



May 2024

MILITARY CHILD CARE

Services Should Assess Their Employee Retention Efforts

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106524](#), a report to congressional committees.

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD operates the largest employer-sponsored child care system in the U.S. It has reported that staffing shortfalls have contributed to lengthy child care waitlists in many DOD locations.

Senate report 117-130 includes a provision for GAO to review DOD child care shortages. This report examines (1) how DOD and the military services set child care fees and wages and calculate child care worker turnover rates, (2) challenges the military services face to recruit and retain child care workers, and (3) the extent to which the military services follow selected leading workforce practices for recruiting and retaining child care workers.

GAO analyzed DOD and military service documents about their child care programs and analyzed selected data. GAO also conducted in-person and virtual site visits to eight installations, chosen for their large waitlists, among other factors. Last, GAO analyzed child care workforce challenges, recruitment and retention processes, and leading workforce practices identified through prior GAO work.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including that the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps and Navy develop metrics to track the effectiveness of their child care program retention initiatives, and that the Air Force and Marine Corps conduct assessments of their child care workforces. DOD concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106524](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.

May 2024

MILITARY CHILD CARE

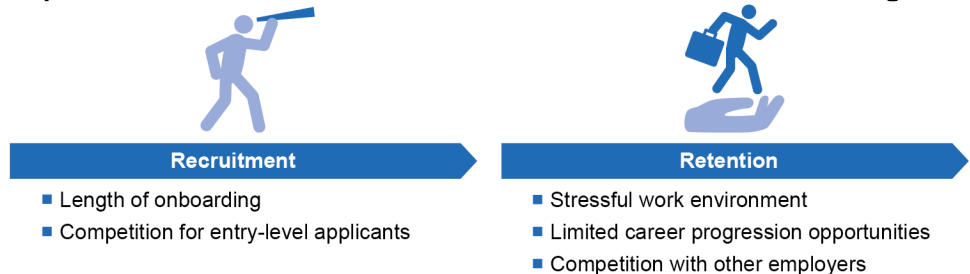
Services Should Assess Their Employee Retention Efforts

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) provides the military services flexibility in determining hourly wages for child care workers, setting child care fees, and calculating turnover rates of child care workers. For example, DOD allows the military services to determine pay levels within set ranges, and the military services may raise entry-level pay within these ranges to compete with the local civilian labor market. Similarly, DOD policy provides the military services options to adjust the weekly child care fees that parents pay to be competitive with local labor markets or to charge comparable fees with the civilian child care sector. All four military services calculate child care worker turnover the same way and reported turnover rates ranging from 34 percent to 50 percent in fiscal year 2022.

Installation officials reported several challenges that affect the recruitment and retention of child care workers including a lengthy onboarding process. Navy officials said they adjusted the health screening policy to streamline the Navy's process. Other challenges include stressful work environments and limited career progression opportunities. For example, DOD and military service officials identified an increase in children's behavioral issues in recent years that has increased stress among child care workers. To assist with recruitment and retention, DOD and the military services offer several benefits, such as paid annual and sick leave, and recruitment and retention bonuses.

Reported DOD Child Care Worker Recruitment and Retention Challenges



Source: GAO summary of information collected during in-person and virtual site visits. | GAO-24-106524

The military services follow most of the selected recruitment and retention leading practices GAO evaluated. However, the Marine Corps does not follow three, the Air Force does not fully follow two, and the Army and Navy do not follow one. Implementing leading workforce practices is essential for successful recruitment and retention of military services' child care workers. For example, the military services continuously recruit year-round and provide financial incentives to new hires and existing workers, but they have not established metrics to track the effectiveness of their retention initiatives. By developing metrics to track the results of their retention efforts, the military services can identify which are most effective at retaining child care workers. Additionally, the Air Force and Marine Corps do not continually assess their child care program needs. By following these leading workforce practices, the two military services could better prepare for their future child care program staffing needs and help meet the child care needs of service members and their families, thus improving military family readiness.

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DOD Department of Defense

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May 14, 2024

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Department of Defense (DOD) operates the largest employer-sponsored child care program in the United States. The program consists of approximately 500 DOD-run child development centers and 250 school-age care programs. It also offers other options service members can use for child care, such as supporting access to family child care providers and fee assistance to pay for services at eligible civilian child care providers in their communities.¹

In 2020, DOD reported that staffing shortfalls contributed to child care capacity challenges in its system, with the highest demand for care needed for infants and toddlers. These shortfalls also contributed to lengthy waitlists and long wait times for on-installation child care in many DOD locations.² DOD has since reported that it continues to face challenges recruiting and retaining child care workers for its child care program, which serves children from birth to age 12.³ As of September

¹We did not include family child care providers in our review because they are independent contractors who set their own wages and hire their own child care workers, according to DOD officials. Family child care providers operate in DOD-certified on-installation or off-installation homes for children from birth through 12 years of age.

²Department of Defense, *Report to the Congressional Defense Committees on Department of Defense Child Development Programs* (Washington, D.C.: June 5, 2020).

³In this report, we use “child care workers” to describe those who provide care to children in child development center classrooms and school-age care programs. DOD child care workers provide care to children who are infants, pre-toddlers, toddlers, preschool-age, and children ages 6–12.

30, 2022, DOD reported approximately 17,500 child care workers in its child development centers and school-age care programs.⁴ The military services (Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy)⁵ reported approximately 6,200 child care worker vacancies, as of September 30, 2022.⁶ DOD reported that vacancies can affect child care programs' ability to operate at maximum capacity and contribute to longer wait times for families.

Senate report 117-130 includes a provision for us to review the recruitment and retention of DOD child care workers. This report examines (1) how DOD and the military services set child care fees, and determine hourly wages and calculate turnover rates for child care workers; (2) the challenges faced by the military services in recruiting and retaining child care workers, and the benefits DOD and the military services offer to assist with recruitment and retention; and (3) the extent to which the military services follow selected leading workforce practices for recruiting and retaining child care workers.

To address our first objective, we reviewed DOD and military service documents on how DOD sets the fees parents pay in child development centers or school-age care programs and child care worker wages.⁷ We also reviewed documents on how each military service sets parent fees and wages for child care workers based on local economic factors. Lastly, we reviewed how each military service calculates turnover rates for its child care workers.

To address our second objective, we conducted in-person and virtual site visits to eight installations representing all military services in four states (Hawaii, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia). We selected these installations because they have some of the largest waitlists and the

⁴These data are from DOD's Office of Child and Youth Programs *Fiscal Year 2022 Child and Youth Program Annual Summary of Operations* report. These are the most recent data DOD has available on its child care program.

⁵The Air Force oversees all air and space installation child and youth programs, including the Space Force's child care program, according to an Air Force official. This official explained that the Space Force follows Air Force's policies in terms of staff wages and recruitment and retention efforts. In this report, when we discuss the Air Force child care program, it is inclusive of the Space Force's program.

