



SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

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MEMORANDUM FOR SENIOR PENTAGON LEADERSHIP
COMMANDERS OF THE COMBATANT COMMANDS
DEFENSE AGENCY AND DOD FIELD ACTIVITY DIRECTORS

SUBJECT: Strengthening Our Support to Service Members and Their Families

Every day, nearly 3.4 million patriotic Americans protect our country by serving in military uniform or as civilian employees at the Department of Defense. Their service and sacrifice ensure that the U.S. military remains the strongest fighting force in the world.

One of my top priorities as Secretary of Defense is to do right by our outstanding Service members, military families, and civilian employees. In recent years, our military community has weathered a number of challenges, but our people have risen to every mission — and done it all with extraordinary resilience. But it is the Department's ongoing moral duty to spare our outstanding people stress and struggle on the homefront where we can — and to show our Service members and civilian employees how much they mean to us with tangible support that makes a genuine difference in their lives. The Department has therefore relentlessly focused on improving quality of life, and I am very proud of what we've achieved so far. For example:

- On January 1, 2023, Service members and civilian employees received a pay increase of 4.6 percent — the largest in two decades. The Department increased its Basic Allowance for Housing this year by an average of 12.1 percent, the largest percentage increase in 15 years, and Basic Allowance for Subsistence increased by 11.2 percent.
- In September 2022, we announced a series of actions to provide \$864 million in financial and quality of life program enhancements for Service members and families. Since then, military communities have seen immediate results. For example, military commissaries exceeded the goal that I set by providing savings of 25.3 percent compared to the local marketplace, and we made military moves easier by extending Temporary Lodging Expense coverage for Service members and raising our Dislocation Allowance for Service members in grades E-1 to E-6.
- We've continued to expand Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS, an extension of the military's traditional fee-assistance program, in which eligible states are invited to participate. This important resource for military families is now available in eight states. This expansion allows more child care providers to participate, making it easier for our military families to gain access to affordable, high-quality child care. This year, the Department continues to work with several states and counties to expand this program even further.
- We have transformed the Military OneSource website, the Department's online portal for support to military families. It is an important source of trusted information, resources, and confidential help, and users of the new Military OneSource will enjoy



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a better, more personalized experience. Military OneSource should work for those who use it, and we are dedicated to ensuring a positive and effective user experience.

- To ensure that we hear the concerns of our valued civilian employees, the Department updated its policy on Command Climate Assessments to allow all civilian employees to participate. This helps us get the feedback we need to build a better working environment for everyone.

I'm grateful to the leaders at every level of the Department who have made these improvements real. But we still have much more to do to ensure the well-being and success of all our people. To that end, today I'm directing the following actions:

- **Provide universal prekindergarten at DoD Education Activity (DoDEA) schools.** Children who go to preschool are nearly 50 percent more likely to finish high school and go on to higher education, no matter their background. Recognizing this, the President's Fiscal Year 2024 budget seeks more than \$90 million to expand full-time, universal prekindergarten to all DoDEA schools. This funding will make more than 4,000 children eligible for prekindergarten programs at DoDEA schools. The Department looks forward to working with Congress to fund this program and working through phased implementation over a five-year period.
- **Provide Service members access to Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts.** These accounts will enable Service members with dependents to set aside up to \$5,000 in pretax income through payroll deduction for eligible dependent care expenses, such as child care, preschool, before or after school programs, and summer camp. The Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R)) will work with the Military Departments to make this benefit (which is already available to the Department's civilian employees) available to Service members as soon as feasible. Department leadership will also reach out to all those who are eligible to ensure they understand how this benefit may help their families.
- **Promote new parental leave benefits.** Earlier this year, at the direction of Congress, the Department issued new policies to provide 12 weeks of paid, non-chargeable parental leave to Service members who welcome a child into their family through birth, adoption, or long-term foster-care placement. These 12 weeks of parental leave, which come in addition to authorized convalescent leave for Service members who give birth, are available for births, adoptions, and placements that occur on or after December 27, 2022. Service members on parental leave under the old program as of that date were given the opportunity to transition to the new, expanded benefit. We want to ensure that all Service members and their families understand the benefits to which they are entitled. I therefore direct the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, in consultation with the USD(P&R) and the Secretaries of the Military Departments, to immediately launch a messaging campaign to publicize the important new benefit now available under the Military Parental Leave Program.

- **Further support for our exceptional families.** The Department is deeply committed to ensuring that family members with exceptional needs have access to superb care, support, and expertise. Therefore, I direct the USD(P&R) to make improvements to the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) within 90 days. We will establish a standard process to enroll and disenroll families from the program, require that support personnel make personal contact with each enrolled family at least once a year, better coordinate the way support personnel are assigned to families, and ease the transition between support personnel. We will also enhance EFMP oversight and evaluation by requiring the Secretaries of the Military Departments to submit quarterly data in the EFMP Data Repository to measure performance and program effectiveness. Effective immediately, Military OneSource will — to the greatest extent feasible — assign families a single specialty consultant to help foster deeper relationships and provide better continuity of support. These consultants complement the services provided by support personnel at military installations worldwide.
- **Expand spouse eligibility for financial assistance through My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA).** MyCAA provides eligible military spouses with up to \$4,000 in financial assistance to earn a license, certificate, or associate degree. Data shows that the first cohort of spouses who used this benefit were more likely to be employed and earn more compared to those who did not participate. Further, participants' Service member spouses were more likely to remain in the military. To build on this success, effective immediately, the Department will expand MyCAA eligibility to military spouses of active duty Service members in pay grades E-6 and O-3. The program will now cover the spouses of Service members on active duty in pay grades E-1 to E-6, W-1 to W-2, and O-1 to O-3.
- **Continue to work to make professional licenses portable.** Military spouses provide critical support to our Service members, and we remain committed to supporting our Service members and spouses as they relocate in the service of their Nation. On January 5, 2023, the President signed into law Congress's amendment to the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, which requires that professional licenses be portable, with the exception of licenses to practice law, for Service members and their spouses as they move between states. This law will reduce burdens on Service members and help military spouses more easily obtain meaningful employment wherever they live. The Department is committed to robust communication with Service members and their spouses to ensure there is broad awareness of the new law and will also continue to work with the states to promote the sharing of licensure best practices and the approval of occupational licensure compacts.

It is a stirring testament to the ideals of our democracy that millions of people freely choose, every day, to defend them. Serving alongside these outstanding Americans is a profound honor. The leaders of this Department stand solemnly committed to taking care of our Service members, military families, and civilian employees as we work to protect our fellow Americans and the country that we love. That's a sacred trust — and we will keep up our end of the bargain.

