Child Care Program mandates that all Department of Defense (DOD) child care centers are nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The NAEYC accreditation “organizations evaluate providers on standards related to, for example, curriculum, teaching, health, staff competencies, leadership and management, physical environment, and relationships between teachers, children, parents, and communities”.⁷² Today 97% of all DOD child care centers are nationally accredited by NAEYC and adhere to both state requirements and individual service rules of instruction.⁷³ The NAEYC

provides accreditation for a five-year time period. In addition, all Military Child Care Program child care centers must meet the DOD operational standards required to receive a DOD Certificate to Operate. Moreover, the DOD Certificate to Operate requires each center to pass all announced and unannounced public health, fire, and other forms of safety inspections. The Air Force further mandates on all centers to pass both the Air Force Services Agency (AFSA) inspections and any state inspection or accreditation requirements. Finally, as terms of employment, all military child care program staff members must undergo background checks and meet all training requirements.

In comparison, there is no requirement for off-base child care centers to be accredited by NAEYC. Due to the cost of a NAEYC accreditation, most child care companies do not seek this accreditation, and in turn, are either unaccredited or create their own internal accreditation standard. However, there are national chain centers that create standards that mimic NAEYC standards and are subject to internal inspections similar to that of DOD operational standards and AFSA inspections.

Standards

Prior to conducting research, this papers' original thesis was based on proving, or disproving, that off-base child care was superior to that of the Military Child Care Program. After extensive research, the overall standards of care provided continued to show that the Military Child Care Program continues to be America's "Golden Standard" of child care. The various inspection and accreditation standards that the Military Child Care Program centers must adhere to in comparison to off-base care do not compare. Furthermore, the process of becoming accredited requires continuous self-assess, process improvement to operations and enables staff

development. Moreover, accreditation reassures parents of the quality of care given to their children.

In addition, it was assumed that off-base standards in curriculum were greater than that the on-base curriculum provided; however, this is an inaccurate assumption. National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation ensures that all on-base care centers, along with their off-base peers, adhere to the same Science, Technology, Art, Engineering and Mathematic based curriculums for all ages. Although not all off-base centers acquire NAEYC accreditation, it is important to emphasize that off-base centers at a minimum adhere to state educational standards, which ensure the same basic level of curriculum.

Furthermore, when comparing policies and procedures, there are various aspects with regards to technology that the Military Child Care Program can benefit from utilizing. For example, a standard practice for off-base child care centers is the use of streamlined software that interacts between the center and parents to provide video streaming of the classroom, daily reports (i.e., meal tracking, diaper changes, and “text” exchanging between parent and teacher).

Conclusion

Regardless of on-or-off base care, the type of care provided to a child should be determined by the parent and not based solely off availability and cost. The Military Child Care Program must continue to seek ways for improvement to ensure the program remains America’s “Golden Standard” for child care and is continuously utilized by its Airmen.

⁷² “Early Learning Program Standards” National Association for the Education of Young Children, accessed November 2018, [Professional Development | NAEYC](#)

⁷³ Gail L. Zellman, Susan M. Gates, Michell Cho, Rebecca Shaw. *Options for Improving the Military Child Care System* (RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2008), 19.

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