⁶Military service officials told us they may intentionally keep some position announcements open so they can promote or hire people at any time.

⁷In this report, we use the term "parents" to describe the parents, guardians, or other responsible caregivers for children.

greatest unmet child care need.⁸ We also selected installations that are located near other installations for different military services to explore potential recruitment challenges stemming from inter-military service competition for workers. At each installation, we spoke with installation commanders, child and youth program directors, and child development center and school-age care program administrators. We interviewed these officials about the challenges they face recruiting and retaining child care workers and about the benefits and initiatives they use to address these challenges.

We also held small group discussions with child care workers about the challenges they face providing care to children and their decision to work in DOD child care centers rather than positions in civilian child care centers or positions in other fields. Information we gathered from these interviews and small group discussions is not generalizable. Rather, the information reflects the views of child and youth program staff at installations at the time of our interviews and may not be representative of programs on other installations.

To categorize key challenges related to child care worker recruitment and retention that emerged from the interviews and group discussions, we conducted a content analysis. Specifically, we first identified the challenges mentioned by those with whom we spoke. We then organized these challenges into categories and revised as needed. One GAO analyst coded the interviews, and a second analyst verified the coding. The analysts reviewed each other's coding and met to discuss and resolve any differences.

To address our third objective, we identified topic areas associated with leading human capital management practices based on our review of GAO's prior workforce planning and management reports. From these topic areas, we selected five of particular importance to the recruitment and retention of DOD's child care workforce: (1) strategic workforce planning, (2) talent acquisition, (3) talent management, (4) engaging employees, and (5) employee morale. Within these five topic areas, we selected 10 leading practices relevant to the military services' efforts to

⁸See Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs (CDPs)* (Aug. 5, 2014) (incorporating change 2, effective Sept. 1, 2020). DOD defines unmet need as a need for child care that has not been met and the date identified by parents for needing care has passed. According to an official, unmet need includes families who are waiting for child care from DOD's fee assistance or family child care providers.

recruit and retain child care workers.⁹ We then reviewed Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy documents and spoke with military service officials about their child care workforce recruitment and retention efforts. We compared the military services' efforts to the 10 leading practices we selected. To determine the extent to which the military services followed the practices, two analysts reviewed the documents and the selected interviews then assessed the extent to which the military services fully followed, partially followed, or did not follow the practices.¹⁰

To inform all three objectives, we obtained and reviewed summary administrative data on the DOD child care program's operations for fiscal year 2022, the most recent data available. To describe selected aspects of each military service's child care program, we obtained and reviewed fiscal year 2022 data (also the most recent available) on the total number of full-time, part-time, and "flexible" child care workers employed in child development centers and school-age care programs and on child care worker compensation (pay and benefits).¹¹ We also reviewed data on child development center and school-age care program enrollment, spaces, and waitlists as well as capacity, the number of closed classrooms, and the reason why they are closed. We assessed the reliability of DOD's summary administrative data and the military services' data by interviewing knowledgeable agency officials and reviewing related

⁹We have previously found these topic areas to be of particular importance to successful workforce planning. These five topics areas have been identified as part of our key issues work on human capital management. To select these leading practices, we reviewed those identified in four of our past reports on strategic workforce planning, recruiting and hiring efforts, and retention incentives. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Workforce Planning Actions Needed to Address Growing Cyberspace Mission Demands*, [GAO-22-105208](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2022); GAO, *State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges*, [GAO-22-105932](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2022); GAO, *FDA Workforce: Agency-Wide Workforce Planning Needed to Ensure Medical Product Staff Meet Current and Future Needs*, [GAO-22-104791](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 14, 2022); and GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

¹⁰We considered a practice to be fully followed when we found that information obtained from the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy documentation and interviews demonstrated all aspects of the applicable leading practice. We considered a practice to be partially followed when we found that information obtained from the four military services followed some, but not all, of the applicable leading practice. We considered a practice to be not followed when we found that officials from the four military services did not provide any documentation or if they provided information in interviews, it did not follow any aspect of the applicable leading practice.

¹¹Employees considered "flexible" can fill temporary or seasonal workforce needs, or they can fill in where work schedules fluctuate. These employees may be scheduled for zero to 40 hours per week and do not have a set schedule, or they are working on a continuing, temporary, or "as needed basis."

documentation. We found DOD and military service data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objectives.

In addition, we interviewed and obtained documents and written information from officials who oversee child care programs in the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy and from DOD's Office of Child and Youth Programs and Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service.¹² We asked about challenges DOD and the military services face recruiting and retaining child care workers, and the benefits and initiatives that exist to address those challenges. We also interviewed university researchers and knowledgeable stakeholders at nonprofit organizations who study child care issues, including child care staffing challenges, child care prices, child care worker wages, employment trends, and turnover rates.¹³ Last, we reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations, as well as related reports from DOD and the military services, GAO, the Congressional Research Service, and other entities.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2023 to May 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Despite the importance of and need for child care, child care jobs have traditionally been low-wage positions with high turnover rates. A study using 2019 data found child care workers rank in the bottom 2 percent of

¹²According to an official, DOD's Office of Military Family Readiness Policy was changed to the Office of Child and Youth Programs in November 2023. This office sets policy for the military departments' (Air Force, Army, and Navy, of which the Marine Corps is part) programs and activities relating to military families, which includes DOD's Child Development Program, among other responsibilities. The Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service develops, implements, and monitors Department of Defense civilian human resources plans, policies, and programs.

¹³We interviewed representatives from the Bipartisan Policy Center, Child Care Aware of America, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, and two individual researchers. We identified these organizations and stakeholders through a combination of methods, including reviewing publications on child care and asking other interviewees for recommendations.

annual pay of all workers, with a median income of \$24,230 per year.¹⁴ Another study found that an estimated one-third of sampled child care centers had high staff turnover, defined as more than 20 percent or one in five child care workers leaving their position during the prior 12 months.¹⁵

With a more competitive labor market emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic, the child care sector has become less competitive relative to low-wage jobs in other sectors. While average hourly wages for child care workers have increased, so have average hourly wages for many other civilian-sector employees.¹⁶ For example, between May 2021 and May 2022, average hourly wages earned by pre-school teachers and child care workers increased by 6 percent and 6.8 percent, respectively. During that same period, average hourly wages earned by stockers and order fillers, maids and housekeepers, fast food workers, and cashiers rose by 7.7 percent, 7.9 percent, 7.9 percent, and 7.3 percent, respectively.¹⁷

DOD's Child Care Program

DOD served nearly 163,000 children of service members and DOD civilian employees in its Child Development Program in fiscal year 2022.¹⁸ DOD's child development centers typically offer care for children from birth to 5 years of age, and school-age care programs offer before- and after-school care and summer and holiday care for children 6–12 years old.

¹⁴C. McLean, L.J.E. Austin, M. Whitebook, and K.L. Olson, *Early Childhood Workforce Index – 2020*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (University of California, Berkeley, 2021). Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/report-pdf/>.

