

Congressman Carbajal's Testimony for Quality of Life Panel

Thank you, Chairman Bacon and Ranking Member Houlahan, for holding this hearing today. I commend you for your leadership and work as part of this panel since its creation, and I look forward to the recommendations that will come from it.

I am a proud Marine, having served eight years in the Reserves. This is my eighth year serving in Congress and on the Armed Services Committee. This has given me perspective on the things that DoD does well to raise quality of life for our service members, but also on areas we need to improve.

When I think about how to improve quality of life for our service members two things come to mind: 1) pay differential between enlisted and officers and 2) child care access and affordability.

I know my good friend and Chairman of this Panel, Mr. Bacon, is already working on the first issue, so I will only touch on it slightly. The pay gap between enlisted and officers is concerning, especially for junior enlisted.

I know this committee has worked hard to deliver pay increases in the last few years, but we need to do more for junior enlisted.

In your report to the Military Personnel Subcommittee, I urge you to prioritize this disparity. Without any actions on it, we will continue to struggle as a nation to meet recruiting goals and potentially create retention problems.

Nationwide, there is a lack of child care options, costs are unaffordable, and waitlists are months long. This is negatively impacting our service members, not just in their day-to-day productivity, but also their morale, as we heard it from Senior Enlisted Leaders last week.

Part of the affordability issue is directly related to the pay issue I just discussed.

However, that is not the only concern. We need DoD to act more swiftly on this growing issue. For example, DoD is working to increase staff recruitment and retention for child care development centers.

As a way to improve recruitment and retention at CDCs, in the Fiscal Year 2023 NDAA, Congress gave DoD the authority to discount fees for civilian child care development center employees whose children are enrolled. Under this authority, DoD could offer discounts of up to 100 percent. But as of this year the military departments are still in the process of establishing policies and implementing the childcare employee discount program.

The House passed Fiscal Year 2024 NDAA included a provision that would have require the DoD to implement this 100 percent discount but was taken out during Conference negotiations. This should signal to the DoD that this is an issue Congress is paying attention to.

Military families should not need to worry how they are going to find or afford child care. In this panel's report, I encourage imploring the DoD to use their existing authorities to alleviate this issue and to work with Congress where they need new authorities or funding.

Quality of life issues are not just morale issues, they are also recruitment issues, readiness issues, and retention issues. Without addressing them, we will struggle with recruitment and retention.

I thank you for this opportunity to testify and look forward to any questions you have.