Lessons on child care, from the military [1]

The military transformed what was once an underfunded, scattershot child care system into one of the best in the country. Some see it as a model to emulate.

Author: Gupta, Alisha Haridasani
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EXCERPTS

“Some commanders grumble that they are warriors, not babysitters.”

— New York Times article about military child care from 1975

In 1978, Linda Smith walked into her new job as program director of the child care center at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona to find a distressing sight: dozens of toddlers and infants all crammed into one room with a single caregiver and a TV mounted on the wall.

“They were all just running around the room, and there was just one chair — for the caregiver,” Ms. Smith said. “Imagine the chaos.”

The scene Ms. Smith witnessed was actually quite common in a child care system that was then deeply underfunded and riddled with scandal. At the time, most military child care centers did not even meet fire and safety codes, according to a scathing report published in 1982 by the General Accounting Office, the congressional watchdog.

The tipping point came in 1987, when the U.S. Army closed a child care center at the Presidio base in San Francisco amid reports of children being sexually abused.

In the ensuing years, the Defense Department, with the help of Ms. Smith, would engineer a transformation of its child care system, laying the groundwork for the creation of what is widely considered among the best such programs in the country.

Today, the system’s standards are considered more rigorous than any state’s and almost all of its centers meet the criteria for national accreditation, which includes having a vetted curriculum and a low student-teacher ratio. By comparison, less than one in 10 civilian programs are accredited.

Because child care is considered essential to “military readiness,” the Defense Department spends over $1 billion a year, funding everything from upkeep of centers to subsidizing parent fees to the employment of 23,000 child care workers, many of whom are specifically trained by the military for early education, and are paid more than their civilian counterparts.

The model is one that researchers, advocates and lawmakers — most notably Senator Elizabeth Warren and the co-sponsors of her expansive universal child care bill, including Senator Cory Booker, and Representatives Mondaire Jones and James McGovern — urge the rest of the country to emulate.

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Last week, the House passed a $3.5 trillion blueprint, paving the way for Congress to draft legislation that would expand the social safety net, although its ultimate shape remains to be worked out in the coming days through a quirky process called reconciliation. It’s unlikely that the package will go as far as replicating the military’s turnaround at a national scale and may instead create a universal prekindergarten system.

But the experience of the military provides crucial lessons. Before its transformation, the military child care system was plagued by many of the same problems that plague America’s national child care system today: no clear teaching standards, inconsistent quality and low teacher pay, said Lynette Fraga, chief executive of Child Care Aware of America, a national child care advocacy organization.

“Taking the lessons they’ve learned,” Ms. Fraga said, “could be incredibly important to reimagining the civilian system.”

‘Warriors, not babysitters’

The story of how the Defense Department transformed its child care services is inextricable from the military’s broader changes in the 1970s. In 1973, the military ended the compulsory draft that started before World War II, switching to an all-volunteer armed force.

Without a draft, and in the shadow of the unpopular Vietnam War, the military found itself having to attract and retain talent — a situation that catalyzed the creation of a raft of new policies in the coming years.

One change was the 1975 decision to allow pregnant women to keep their jobs. Until that point, military women — nearly all of whom held noncombat roles at the time — were automatically discharged if they became pregnant, unless special exceptions were granted. The change in policy quickly led to a surge in marriages and babies. By 1986, on one base — Hampton Roads, in Virginia, which housed 100,000 employees and their families — 400 babies were born each month, according to a New York Times article published that year.

Informal care arrangements started sprouting up all over. Young parents would sometimes ask commanders to help look after their children, The Times wrote. “Some commanders grumble that they are warriors, not babysitters.”

Parents who were called for drills in the middle of the night would often bring their groggy children, still wearing pajamas, and leave them alone in their cars while they worked, Ms. Smith recalled.

On many bases, parents created ad hoc “nurseries” and hired temporary caregivers who would be on call on an hourly basis. The fees parents were charged were so low, they would barely cover staff wages and there was little money left to invest in upgrading the nursery.

One of the first things Ms. Smith did when she arrived at the child care center in Arizona was hire permanent staff members and move them onto the government’s payroll.