¹⁵S. Amadon, Y-C. Lin, and C.M. Padilla, *Turnover in the Center-based Child Care and Early Education Workforce: Findings from the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education*. OPRE Report #2023-061 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

¹⁶C. Gilbert, R. Ghertner, and N. Chien, *Child Care Industry Trends During the Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of Human Services Policy, January 2023).

¹⁷Annual occupational wage estimates for selected occupations for 2021 and 2022 are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, accessed February 15, 2024, https://www.bls.gov/oes/2021/may/oes_stru.htm and https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm.

¹⁸These data are from DOD's Office of Child and Youth Program's *Fiscal Year 2022 Child and Youth Program Annual Summary of Operations* report. These are the most recent data DOD has available on its child care program.

DOD's Office of Child and Youth Programs establishes department-level policy, provides oversight, and collects and compiles certain data on its child care program to support policy and reporting requirements. For example, this office sets the required child care worker-to-child ratios for each age group.¹⁹ However, the military services each operate and manage their own child care program and set their own service-level policies for them, in addition to implementing DOD policy. Each military service is responsible for managing its civilian employees along with the recruitment of new employees and retention of existing ones. Moreover, the military services can expand beyond the minimum requirements DOD sets for the child care program. This results in some variation in each military service's child care program, such as position descriptions and child care worker-to-child ratios.²⁰

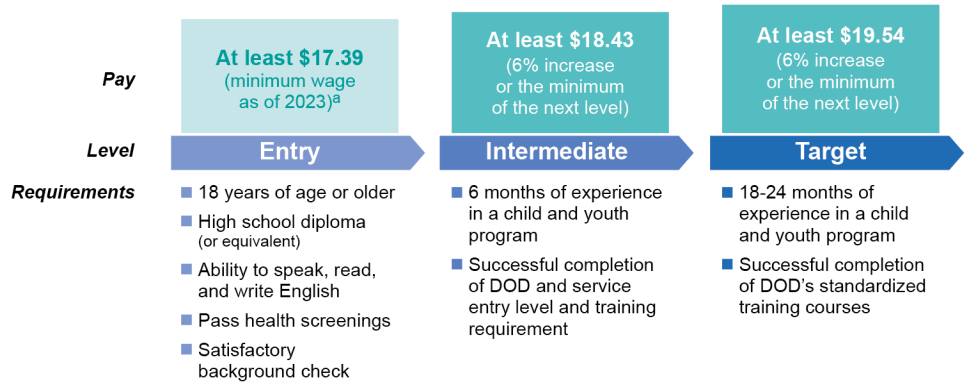
DOD's Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service creates and manages human resources policies on issues such as compensation and staffing for DOD-employed civilians. DOD policy requires that child care workers be at least 18 years old and have a high school diploma or the equivalent, at a minimum.²¹ Applicants who meet basic DOD requirements start as entry-level employees and progress to positions with additional responsibilities once they meet DOD's training and experience requirements at a satisfactory level. DOD has standardized requirements for workers to advance through these positions across the military services, and a minimum 6 percent wage increase for each position change (see fig. 1). Child care workers can also be promoted to serve as lead teachers or program technicians, who typically oversee multiple classrooms and assist with training new employees, among other duties. This generally happens through a competitive application process administered by each military service.

¹⁹DOD has set minimum child care worker-to-child ratios in classrooms, which vary based on the age of the children, with infants and younger toddlers requiring more adults per child. For example, DOD requires one child care worker for every four infants and one child care worker for every 12 children in preschool classrooms.

²⁰Each military service's child development centers and school-age care programs must have at least as many workers per child as set by DOD. However, some military services set different ratios. For example, the Army requires one child care worker for every 10 children in its preschool classrooms, as compared to the DOD minimum of one for every 12 children.

²¹Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs (CDPs)*.

Figure 1: General Progression of DOD Child Care Workers, with Advancement Requirements and Related Pay Increases, as of 2023



Source: GAO summary of Department of Defense (DOD) information. | GAO-24-106524

^aAs of January 1, 2024, starting pay for entry-level DOD child care workers in the United States is \$18.21 per hour.

Selected Recruitment and Retention Leading Practices

Prior GAO work has shown that workforce planning processes are essential for ensuring that federal agencies have the talent, skill, and experience mix they need to execute their missions and meet program goals.²² We focused on five areas of human capital management centered on recruitment and retention efforts. Within these five areas are 10 selected leading practices that we determined are central to effectively managing the recruitment and retention of DOD's child care workforce. (See table 1 for the 10 selected recruitment and retention leading practices.)

²²For more information on selected recruitment and retention leading practices, see [GAO-22-105932](#) and [GAO-04-39](#).

Table 1: Selected Recruitment and Retention Leading Practices Identified in Previous GAO Work

Workforce area	Selected recruitment leading practice^a	Description of recruitment leading practice
Strategic workforce planning	1. Establish and maintain workforce plans	Establish and maintain a strategic workforce planning process, including developing strategies and implementing activities to address all competency and staffing needs and vacancies.
	2. Develop competency and staffing requirements	Develop competency and staffing requirements, regularly assess competency and staffing needs, and analyze the workforce to identify gaps in those areas.
	3. Monitor competencies and vacancies	Monitor the agency's progress in addressing competencies and vacancies and report to agency leadership on progress.
Talent acquisition	4. Recruit continuously	Recruit continuously year-round.
	5. Strategically leverage hiring flexibilities	Strategically leverage available hiring flexibilities; fully engage the agency's human resources staff; and offer recruiting incentives such as recruitment bonuses, relocation expenses, and student loan repayments.
Workforce area	Selected retention leading practice^b	Description of retention leading practice
Talent management	1. Continually assess agency needs	Continually assess the knowledge, skills, and ability needs of the agency so that the agency is able to obtain a workforce that has the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve organizational goals.
Engaging employees	2. Implement meaningful rewards	Implement meaningful rewards programs and provide incentives to motivate and reinforce expected levels of performance and desired conduct, including training and credentialing, as appropriate.
	3. Develop tailored flexibilities, benefits, and incentives	Develop a tailored approach for using available flexibilities, benefits, and incentives by taking advantage of those flexibilities that are appropriate for their particular organization and its mission accomplishment and by tailoring benefits to employees' needs.
Employee morale	4. Establish and track retention metrics	Establish and track metrics of success for improving employee morale and report to agency leadership on progress in improving morale.
	5. Provide financial incentives	Provide financial incentives, such as retention allowances, to workers who obtain job-related degrees and certifications and provide student loan repayments and work-life programs.

Source: GAO analysis of workforce-related areas and practices identified in GAO's prior work. | GAO-24-106524

^aSee [GAO-22-105932](#) and [GAO-04-39](#) for more information on these selected recruitment leading practices.

^bSee [GAO-22-105932](#) and [GAO-04-39](#) for more information on these selected retention leading practices.

