

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 12, 2024

Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1200 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Austin:

We write regarding the Department of Defense's (DoD's) efforts to address the needs of its child care program,¹ which provides high-quality care for tens of thousands of American military families.² We appreciate that DoD has conducted a thorough review of its 30-year-old child care staffing and compensation model and put forward proposals to increase child care worker pay and address child care staffing shortages that harm military families by limiting child care capacity.³

Two-thirds of active duty military families have children living at home⁴ and, like all 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 also face unique challenges finding child care due to non-standard work schedules, abrupt relocations, and long deployments—and if they cannot find child care, they may not be able to serve, harming military readiness and national security. Thus, we write to commend you on your commitment to invest in child care and increase DoD child care worker pay, and ask for further information on your work to ensure all military families have access to the affordable, high-quality care they need.

Challenges Affecting DoD Child Care

Recognizing the connection between high-quality child care, early learning, and military readiness, DoD has invested in child care for decades, with bipartisan support in Congress.⁵ Today, DoD's child care program is the largest employer-based child care system in the country

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families," report, 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/>.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, Child Development Program, "Recruitment, Retention, and Compensation Task Forces Report," report, October 2023, p. 1, [On file with the Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren].

⁴ *Supra* note 1, p. 16.

⁵ 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," Kristy N. Kamarck and Andrew Tilghman, January 17, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11998/4>.

and widely considered among the best such programs in the country,⁶ serving over 160,000 military children⁷ at on-base Child Development Centers (CDCs) for children five years or younger, School-Age Care for children 6-12 years old, and in-home Family Child Care.⁸ In addition to its high quality, DoD care is affordable, with fees on a sliding scale that keep costs below 7 percent of family income, meaning a married couple with children making U.S. median income would pay \$5,408 for DoD CDC care, compared to the \$11,582⁹ national average price of child care (or significantly more in many areas).¹⁰

Military families must be able to rely on the DoD child care program, but face long waitlists for DoD child care—averaging between 6 and 7 months or longer in some locations,¹¹ with the Army, for example, reporting that families with children age zero to five wait an average of 139 days for care.¹² As of March 2024, DoD reported nearly 50,000 children were enrolled in CDC across the services, but over 11,500 children in military families had an *unmet need* for child care and were on the CDC waitlist.¹³ A recent study found that many military families “were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of [DoD] child care” but they reported being “dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with seeking/securing child care.”¹⁴

In August 2022, DoD established an internal DoD Task Force to “conduct a comprehensive review of current DoD-wide Child Development Program (CDP) professionals’ recruitment, retention, and compensation structure and related policies... to define challenges and identify best practices.”¹⁵ DoD published its Child Development Program Recruitment, Retention, and Compensation Task Force Report in October 2023, which identified significant CDC caregiver

⁶ Letter from Senator Elizabeth Warren to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, August 6, 2023, <https://www.rickscott.senate.gov/services/files/41E18EB9-8F99-4079-9B1C-312F3297E876>.

⁷ 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 2025 and the Future Years Defense Program,” May 8, 2024, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-military-and-civilian-personnel-programs-in-the-department-of-defense-in-review-of-the-defense-authorization-request-for-fiscal-year-2025-and-the-future-years-defense-program>; U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families,” report, February 2023, p. 1, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf>.

⁸ *Supra* note 1, p. 9.

⁹ CNN, “Here’s where child care costs at least twice as much as rent,” Tami Luhby, May 15, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/15/business/child-care-cost-average-annual/index.html>.

¹⁰ Across the nation in 2021, the median income of families with children under 18 years old was \$82,767 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021), datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/10278-median-family-income-by-family-type; The weekly fee for child care for families making between \$77,501 and \$90,000 annually is \$104 per week, or \$5,408 per year. U.S. Department of Defense, “DoD Reduces On-Base Child Care Fees for Military Families,” Joseph Clark, January 31, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3662171/dod-reduces-on-base-child-care-fees-for-military-families/>.

¹¹ *Supra* note 1, pp. 21-22.

¹² Responses to Questions for the Record for Major General Johnny K. Davis from U.S. Senator Warren, p. 39, [On file with the Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren].

¹³ Letter from Acting Under Secretary of Defense Ashish Vazirani to U.S. Senator Warren, March 21, 2024, [On file with the Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren].

¹⁴ Military Family Advisory Network, “Military Family Support Programming Survey 2023 Report,” June 5, 2024, p. 56, <https://www.mfan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/MFAN-2023-MFSPS-Full-Report.pdf>.

