

**DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE**  
**PRESENTATION TO THE PERSONNEL SUBCOMMITTEE**  
**COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES**  
**UNITED STATES SENATE**

**SUBJECT: AIR FORCE FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES**

**STATEMENT OF: MS. ELIZA NESMITH**  
**CHIEF OF THE AIRMAN AND FAMILY SERVICES DIVISION**  
**UNITED STATES AIR FORCE**

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## **Introduction**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Graham, and Members of the Personnel Subcommittee, for the chance to appear before you today to highlight some of our Air Force initiatives we have implemented to support our most valued resource. Our Airmen are committed to serving their country and do so around the world every day. Their accomplishments are a source of pride for Air Force leadership and our Nation. Airmen make a decision to stay in the Air Force based on many factors, one of which is the quality of support they and their families receive. Caring for families has a direct impact on mission readiness; when we take care of Air Force families, Airmen are free from distractions and better able to focus on the mission. Our Chief of Staff has made developing and caring for Airmen and their families a top priority for the United States Air Force.

## **Deployment Support**

We tailor programs on both the home-front and the front-line to meet the needs of single and married members and their families who are impacted by deployments. We offer programs and services across the three phases of the deployment cycle: pre-deployment, deployment or sustainment, and reintegration or reunion. These programs help Airmen and families identify and resolve concerns related to deployment.

At home-station, we offer information and referral services directly to spouses and families. This past year, our pre-deployment briefings armed 100,000 members and families with information and resources to help them prepare for extended separations, with special emphasis on personal, professional and legal matters. During deployment, free morale calls help Airmen and families stay connected, thereby increasing communication and decreasing the sense of isolation. During the sustainment phase, our Airman and Family Readiness Centers conduct workshops and activities

which help family members address issues such as financial stability, parenting, and stress. Our reintegration briefings helped 22,000 spouses this year understand changes which their loved one may have experienced during deployment, and offered them ways to address those changes and improve the quality of the reunion. Over 15,000 family members attended our communication and life skills workshops, and 24,000 requested and received financial counseling. We also provided employment assistance to prepare 40,000 spouses for portable careers. Although stressors associated with longer and multiple deployments may begin to wear on Air Force families, we ensure there are services and resources at their disposal to help address their concerns.

On the front-line, our Deployed Airman and Family Readiness Center in Al Udeid provided over 8,100 consultations last year. Keeping single and married deployed Airmen in touch with their families provides an emotional link to family and friends back home. Some of the most requested services by deployed members were financial management, family reintegration, and personal and work-life issues. Accessibility to morale phones, computers, and faxes allows deployed Airmen to make frequent contact with families and friends.

### **Military Child Education**

Air Force families include 145,000 children ages 6-18; these children typically move six to nine times during their school years. Academic standards, promotion and graduation requirements, services for children with special needs, eligibility for sports and other activities, and transfer and acceptance for records vary greatly from state to state and district to district. While these are not new issues, national emphasis on quality education and higher standards for admission to post high school education and training institutions increases the stakes for military children. Additionally, the added stress of family separation due to deployments combines with transition issues to increase the need for information and support to these families.

Our new family structure enabled us to make great progress in institutionalizing support for Air Force-connected students attending public, private, Department of Defense Dependent Schools, and home and cyber schools. Overseas Air Force bases and 12 stateside installations locally fund school liaisons; other Air Force bases use their Airman and Family Readiness Center staff to provide school liaison support as a collateral duty with other family support services. Also, a senior military officer or DoD civilian is designated to attend local school board meetings to advocate for the interests of Air Force families. Despite limited funding, major commands and installations employ creative initiatives such as providing webcasts of graduations so deployed parents can share in these occasions. We sponsor training in conjunction with the Military Child Education Coalition for staff working education issues, and partner with Army and Navy to offer training to schools located near installations. The Air Force continues to strengthen its partnerships with the National Military Family Association, Military Impacted Schools Association, Military Child Education Coalition, Department of Defense Education Agency, the other Services, and the US Department of Education in a concentrated effort to ease the tough challenges that military students and their families face.

### **Support for Working Spouses**

Today, more and more spouses seek the personal fulfillment of a full professional career and many families need two incomes. As a result, spouse employment and career development opportunities are crucial for recruitment and retention. Studies show over 50 percent of Air Force spouses currently work outside the home, and 77 percent wish to work outside the home. Typically, military spouses earn less than their civilian counterparts, even though 7 of 10 have some college education.

Our Air Force programs provide spouses with the knowledge and skills they need to develop and maintain a successful career within the framework of the mobile military lifestyle. Installation-level staff members interface with employers in the community to raise awareness of the value of hiring military spouses. Airman and Family Readiness Centers provide classes and individual consultation on career planning and all phases of the job search, as well as assistance with on-line resources and access to computers. One Air Force spouse arrived at an Air Force base last year with a long and daunting to-do list, but said the one thing she didn't have to worry about was where to look for career and employment assistance: "It was comforting to have one centralized area I could go to and find the resources I needed."

The Air Force is also working with DoD to support spouse employment initiatives through programs such as "Spouses to Teachers" and "My Career Advancement Account," which provides up to \$6,000 for education, licensure, certification, and continuing education for a portable career.

The Air Force Aid Society sponsors a Spouse Tuition Assistance Program which grants up to \$1,500 to a spouse stationed overseas to defer the cost of college tuition, and the Spouse Employment Training Program which funds up to \$10,000 for Airman and Family Readiness Center programs that assist spouses with requirements for portable careers. In 2009, 32 grant proposals were approved across the Air Force. Participants will train in medical transcription, pharmacy technology, computers, nursing assistance, and special needs education.