DOD Provides the Military Services Flexibility in Managing Wages and Fees for Child Care Programs

DOD Sets Wage Ranges for Child Care Workers, but the Military Services Can Raise Pay within the Range to Improve Recruitment and Retention

While DOD initially sets wage ranges for each position within child and youth programs based on the General Schedule, the military services may adjust wages to help recruit and retain child care workers.²³ The majority of DOD child care workers are paid using nonappropriated funds generated from parent fees (and are therefore referred to as “nonappropriated fund employees”), which military service officials said allowed the DOD child care program more flexibility to adjust wages.²⁴

In recent years, DOD has made adjustments to entry-level wages (and associated pay ranges) for child care workers. In May 2021, DOD required an increase in the minimum starting pay for each child care position within the DOD child and youth program from \$10.63 per hour to \$11.67 per hour.²⁵ In March 2022, DOD implemented a \$15 minimum wage for all nonappropriated fund employees, including child care workers, after the Office of Personnel Management determined that basic

²³According to OPM, the General Schedule classification and pay system covers the majority of civilian white-collar employees. The General Schedule provides for periodic salary increases worth approximately 3 percent of an employee’s salary based on an acceptable level of performance and longevity.

²⁴According to the Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service, pay for federal nonappropriated fund employees is primarily from self-generated funds rather than taxpayer funds appropriated through Congress. These employees are under the Secretary of Defense’s administrative authority and are excluded from many of the laws administered by the Office of Personnel Management. In this report, we refer to nonappropriated fund employees to mean those employees that are generally covered by the DOD’s policies related to nonappropriated fund employment. Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25, volumes 1401–1471.

²⁵The Assistant Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *DoD Child Development Program and Youth Program Direct Care Staff Compensation Increase* (May 6, 2021).

pay of less than \$15 per hour was creating significant recruitment and retention problems across the federal government.²⁶

In fiscal year 2023, the hourly range for entry-level wages of child care workers was increased again, to between \$17.39 and \$23.14, depending on their location.²⁷ The upper limit of the hourly pay range varied by location, from a high of \$19.95 in the areas with the lowest cost of living to a high of \$23.14 in the areas with the highest cost of living. For non-entry-level employees, the ceiling for child care worker hourly wages is \$29.06.

DOD policy gives the military services flexibility to set starting pay within this range to compete with civilian employers in the local labor market. Specifically, DOD policy identifies competitiveness with both federal and civilian sector pay as a reason to increase basic pay for employees. At the military service level, installation officials have discretion to raise pay as necessary within the required pay ranges to compete within the local labor market, officials from those services told us. However, the Navy sets initial entry-level pay centrally by geographic region.

Higher pay has allowed the military services' child care programs to better recruit and retain child care workers, according to some installation commanders, child and youth program directors, and child development center and school-age care program administrators at six of the eight installations we visited. Child care workers in small group discussions at seven installations said that pay (and benefits, such as the child care fee discount and health insurance) is an advantage to working in a DOD child care program compared to civilian child care programs. Similarly, child development center and school-age care program administrators at one installation we visited said child care workers do not leave for civilian child care centers because pay for DOD child care workers is higher.

DOD Sets Child Care Fees Annually, but Allows the Military Services to Adjust for Local Economic Conditions

DOD policy establishes requirements for the military services to base child care fees on total family income, and DOD must annually review and

²⁶The Under Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Implementation of a \$15 Per Hour Minimum Pay Rate for Nonappropriated Fund Employees* (March 9, 2022).

²⁷According to a DOD official, this increase was due to the annual federal pay adjustment.

issue a child care fee policy.²⁸ Since 1990, all DOD child care fee policies have included a sliding scale schedule, which involves grouping families into total family income categories and establishing weekly fees for each category.

Officials from DOD’s Office of Child and Youth Programs told us that to complete this process of reviewing and issuing an annual child care fee policy, they provide several fee options for senior DOD leadership to consider. These are based on recommendations from military service child care officials and several other factors. These factors include the operational needs of the military services, the existing DOD child care fee schedule, options for “high” or “low” market rate fees, and findings from a review of market rate fees.

While officials from DOD’s Office of Child and Youth Programs told us they provide several options for DOD senior leadership to consider, they recommend one specific course of action.²⁹ For the 2022–2023 school year, the proposed options included continuing the current fee policy or implementing moderate to significant fee increases for higher-income families, with minimal fee increases for lower-income families.³⁰

For the 2022–2023 school year, DOD senior leadership followed the Office of Child and Youth Programs’ recommendation and selected the course of action that included moderate fee increases for higher-income families and minimal fee increases for lower-income families. DOD took this course of action primarily to help cover the cost of increasing staff wages to compete with other employers.³¹ However, as required by law, fees remain contingent on family income.³² For example, families in the

²⁸Under 10 U.S.C. § 1793(a), DOD must establish requirements for parent fees for the attendance of children at child development centers. These requirements are detailed in Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs (CDPs)*.

²⁹Courses of action may include fee increases that are described by DOD as minimal (2 to 3 percent increase), moderate (8 to 10 percent increase), and significant (13 to 20 percent increase).

³⁰As of January 1, 2024, DOD has implemented a new fee policy for the 2023–2024 school year.

³¹The Assistant Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Department of Defense (DoD) Child Development Program Fees for School Year 2022-2023* (July 25, 2022).

³²Under 10 U.S.C. § 1793(a), in issuing requirements for child care fees, DOD must base parent fees for children who attend child development centers on a regular basis on family income.

lowest family income category pay a weekly fee of \$58 per child, while families in the highest category pay a weekly fee of \$184 per child.

While DOD sets the annual fee adjustment, the military services can elect to use a “high” or a “low” market rate at specific installations to account for local economic factors, rather than the standard rate in the DOD fee schedule. For example, collecting “high” fees may allow installations to raise child care worker wages in competitive labor markets. The “high” fee adjustment raises weekly fees by \$10 per child across all family income categories. Other installations may elect to charge “low” fees when prices for comparable child care near the installation are significantly lower to compete with the civilian child care market. This reduces weekly fees between \$8 and \$12 per child per week, depending on total family income.

As a result, families in the lowest income category (total family income below \$30,810) could pay \$50 per child per week in a “low” market rate area, \$58 in a standard market rate area, and \$68 in a “high” market rate area. In comparison, a family in the highest income category (total family income above \$154,050) could pay \$172 per child per week in a “low” market rate area, \$184 in a standard market rate area, and \$194 in a “high” market rate area.³³

Processes for installations to request the use of “high” or “low” market rate options vary by military service. Military service officials must select at least one reason from a list of justifications for use of the “high” or “low” market rate option.³⁴ Each military service has to notify the Office of Child and Youth Programs about which installations opt to use “high” or “low” market rates, according to an official.

³³DOD contractors and other specified space-available patrons pay a standard fee of \$235 per week, regardless of total family income.

