

Rep. Jackie Speier (CA-14)

**Member Day Testimony before the House Appropriations Military Construction-VA
Subcommittee**

May 19, 2021

Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz and Ranking Member Carter, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Military Construction-VA Subcommittee about funding priorities for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 appropriations. Today, I would like to discuss two areas where the military desperately needs additional facilities investment to address decades of neglect by the Department of Defense (DoD): Military Child Development Centers and Unaccompanied Personnel Housing. I am proud to have led two letters to the Subcommittee this year on these issues, signed by 23 members and 10 members, respectively.

First, I would like to thank the Subcommittee for its leadership on military child care. In last year's (FY 2021) appropriations, 83% of the \$184 million made available for Military Child Development Center (CDC) projects were provided due to the proactive action of this Subcommittee and were not included in DoD's budget request. Without this Subcommittee's intervention, child care facilities would have received minimal funding.

Unfortunately, the need for investment in military child care is enormous and growing. Of DoD's 761 Child Development Centers, only 378 are in "Good" condition, with 135 in "Poor" or "Failing" condition, according to DoD. In addition to substandard facility conditions, child care capacity is insufficient. DoD reported that nearly 9,000 children of servicemembers were stuck on waitlists with immediate need for child care. Despite this obvious and overwhelming need to fix and expand child care facilities, only 8 CDC facility projects were

funded in the last decade. This low number is squarely due to DoD's failure to request funding for these essential projects, which stems from the failure of child care to compete successfully in the military services' military construction project development processes. We know that this is not for a lack of potential projects—in DoD's 2020 report to Congress, the services identified 121 CDC projects that are not yet funded, many of which would add crucial child care capacity at installations with high demand and long waitlists. I followed up with letters to each service secretary. The Army replied that between FY22–FY30, they plan to renovate about 125 existing CDCs, School Age Centers, and youth facilities, as well as construct 21 new CDCs that will add about 4,600 spaces to their CDC capacity. This ambitious plan certainly deserves support. Unfortunately, the Navy's response did not include specific plans, and I have yet to receive a response from the Air Force.

We must change the dynamics and begin a major reinvestment campaign in military child care. I'd like to ask the Subcommittee to continue your leadership in this area and seek the highest possible amount for Military CDC projects—if necessary, pulling projects off of the service Unfunded Priority Lists and the Future Years Defense Program if the president's budget does not request funds for those projects directly. The MilCon-VA Appropriations Subcommittee plays a critical role, but I also want to assure you that I am also seeking additional sources of funding because the need is so great. The last time that DoD made a major investment in child care facilities was the late 2000s, when a combination of military construction appropriations, one-time spending from the 2009 stimulus package (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act), and temporary (now expired) authority to spend additional Operations & Maintenance (O&M) funds on CDC facility projects were leveraged to make a major investment in military child care. I believe we once again need these three sources, and so I am advocating to include

funds for military child care facilities in the infrastructure package, and I am working to include a provision in the FY22 NDAA to bring back the lapsed provision to create a stream of O&M funds for child care facilities. You have my commitment that the HASC will be a good partner to make progress on this crucial issue.

Second, I would like to address the condition of unaccompanied personnel housing. This issue came to my attention when I led a CODEL to Fort Hood, TX, last year to investigate the Army's failures leading up to and after the brutal murder of SPC Vanessa Guillén. Among many other locations, we visited the barracks where Vanessa lived, and our party was stunned by the poor condition of the facilities. The CODEL included Army and Navy veterans, and those veterans said at the post-trip press conference that the barracks we visited were the worst they had ever seen. Soldiers who had watched the press conference livestream then wrote us on social media to tell us that we actually saw some of the nicer barracks at Fort Hood, underscoring the depth of the problem and the cumulation of many years of neglect.

After the trip, I wrote the Army about my concerns about the condition of the barracks that we saw on the CODEL, and the Army acknowledged that 43% of the barracks at Fort Hood do not meet Army minimum standards, and that modernizing these barracks will cost nearly half a billion dollars through FY27. Further, the Army recognizes that this problem is not limited to one installation but is endemic throughout the service. The Army has announced a nearly \$10 billion plan to modernize unaccompanied servicemember housing so that all barracks meet or exceed Army standards within a decade.

I ask the Subcommittee to support the Army's and all of the other services' plans to renovate unaccompanied personnel housing to ensure that all servicemembers have safe, comfortable, and modern places to live. This is the right thing to do for our troops, and it is also

essential to the readiness and wellbeing of military personnel. Over and over at Fort Hood I heard concerns from servicemembers and their loved ones about their sense of safety. The quality of housing is one of the key factors that contributes to that sense of safety and should never be dismissed or deprioritized.

In the wake of so much bad news about sexual harassment, sexual assault, and suicide, one of the realizations from the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, the Army's People First Task Force, and the Secretary of Defense's commission chaired by Lynn Rosenthal, is that the culture and command climate are essential for preventing harm to and promoting the wellbeing of servicemembers. Much of this is about how leaders treat subordinates, whether operational tempo (or OPTEMPO) allows servicemembers to maintain relationships and care for themselves, and whether servicemembers are held accountable when they harm others. But a large part of the climate is impacted by the conditions of living, and so I believe that in its efforts to fund quality child care and housing facilities, this subcommittee is supporting the culture and command climate that we must achieve to do right by the brave women and men who wear their nation's uniform. Thank you for considering our requests.