Then she tapped a local community college to provide her staff with formal training. The training was paid for by the military as well, and wage increases were tied to a worker’s level of qualifications. Slowly, these changes began to improve staff retention rates and the quality of care.

The center became fully woven into the functioning of the base. “When they did drills in the middle of the night, I’d get a call from the base commander saying, ‘Come open the child care center because my men and women can’t come unless you do that,’” Ms. Smith said.

Ms. Smith would go on to replicate her model at over a dozen other U.S. bases around the world.

But at a majority of bases, quality was still lagging and Congress was under increasing pressure to fix the problem.

In 1989, after consulting with Ms. Smith and the Defense Department, lawmakers passed the Military Child Care Act, mandating that the department fund child care programs and staff training. The law also increased wages for caregivers, kept fees for parents low and enforced safety standards.

Accountability — things like regular facility inspections — fell under the control of the Defense Department, not states, because otherwise “we would never have had consistency,” Ms. Smith said.

The military also had the authority to close centers that didn’t meet its standards. “We had to report to Congress when any center was closed, and no base commander wanted to be reported to Congress that his facility didn’t meet specific standards,” said Ms. Smith, who now works as the director of the early childhood initiative at the Bipartisan Policy Center, a think tank.

A tale of two systems

Today, about 97 percent of the child care centers run by the Defense Department on bases and in certified home-based facilities are nationally accredited, compared with 9 percent of civilian centers nationwide, according to a 2020 report by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service. An unaccredited center can still be licensed by state or local governments after meeting basic health and safety standards, which vary from state to state but generally involve things like class sizes, staff background checks and building safety. To become accredited, a center must meet a set of higher standards focused on the quality of the teaching program.

“Think of all child care systems as a three-legged stool between access, affordability and quality, and if you focus on just one leg, the other two fall off,” said Rhian Evans Allvin, chief executive of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

With the military system, “they’ve been able to keep all the legs of the stool on,” Ms. Allvin said.

Military families can log onto a centralized website to enroll children of all ages. Fees are determined by a sliding scale based on total family income. In 2019, they ranged from about $3,000 to $8,400 a year per child.

By comparison, the national average fee for full-time civilian child care in 2017 was $10,000 a year, according to a Moody’s analysis, and can go up to $20,000 in Massachusetts.

Families in the military do, however, face long waiting lists that can often stretch into years, said Nicole Russell, government relations deputy director at the National Military Family Association, an advocacy group. Ms. Russell herself is on a child care waiting list in Northern Virginia. To try to address the short supply, the Defense Department has partnerships with a network of accredited civilian centers and offers subsidies to help pay the higher fees.

Caregivers at military centers can earn $12 to $15 an hour with benefits, while nationally, child care workers are paid a little over $11, often with no benefits. This ranks the industry among the lowest paid in the country, with high rates of poverty, according to a recent report by a research institute at the University of California, Berkeley.

Of the several child care plans that Congress was considering this year, Senator Warren’s $700 billion bill was among the most ambitious and sweeping. It proposed using federal dollars to back providers in order to make child care accessible for children from birth to age 5 regardless of household income or parent employment status. It would also have required all child care providers to be accredited, established a sliding scale for fees and boosted wages for workers.

A lot of Senator Warren’s ideas came from the military model, said Jon Donenberg, her current chief of staff, noting the system’s universality. It doesn’t matter what a service member is earning or if they’re in the middle of transitioning jobs: Their toddlers and infants stand to receive affordable, high-quality care.

What is known so far of the $3.2 trillion budget blueprint now working its way through the reconciliation process is that it will most likely establish a pared-back vision for child care that may include universal prekindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds. Negotiations during the legislative process — which would require support from all 50 Democrats in the Senate and the majority in the House — might also shrink the overall spending figure to appease the more conservative arm of the party.

And Ms. Smith noted that there also aren’t many details yet on how exactly the federal government would help providers improve quality and work force recruitment and training.

“That’s the missing piece right now,” she said. “The money going to the programs is what made a lot of the changes happen in the military. And I worry, as we go through reconciliation, that we as a country still haven’t learned that.”

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