³⁴Justifications for a “high” market rate include, for example: (1) the optional high-cost fee schedule is necessary to pay higher wages to compete with local labor, and (2) the optional high-cost fee schedule is necessary because wages are affected by cost-of-living allowances or locality pay. Justifications for a “low” market rate include, for example: (1) the overall program operating costs are significantly lower than average program operating costs, and (2) costs for comparable care within the installation catchment area are significantly lower, and the program’s rate must be adjusted to be marketable in the geographic area.

The Military Services Track Child Care Worker Turnover

The military services are each responsible for overseeing data collection about their own child care workers, according to officials from DOD’s Office of Child and Youth Programs. This office then collects and aggregates data from the military services for its Child and Youth Program’s Annual Summary of Operations in support of policy decisions and reporting requirements.³⁵

To calculate child care worker turnover rates, military service officials said they divide separations (the number of workers who have left their jobs) during a given period by the average number of child care workers employed during that period.³⁶ (See table 2.)

Table 2: Child Care Worker Turnover Rates at Department of Defense–Operated Installation Child Care Programs, Fiscal Year 2022 (the Most Recent Available)

	Air Force	Navy	Marine Corps	Army
Turnover rate	49%	41%	34% ^a	50%

Source: GAO summary of military service data. | GAO-24-106524

^aMarine Corps officials reported that they included child care workers transferring to another installation in their turnover rate. For fiscal year 2022, 39 child care workers transferred.

All four military services reported high child care worker turnover rates ranging from 34 percent to 50 percent for fiscal year 2022. A 2023 report from the Child Care and Early Education Policy and Research Analysis project categorized a turnover rate above 20 percent as “high” and found that an estimated one-third of sampled child care centers met this criteria in 2019.³⁷ High turnover rates contribute not only to staffing shortages, but also to child care worker stress and burnout according to some child care workers, child and youth program directors, and child development center and school-age care program administrators at all the installations we visited.

³⁵DOD requires military department heads to submit annual summary of operations reports to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy.

³⁶This rate generally excludes child care workers who transferred to another installation or who were promoted.

³⁷Amadon, Lin, and Padilla, *Turnover in the Center-based Child Care and Early Education Workforce*.

The Military Services Reported Challenges Recruiting and Retaining Child Care Workers, and DOD and the Military Services Offer Benefits to Assist with Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment Challenges Include a Lengthy Onboarding Process for New Employees and Competition from Other Sectors

Onboarding Process

New DOD child care employees must undergo a lengthy onboarding process that can take 1 to 6 months, posing a recruitment challenge, according to some installation commanders, child and youth program directors, and child development center and school-age care program administrators at the eight installations we visited.³⁸ While each military service hires new workers for its child care program, they must comply with specific DOD onboarding requirements. New hires must wait for an initial fingerprint check to be completed, pass a background check for every state they worked in previously, and complete a health screening. These activities are part of their onboarding requirements to work in the military services' child care programs without restrictions.³⁹ A child development center and school-age care program administrator at one

³⁸For the purposes of this report, we define onboarding as the time from when a prospective employee receives a contingent job offer to when they work their first paid hours.

³⁹Department of Defense Instruction 1402.05, *Background Checks on Individuals in DOD Child Care Services Programs* (Sept. 11, 2015) (Incorporating Change 1, Effective July 14, 2016).

installation we visited said the installation is losing new child care workers to other jobs because they cannot wait before they are cleared to start working.⁴⁰ However, after some portions of their criminal background check are completed, child care workers may be able to work in a provisional status.

Some military services are taking actions to streamline the onboarding process for new child care workers, according to officials. For example, in May 2023, the Navy adjusted its onboarding policy to allow newly hired child care workers to complete health screening requirements within their first 60 days of starting work.⁴¹ Marine Corps officials said they are assessing ways to onboard child care workers more efficiently, including offering a waiver that allows new workers to delay health screenings. In addition, Air Force officials told us they are working on ways to streamline background checks for new child care workers.

Competition for Employees

When recruiting child care workers, installations face additional challenges, such as competing for applicants with other jobs offering higher starting wages that have similar entry-level requirements, according to some installation commanders, child and youth program directors, and child development center and school-age care program administrators at all eight of the installations we visited. In Hawaii, for example, officials at the three installations we visited told us the island's small workforce contributes to recruitment challenges.

Candidates may also prefer jobs that they consider less stressful in retail, fast food, and hospitality sectors, according to some installation commanders, child and youth program directors, and child development center and school-age care program administrators at the eight installations. These jobs may offer similar wages and have fewer on-the-job requirements, particularly in areas with competitive labor markets. For example, an installation child and youth program director told us the installation has received fewer applications because of other civilian-sector job openings that offer better pay. Specifically, at one installation, a school-age care program administrator said the installation competes with employers in the tourism industry for new employees. Wage data from

⁴⁰In general, child care workers that work in civilian child care programs may also be subject to background checks before beginning work.

⁴¹A May 2023 memo issued by Commander, Navy Installations Command extended the timeframes for receiving pre-employment health screening required as a condition of employment. This memo also states that Navy Child and Youth Programs shall limit child care worker duties until after the employee has cleared the health screening.

Hawaii highlights this, as the entry-level hourly wage for DOD child care workers at Navy installations in Hawaii was \$17.31 in 2022 while the average hourly wage for housekeepers in Honolulu was \$23.06.⁴²

Retention Challenges Include Stressful Work Environments and Limited Career Progression Opportunities

Complex Classroom Needs

A perceived increase in children's challenging behaviors and children with special needs, and new and inexperienced child care workers, can contribute to a stressful work environment. This can lead to child development center and school-age care program worker retention issues, according to some installation child care personnel with whom we spoke. More children have exhibited challenging behaviors, such as biting and kicking, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic than was previously typical, according to DOD and military service officials as well as some installation commanders, child and youth program directors, child development center and school-age care program administrators, and child care workers at all eight installations.⁴³ These behaviors may extend beyond behaviors that child care workers are trained to address, according to some child and youth program directors and child development center and school-age care program administrators.

In addition, there appears to be an increase in the number of children with special needs enrolled in DOD child care programs, according to some installation commanders, child and youth program directors, child development center and school-age care program administrators, and child care workers at seven installations.⁴⁴ These children may require additional individual attention that may be difficult for a child care worker

⁴²The average wage for housekeepers in Honolulu, Hawaii was obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2022 Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics data.

⁴³Some child and youth program directors, child development center and school-age care program administrators, and child care workers at four installations we visited hypothesized that these behaviors may be the result of a decrease in socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴⁴An estimated 17 percent of children ages 2 to 8 have a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder, and over 1.7 million children under age 6 have at least one complex health need requiring specialized care. Child Care Aware of America, *The US and the High Price of Child Care* (Arlington, VA, 2019).

to provide. Some child care workers said that even if they do not have the specific resources or skills to provide care for children with special needs, DOD child care programs are generally required to provide care.⁴⁵

Experienced child care workers told us the challenges of caring for children with behavioral issues or special needs are exacerbated by the influx of new staff without child care experience. For example, one child care worker told us seven out of the 14 children in the classroom had special needs, yet the current classroom partner did not have the skills necessary to work with those children. Some child development center and school-age care program administrators at one installation told us new workers who do not necessarily have the skills to fully perform their roles must be placed in classrooms with experienced child care workers. However, they said this can be demoralizing and overwhelming for those experienced staff. One Navy official told us after it lifted COVID-19 restrictions, the Navy attempted to grow its program by 50 percent and it brought in new child care workers too quickly. The official said that this burned out both new and more experienced child care workers because the newer workers were not trained well enough to know how properly provide care to children.