### **Child and Youth Programs**

We made significant progress this year helping Airmen and their families balance the competing demands of parenting and military service. Readily available, quality and affordable child care and youth programs continue to be a workforce issue with direct impact on mission readiness. The challenging military environment includes higher operations tempo, increased

mobilization, and longer periods of time away from home. Our challenge over the past several years has been to expand access to child care. With your support, and the assistance of the Department of Defense, we continue to increase child care spaces for Airmen.

Thanks to the temporary legislative authority for child care projects, the “Growing Child Care Spaces” initiative funded 18 minor construction projects. Congress also funded 8 MILCON projects, plus 7 others in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This construction boom is expected to significantly reduce the known Air Force child care space shortfall from 6,400 child care spaces to zero by the time all funded construction is complete. Our next challenge will be to renovate or replace the aging infrastructure at child development and youth centers.

The “Expanded Child Care” program provides 16,000 hours of child care each month to assist Airmen who require additional child care support during shifts, deployments, or when they work in excess of a normal duty day. The “Returning Home Care” program supports Airmen returning or on leave from 30 days or more deployment in support of contingency operations with 16 hours of free child care. To ensure child care is affordable when a space is unavailable at the child development center or school age program, the “Family Child Care Subsidy” program provides an average subsidy of \$142 per child per month in Air Force Family Child Care homes. Our partnership with the Air Force Aid Society in the “Give Parents a Break program” provides several hours of free child care each month to parents who are dealing with challenges inherent to military life, including deployments, remote tours of duty, and extended hours.

We continue to expand the “Home Community Care” program, which reduces out-of-pocket expenses for Air Reserve Component members by providing free in-home quality child care during drill weekends. We significantly expanded the program to new locations this past year, with a total of 43 participating family child care homes in 37 locations in 26 states typically not near active duty

bases. The program offered over 57,000 hours of child care last year, with 24,000 hours provided in off-base, civilian contracted homes during Unit Training Assembly weekends. We expect the amount of off-base care to increase to 36,000 hours during 2009.

We capitalize on our relationships with national family service organizations to expand child and youth programs. Our partnership with the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies provides child care in off-base areas where on-base child care is not available. We will expand this relationship to include respite child care over the coming months.

We continue to provide outstanding youth development opportunities for Air Force children, from elementary school through high school. Providing support for geographically-separated families has been an area of our focus this year, and partnership opportunities have allowed us to reach additional families living in civilian communities and on active installations.

We also partner with Boys & Girls Clubs of America to offer a one-year free membership in a local Boys & Girls Club. This allows us to reach active duty, Guard and Reserve families who do not live near a military installation, and provides their children with a safe and positive place to spend out-of-school time. Our partnership with United States Department of Agriculture/4-H and our sister services fosters the development of 4-H clubs on Air Force bases and provides opportunities for military youth to participate in 4-H programs in every county in the United States, and in our overseas locations.

The Air Force offers a variety of residential, specialty, and other base-specific camp opportunities. The “Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve Teen Leadership Summits” are no-cost summer camps for Reserve and Guard teens ages 15-18 years. We partner with Air Force Reserve and the University of Georgia 4-H to provide these camps in 2009 for more than 150 youth. We also partner with the National Military Family Association to host seven Operation Purple

camps on Air Force installations; these camps are geared toward teenagers who have experienced their parents' deployments and may not have a local support system that understands their unique issues. The European Keystone Summit, and camps developed in partnership with the National Military Family Association, provides residential youth camps during the summer. Over 25,000 Air Force youth participate in camps designed to help them achieve their potential, develop their self-esteem, and build their resistance to negative pressures.

We focus on fitness through "Air Force FitFactor," which encourages physical activity and healthy eating selections for youth ages 6-18 years. This successful program reaches over 15,000 youth each year. Our new Air Force FitFamily initiative will roll out in 2010 and allow families to register as a team to enhance family fitness and wellness.

Additionally, the Air Force has made great efforts to expand or create fitness programs for parents and families. Most fitness centers have a family-oriented fitness room and programs that allow parents to work out with their children. For example, our fitness professionals created and supported programs such as Mommy and Me, Yoga for Kids, and Strollerobics. Our programs and services allow families to participate in outdoor adventure activities, libraries, clubs, and community centers provide an outlet for families experiencing stressors. The rich variety of programs helps families connect with the larger Air Force Family, and others who are experiencing similar challenges.

### **Exceptional Family Members and Special Needs**

To identify gaps in services, our recent Caring for People forum brought together more than 200 Air Force behavioral specialists, chaplains, family advocacy personnel and other family support professionals. The Forum focused on issues on deployment, families, schools, special needs, Guard and Reserve families, and single Airmen. The resultant top 11 initiatives included development of a

special needs family support program, a social networking plan for military families similar to Facebook, expansion of family support resources for Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, expansion of schools support functions, and a focus on single Airmen.

The Air Force identified an emerging need to standardize support and advocacy for families enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program. We have a long-standing and successful process for identifying families with special needs and facilitating personnel moves and assignments based on the families' requirements. However, we also determined there is need for a companion program to provide families with continuing support as they move from location to location. Over 14,000 families have Exceptional Family Members, and it is important to minimize the adverse effects of these moves on the family or member's career. As such, we are actively engaged in creating a comprehensive program that offers these families consistent support and reassurance throughout their moves, extended or repeated deployments, and military career.

Thank you for the opportunity to address these issues today for Air Force families. We look forward to working with you as we continue to enhance our support to the men and women of the United States Air Force and their families.