¹⁵ *Supra* note 3, p.1.

shortages, finding that CDC utilization rates declined “primarily in response to the inability to hire and retain staff.”¹⁶

As of May 2023, DoD reported that there are nearly 3,900 caregivers needed to match the existing child care needs, with approximately 20,500 CDC direct care staff separating from employment between March 2020 and May 2023, forcing DoD to accept 30% fewer children than if the CDCs had full staffing.¹⁷ The Child Care and Early Education Policy project categorizes a turnover rate above 20 percent as “high.”¹⁸ The Government Accountability Office found DoD faced “turnover rates ranging from 34 percent to 50 percent in fiscal year 2022.”¹⁹ For example, the Air Force has made slight improvements but is “still sitting at 80% child care providers, meaning [there is] a 20% deficit.”²⁰ We are particularly concerned by the numerous reports of staffing shortages among the CDC’s lower-wage, direct care workforce.²¹

Moreover, the DoD Task Force identified reliance on its 30-year-old pay scale for CDC workers as the key driver of staffing shortages and turnover. The DoD Task Force noted that “DoD CDP direct care staff pay is at the bottom of Federal pay,”²² and that multiple studies confirmed a direct link “between poor compensation and low retention.”²³ While pay for child care workers has increased, it has not kept pace with hourly wages for stockers, maids, fast food workers, and cashiers,²⁴ making it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain child care workers, which leads to understaffing at CDCs and reduced capacity for child care for military families. DoD’s task force concluded that “recruitment and retention of qualified CDP professionals has been shown to have a direct correlation to child care capacity, and influences the ability to maximize existing CDC space, thereby reducing the current unmet need for child care.”²⁵

Thus, DoD’s Child Development Program Task Force recommended increasing pay for child care workers to directly improve recruitment and retention of quality and trained CDC staff, stating “the future state of the DoD *System of Care* is reliant on the robust modernization of the existing framework and structure of the CDP pay plan and management standards.”²⁶ The Task Force also recommended “all direct care position descriptions [be] revised and reclassified to accurately depict increased responsibilities and requirements” and “ensure that duties and qualification requirements are more closely aligned with comparable education career fields.”²⁷

¹⁶ *Supra* note 3, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Supra* note 7; *Supra* note 12.

¹⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Military Child Care: Services Should Assess Their Employee Retention Efforts,” report, May 14, 2024, p. 14, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106524>.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Supra* note 7.

²¹ *Supra* note 3.

²² *Supra* note 3, p. 15.

²³ *Supra* note 3, p. 14.

²⁴ *Supra* note 3, p. 6.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, Child Development Program, “Recruitment, Retention, and Compensation Task Forces Report,” report, October 2023, p. 5, [On file with the Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren].

²⁶ *Supra* note 3, p. 7.

²⁷ *Supra* note 3, p. 15.

Conclusion and Questions

During a recent Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, military leaders all agreed that child care is critical to military readiness, recruitment, and retention.²⁸ For example, Acting Under Secretary Vazirani agreed that competitive salaries are a national security concern and necessary to ensure a strong, civilian force, saying “[a]s we’re competing in a very tight labor market, we need to have a competitive pay structure” and “childcare is a key enabler of readiness” and “of military spouse employment.”²⁹

We wholeheartedly agree and urge you to implement the revised pay scale as quickly as possible. Congress and military families are counting on DoD to update its compensation model for direct care staff expeditiously so DoD can hire and retain more caregivers, and more military families can find the care they need.

To better understand the DoD’s efforts to support these military families, we ask you to answer the following questions no later than October 3, 2024:

1. Describe specifically how the DoD plans to improve recruitment and retention of CDC child care workers within the Military Child Development Program.
2. Describe specifically how the DoD will measure those improvements. Such as reduced turnover rates in the lower pay grades, increased usage of current CDC space (vacant rooms), shorter wait lists, etc.
3. How will DoD implement the pay increase for CDC child care workers within the Military Child Development Program?
 - a. What is DoD’s specific plan to increase pay for entry-level classroom staff (GS2, 3, 4, 5 caregivers)?
 - b. How will DoD fund the revised pay scale?
 - c. Will the pay increase be mandatory for all CDCs or will some increases be discretionary (local commanders decide on pay increases based on available Operations and Maintenance (O&M) funds)?
4. What is the DoD’s funding plan for the revision of the pay scale for CDC child care workers within the Military Child Development Program?
5. When will DoD implement the new pay scale for the Military Child Development Program?
6. Please list each current CDP position (from entry level through mid-to-senior level classroom staff and program management positions), the position’s current GS grading, and the proposed GS grading.

²⁸ 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 2025 and the Future Years Defense Program,” May 8, 2024, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-military-and-civilian-personnel-programs-in-the-department-of-defense-in-review-of-the-defense-authorization-request-for-fiscal-year-2025-and-the-future-years-defense-program>.

²⁹ *Id.*

- a. Please list the turnover rate for program management positions (GS-7 through GS-12)?
 - b. Please list the turnover rate for direct care positions (GS-2 through GS-5)?
7. Please list the number of current direct care staff by each GS level, as well as what level they would move to under the redesigned compensation model.
 8. Are military bases required to study comparable wages where the bases are located to determine the appropriate pay level?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Rick Scott
United States Senator