DOD has taken steps to address some of these challenges, primarily through its training program. Child care workers receive most of their training through the Virtual Lab School, which is an online professional development and resource system developed in partnership with The Ohio State University for DOD child care programs. An official said new employees must complete a set number of virtual training modules with distinct tracks for child care providers of different age groups. Child care workers must also complete a comprehensive orientation training and additional annual training, according to officials from the Office of Child and Youth Programs.

Additionally, child care workers also have to take specialized trainings, including one on challenging behaviors, according to officials from DOD's Office of Child and Youth Programs. In addition, these same officials reported that they collaborate with the military services to provide child care workers with multiple resources to address emerging needs,

⁴⁵We did not assess the military services' compliance with legal obligations related to nondiscrimination on the basis of disability for children in child development programs.

including access to a program called Kids Included Together and additional online training resources.⁴⁶

Military service officials said they were aware of the increasingly complex environments and additional stress child care workers face and have taken actions to ensure their child care workforces' needs are met. For example, Navy officials said they identified the need for specialized training and development for child development center and school-age care program administrators as a key area of focus for improving retention in its child care programs. In addition, Army officials said the Army piloted a classroom assessment framework at 16 child development centers with the goal of improving academic and social-emotional outcomes for children. Officials told us the Army plans to expand this framework to 64 child development centers by September 2024.

Moreover, DOD, the Army, and the Marine Corps have established specialized positions for personnel who can support child care workers working with children with special needs through training and observations. In addition, DOD was directed to carry out a pilot program for Special Needs Inclusion Coordinators who will provide support at seven installations' child development centers.⁴⁷ Their responsibilities include providing direct classroom support as well as guidance and assistance related to supporting children with special needs. The Army and the Marine Corps already implemented similar positions.

Lack of Career Progression Opportunities

Without additional higher education, child care workers have limited opportunities to progress in their careers at DOD's child development centers and thus reach salary caps, according to some child care workers at five installations we visited. While child care workers can be promoted from an experienced child care worker to lead teacher and program technician—the highest-level child care position with the most responsibilities—these positions have the same salary cap because they fall under the same pay group. This limits opportunities to earn higher wages. For example, at Navy installations in the Norfolk, Virginia, region, child care workers at the target level as well as lead teachers and

⁴⁶Child and youth program directors said child care workers have access to a nonprofit organization called Kids Included Together, which provides in-person and phone support to child care workers when they need assistance addressing behavioral problems in the classroom. According to its website, Kids Included Together coaches child care providers on how to adapt their attitudes and practices to address behavioral situations in an inclusive environment for all children.

⁴⁷Pub. L. No. 117-263, tit. V, § 576, 136 Stat. 2395, 2605-06 (2022).

program technicians can earn up to \$23.77 an hour—or \$49,615 annually.⁴⁸ Additionally, child care workers cannot typically be promoted into management positions without having a degree in a related field, such as early childhood education. One child care worker we spoke to expressed interest in moving into management, but this worker cannot afford to earn a degree and therefore is not eligible, according to the worker. While some workers may face challenges, military service and DOD officials noted that all child care workers have professional development opportunities through DOD’s training program and the military services’ tuition assistance programs.

In an effort to retain more experienced staff, DOD, the Navy, and the Army have taken steps to address the lack of child care worker career progression. For example, officials from DOD’s Office of Child and Youth Programs told us they have proposed a new position to create a bridge for child care workers to move from the classroom into management-level positions. This proposed position would oversee multiple classrooms and provide coaching and modeling to child care workers. The Army has a position that also creates a bridge between child care workers and child development center management. In addition, Navy officials said they are in the process of moving lead teachers to a higher salary range to account for their additional responsibilities, among other staffing changes.

Inter-Military Service Transfer Program

To aid with the retention of child care workers who are military spouses during permanent change of station moves or to retain child care workers who are not military spouses but who move to new locations, each military service has its own transfer program. This program allows child care workers to move from one installation to another.⁴⁹ For example, the Army allows its child care employees to request a lateral transfer to another Army installation child development center without reapplying for the position. The three other military services have similar programs. (See table 3 for the estimated percentage of child care workers who are military spouses.)

⁴⁸A target-level child care worker has to have a minimum of 18–24 months of experience in a child and youth program and successfully complete DOD’s standardized training courses (see fig. 1).

⁴⁹Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25, Volume 1403, *DOD Civilian Personnel Management System: Nonappropriated Fund (NAF) Employment* (March 20, 2015). The military services allow child care workers to transfer their positions between programs run by the same military service.

Table 3: Estimated Percentage of Child Care Workers Who Were Military Spouses, Fiscal Year 2022

	Air Force^a	Army	Marine Corps	Navy
Estimated percentage of child care workers who were military spouses	24%	30%	40%	25%

Source: Interviews and written responses from military service officials. | GAO-24-106524

^aAir Force officials told us their data do not separate its child care workers who are military spouses from military spouses who work in its child care program in a different capacity, such as management or support staff.

However, if an employee is moving to an installation run by another military service, this employee may not be able to transfer the position and may have to reapply for the same job, potentially with lower pay. For example, at one installation we visited, a child care worker explained that when making a permanent change of station to an installation operated by a different military service, this worker had to reapply for an entry-level child care position. After a previous move, this child care worker told us this new position came with a pay cut and demotion, even though this worker had spent several years working in DOD child development centers.

DOD officials are aware of challenges associated with child care workers who transfer jobs across the military services. A Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service official said DOD plans to update the policy so that child care workers can transfer their positions, regardless of military service. In August 2023, that official said that implementing proposed changes to the transfer policy will take 18 to 24 months.

Other Retention Challenges

Military service child care programs in some locations face additional challenges retaining their workers due to ongoing competition with other military services. At seven of the eight installations we visited, some installation commanders, child and youth program directors, and child development center and school-age care program administrators said they are competing for employees with other military services' child care programs. This challenge was more prevalent in some areas than others. For example, some installation officials in Norfolk told us they did not routinely communicate with officials on other installations in the area. One official in the Norfolk area said that wages vary slightly while a different official said that another military service in the area offers better benefits. These officials said this has resulted in some of their staff leaving their installation's child care programs to work at another installation nearby with better wages or benefits. In contrast, installations in Hawaii regularly communicated to be transparent with each other regarding when they

were implementing salary raises or recruitment incentives, to reduce the possibility of staff turnover from one installation to another, according to officials. However, wages still vary as the Army installation in Hawaii pays entry-level child care workers slightly more than the other two military services located in Hawaii, according to officials.

