



## LEGISLATIVE POINT PAPER MILITARY QUALITY OF LIFE

### BACKGROUND

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The U.S. military's greatest resources are individual servicemembers and their families. Without highly qualified and committed men and women, even the most sophisticated weaponry will not provide the deterrent force necessary to defend our nation. Factors that contribute to quality-of-life include proper compensation, equal opportunities for career development, appropriate housing, quality healthcare, reasonably priced commissaries, and access to affordable day care. Service in the military comes with frequent risks and dangers. However, an individual servicemember's or family's welfare should never be compromised by the loss or degradation of services owed to them.

The future closures and downsizing of Department of Defense (DOD) military treatment facilities and clinics and the reduction of access to more than 155,000 military families, retirees, and DOD civilian employees raises concerns that these changes put individuals, their coworkers, and their families at risk. The move seeks to transition care from on-base clinics to off-base community care while hospitals aim to prioritize treatment for active-duty personnel. While there is concern that these changes could negatively impact TRICARE recipients, details regarding the logistics of the healthcare transition at overseas installations remain much more unclear. For example, last year Yokosuka Naval Base, homeport of the U.S. 7th Fleet, became the first installation to limit civilian employees to space-available appointments for most healthcare needs, while being encouraged to seek Japanese healthcare providers for routine health maintenance. The American Legion is concerned about these effects on readiness, recruitment, and retention of the civilian workforce which supports the U.S. mission.

Privatized military housing continues to be a problem for families as contracted companies struggle to provide quality housing. Military families complain of substandard housing, exposure to potentially toxic substances such as lead paint and mold, insect and rodent infestations, as well as issues involving poor maintenance practices. Furthermore, water contamination issues on military installations and naval vessels have recently surfaced, causing concerns about access to freshwater for military families in communities such as those associated with the Red Hill Bulk Fuel storage facility in Honolulu, Hawaii.

A recently settled suit by the Department of Justice held one private military housing company liable for \$65 million dollars in damages in a scheme to defraud the U.S. military after it was discovered the company lied about repairs made to military housing facilities while still collecting performance incentive fees paid the military. Regrettably, a recent Government Accountability Office report found that DOD oversight of military privatized housing remains inadequate to ensure that military families have suitable housing.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, not all military families had adequate or timely access to installation childcare providers, due to a shortage of facilities and lengthy waiting lists. Today, the problem persists even with more facilities. The DOD issues orders and directs military members to move globally, so it must seek new ways to mitigate and reduce the problem with access to childcare.

According to “Feeding America,” the nation’s largest hunger-relief charity, as many as 24 percent of active-duty servicemembers have issues with food insecurity and providing for their families. This issue primarily impacts junior enlisted servicemembers between the ranks E-1 through E-4, especially those with families residing within high cost-of-living areas. A systematic review and frequent adjustments to quality-of-life benefits can ensure servicemembers are focused on their duties rather than being concerned for their families’ health and welfare.

The American Legion believes that Congress and the DOD must appropriately prioritize quality- of-life standards for servicemembers and their families. Inflationary pressures resulting from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine has led to significant increases in the cost of living. Funding for military pay, benefits, and military quality-of-life programs must be adjusted accordingly. Moreover, barriers to quality-of-life services offered to servicemembers and their families negatively impact the retention and recruitment numbers of our armed forces.

## **KEY POINTS**

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- DOD considers childcare services a quality-of-life benefit, and DOD officials have indicated that the primary reason for providing childcare services is to enhance force readiness.
- According to DOD, 10 percent of families live on-base, in substandard government-owned military housing that is often dilapidated, too small, and lacking in modern facilities. In light of the recent lawsuit regarding mismanagement by privately owned military housing, concerns about companies’ abilities to provide quality, safe housing continue.
- Food insecurity increasingly threatens individual readiness and the ability for military commands to deploy at a moment’s notice.

## **WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO**

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- Pass legislation that would expand financial assistance to servicemembers for childcare, increase access through new agreements with private and public.