



DOD officials strive to strengthen, empower military families

by Elaine Wilson
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2/18/2011 - **WASHINGTON (AFNS)** -- From educational opportunities to spouse employment, Defense Department officials are expanding military family support programs to better meet families' current needs, as well as to empower them for the challenges that lie ahead, the DOD official who oversees military family programs said Feb. 17.

"It's not just about providing fish -- it's teaching to fish as well," said Robert L. Gordon III, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy, to an audience of politicians, spouses and service organization leaders during the Congressional Military Family Caucus Kickoff in the U.S. Capitol building here.



Robert L. Gordon III and Karen Guice take questions Feb. 17, 2011, during the Congressional Military Family Caucus Kickoff in the U.S. Capitol building in Washington. Mr. Gordon is the deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy. Ms. Guice is the executive director of the Federal Recovery Coordination Program. (Defense Department photo/Elaine Wilson)

The caucus' goal is to educate Congress members and staff about the unique challenges, including mental health, wounded warrior care, health care, education and disability, that service members and their families face.

The military community is diverse and vast, Mr. Gordon said, with more than 2 million service members, 1.59 million military-connected children and nearly 800,000 spouses.

"The question is: How do we look at that community and address their needs, but also empower them for the future?" he asked.

The nation is in an era of "fiscal austerity," Mr. Gordon acknowledged.

However, he added, families continue to have the same needs and concerns, including education, behavioral health support, employment and community reintegration.

Mr. Gordon called for an increase in DOD partnerships to bolster family support in the years ahead.

The department must continue to foster relationships with nonprofit and military spouse groups and the commercial and entertainment sectors, he added.

Leadership also is "absolutely key" when addressing the military community's most-pressing issues and concerns, he said, but it will take more than just DOD leaders to do the job.

Government and nonprofit group leaders and senior military spouses, Mr. Gordon said, must be "focused like a laser beam on the issues and concerns of our military community."

Families have a plethora of support programs available to them, but leaders must ensure those programs are effective and adequately address needs, he added.

Toward that end, Mr. Gordon touched on a few of the programs and initiatives the department is looking at to increase education and career opportunities.

DOD officials, for example, plan to conduct an education review to ensure a "world-class" education for military children. Of the 1.2 million military-connected children in schools, roughly 85,000 are in DOD schools, about 70,000 are in public schools on military installations and the rest, Mr. Gordon noted, attend off-base public schools.

The 172-day review will look at science, technology and engineering, math, early child education and languages, he said, to ensure all 1.2 million military children are being adequately prepared for 21st-century

demands.

For younger children, Mr. Gordon said the department is working to expand the number of child care slots within communities.

The DOD has 923 child development centers with 200,000 young children needing care and a shortfall of about 30,000 slots, he said.

To alleviate the shortfall, Mr. Gordon said, DOD officials have partnered with 13 states to increase military family access to community-based, quality child care.

This focus on community care makes sense, he said, since roughly 70 percent of families live off base.

"We have to have partnerships where we provide those sorts of resources where the communities are," he said.

Officials also are focused on improving spouse employment opportunities, Mr. Gordon said.

Of the 800,000 military spouses, about 77 percent would like work, he said.

However, he acknowledged, spouses are hindered by frequent transitions and deployments.

Department officials are engaging in a spouse education and career opportunity initiative to alleviate some of those employment challenges, Mr. Gordon said.

The initiative includes expanding the Army Spouse Employment Program into the Military Spouse Employment Program so all spouses can benefit, he said. The Army's program helps connect spouses with opportunities in Fortune 500 and Fortune 100 companies.

These are just a few of the programs the department is working on, Mr. Gordon said, noting many others are outlined in the White House report, titled: "Strengthening our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment."

This report describes the sweeping interagency effort underway to better support military families.

Federal agencies, he added, have made nearly 50 commitments in terms of family support.

Moving ahead, Mr. Gordon said it will take a mix of innovation and creativity to meet military families' needs, while ensuring they're empowered "to be the best they can be."