DOD and the Military Services Offer Multiple Benefits to Recruit and Retain Child Care Workers

DOD and the military services provide benefits to child care workers, which have helped the military services' recruitment and retention efforts. These benefits help recruit and retain child care workers, according to some child and youth program directors, child development center and school-age care program administrators, and child care workers at all eight installations we visited. DOD ensures each military service offers benefits to all part-time and full-time child care workers.⁵⁰ These benefits include paid annual and sick leave,⁵¹ health benefits,⁵² and retirement benefits.⁵³ Child care workers also receive the highest priority for enrolling their children in child care⁵⁴ and a standardized minimum 50 percent discount on the child care fees a child care worker pays for their first enrolled child.⁵⁵ (See fig. 2 for a general list of benefits DOD provides to eligible child care workers.)

⁵⁰Officials said the benefits DOD provides to nonappropriated fund employees are comparable to the ones received by other full-time and part-time federal employees.

⁵¹See Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25, Volume 1406, *DOD Civilian Personnel Management System: Nonappropriated Fund Attendance and Leave* (March 20, 2015) (incorporating change 2, effective February 15, 2023).

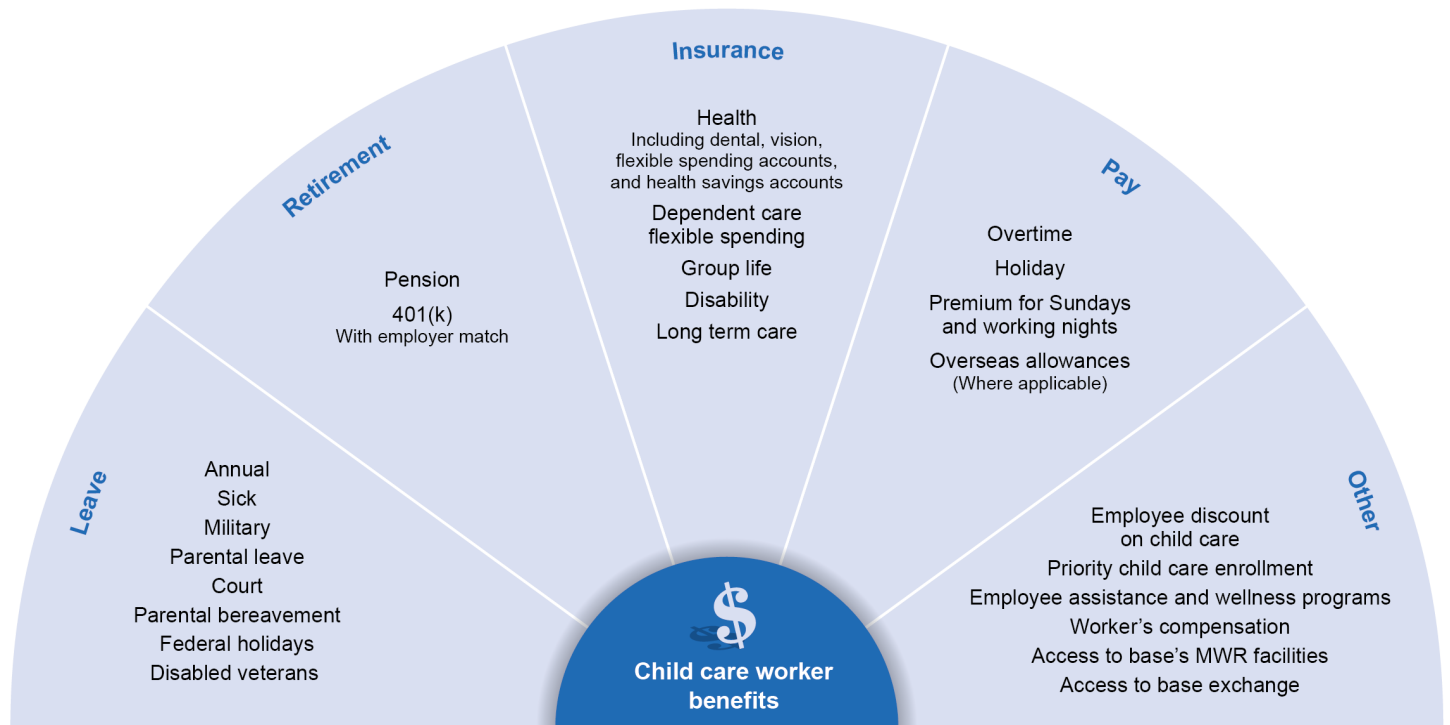
⁵²Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25, Volume 1408, *DOD Civilian Personnel Management System: Insurance and Annuities for Nonappropriated Fund Employees* (August 28, 2020) (change 2, effective July 14, 2023).

⁵³Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25, Volume 1408, *DOD Civilian Personnel Management System: Insurance and Annuities for Nonappropriated Fund Employees*.

⁵⁴Department of Defense, *Policy Change Concerning Priorities for Department of Defense Child Care Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 21, 2020).

⁵⁵Department of Defense, *Taking Care of Our Service Members and Families* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 22, 2022).

Figure 2: List of Benefits Provided to Eligible Department of Defense Child Care Workers









Source: Written responses from Department of Defense (DOD) officials. | GAO-24-106524

MWR= Morale, Welfare, and Recreation

Each military service offers additional benefits to most of its child care workers beyond the ones provided by DOD, although these additional benefits vary. (See fig. 3 for selected benefits offered.) For example, DOD requires that all military services offer child care workers at least a 50 percent fee discount for the first child they enroll at child development centers. However, the Air Force offers a 100 percent discount for a child care worker's first child enrolled in a child care program.

Figure 3: Selected Benefits the Military Services May Offer to Child Care Workers

	 Air Force	 Army	 Marine Corps	 Navy
Recruitment bonus(es)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Referral bonus(es)	✓	✗	✗	✓
Retention bonus(es)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Child Development Associate, Military School-Age credentials ^a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tuition assistance ^b	✓	✗	✗	✓
Intra-service transfer program	✓	✓	✓	✓
Other benefits ^c	✓	✓	✓	✓

 Benefit available
  Benefit not available

Source: GAO summary of military services' documents, interviews with officials, and written responses. | GAO-24-106524

^aCompletion of the Child Development Associate credential represents professional development for early childhood educators working with children from birth to 5 years of age. Completion of the Military School-Age credential represents professional development for staff working with school-age children and youth on installations. The military services pay for the credentials' cost.

^bThe Air Force and Navy offer tuition assistance to all their child care workers, according to officials. Army and Marine Corps officials explained that individual installations can offer tuition assistance, but it is not military service-wide.

^cOther benefits include an Army pilot program that ended in November 2023. It provided child care workers with access to commissaries (i.e., grocery stores) on 17 installations, allowing them to buy food and other goods at discounted prices, among other benefits offered by the military services.

Each military service offers different recruitment and retention bonuses. One military service offers the same bonuses service-wide, while the other services allow each installation to offer them if it chooses. For example, the Air Force can offer its child care workers up to \$1,500 in recruitment and retention bonuses each fiscal year at all Air Force installations. In contrast, each individual Navy installation can opt to offer a recruitment bonus of \$500 once a child care worker completes the new employee orientation. Navy child care workers can also receive an additional \$1,750 total in a series of retention bonuses along with 24 hours of paid time off over the course of the first year of employment.

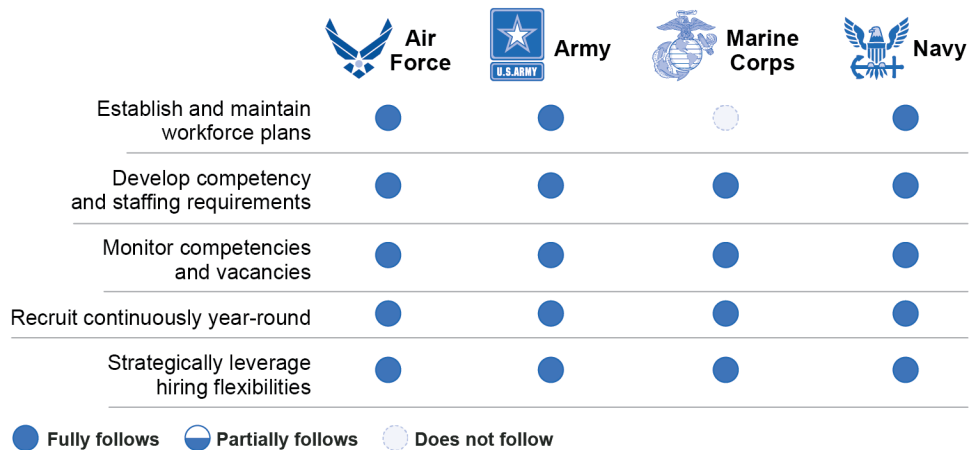
The Military Services Followed Most Workforce Leading Practices, but Some Actions Are Needed

Among the 10 selected recruitment and retention leading practices we identified as central to effectively managing DOD’s child care workforce, we found that the military services fully followed eight and did not follow one. We also found that two of the military services fully followed the final selected leading practice—continually assessing agency needs—while one service partially followed this practice, and one service did not follow it. For example, the four military services follow selected leading practices related to continuously recruiting year-round and providing financial incentives. However, none of the military services followed the retention leading practice of establishing metrics to track the effectiveness of their retention initiatives.

The Military Services Follow Almost All Selected Recruitment Leading Practices

The military services followed almost all of the five selected recruitment leading practices for their child care workforces. However, the Marine Corps did not establish and maintain a strategic workforce plan. (See fig. 4 for a summary of the selected recruitment leading practices.)

Figure 4: Extent the Military Services Follow Selected Recruitment Leading Practices for Their Child Care Workforces



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense and military service documents, interviews with military service officials, and military service written responses. | GAO-24-106524

Establish and Maintain Workforce Plans

Three of the four military services—the Air Force, the Navy, and the Army—have strategic workforce plans that focus on their child care

workforce.⁵⁶ The Air Force's 2023 Child Care Strategic Plan contains one objective focused on maximizing available options to improve access to child care by using recruitment and retention initiatives to stabilize child care worker staffing levels at every installation.⁵⁷ The Navy's strategic plan for its child care workforce focuses primarily on achieving the goal of hiring 95 percent of needed child care workers by recruiting new child care workers, expediting the onboarding process for new workers, and retaining new and existing workers.⁵⁸ The strategic plan for the Army's Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Program includes an initiative to develop and implement directives, guidance, and activities to achieve a 90 percent child care worker staffing goal and assess the effectiveness of these efforts in fiscal years 2023–2024.⁵⁹

The Marine Corps, however, lacks a strategic workforce plan for its child care program, as called for by leading workforce planning practices we have identified in our prior work. Marine Corps officials explained that the Marine Corps does not have a service-wide workforce plan. Rather, each Marine Corps installation is individually responsible for conducting internal assessments about its workforce and addressing any associated issues, such as how to alleviate staffing shortages, according to one Marine Corps official. However, having enough child care workers is a challenge in geographic locations where the Marine Corps has long waitlists, such as Hawaii and San Diego, according to this same official.

Without a strategic workforce plan to coordinate its strategies and activities across the Marine Corps' child care program, the service cannot ensure that the individual installations' activities are aligned with overall mission and programmatic needs. Further, without a strategic workforce plan, the Marine Corps lacks a mechanism to monitor its progress toward

⁵⁶As mentioned earlier, the Air Force oversees all air and space installation child and youth programs, including for the Space Force's child care program, according to an Air Force official. In this report, when we discuss the Air Force child care program, it is inclusive of the Space Force's program.

⁵⁷Department of the Air Force, *2023 Child Care Strategic Plan* (January 2023).

⁵⁸A Navy official described its strategic plan as Performance to Plan, which is an agency-based performance management approach that uses analytics to allow the Navy to make data-driven decisions.

⁵⁹U.S. Army Installation Management Command, *Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Strategic Plan 2023-2030*. The Army's Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation program covers military and family readiness; soldier and family resilience to help with physical and mental fitness; and quality of life programs, which include child care, housing, and spousal employment.

meeting the current and future staffing needs of its child care program, which is inconsistent with leading practices. As a result, its capacity to provide child care in some locations to Marines and their families has been reduced, thereby affecting military family readiness.

In addition to establishing and maintaining workforce plans, the military services follow other leading human capital practices for effective workforce planning we have identified in our prior work. These include selected recruitment leading practices such as developing competency and staffing requirements and recruiting child care workers continuously year-round.⁶⁰

Develop Competency and Staffing Requirements

The four military services have competency and staffing requirements, as established by DOD. DOD developed standard child care worker position descriptions for each position level that describe the roles and responsibilities of child care workers, which range from entry-level to positions that have more responsibilities. Competencies must be maintained by each military service to ensure that each service consistently classifies positions.⁶¹

In addition to meeting DOD competency requirements, each military service has developed its own way to meet minimum staffing requirements, which are based on the child care worker-to-child ratios established by DOD, for their Child Development Programs. The Army uses a staffing guide that determines the number of positions needed. It accounts for both the number of child care workers needed to meet the required worker-to-child ratios as well as child development center operating hours. However, officials from the other three military services said installations hire enough child care workers to meet the minimum child care worker-to-child ratios established by DOD so classrooms can open and remain open for families to enroll their children.

Monitor Competencies and Vacancies

All four military services monitor competencies and vacancies for child care worker positions. They monitor child care worker competencies as part of DOD's required annual inspection process, which we reported on previously.⁶² Each military service ensures that all child care workers

⁶⁰See [GAO-04-39](#), [GAO-22-105208](#), and [GAO-22-105932](#).

⁶¹Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25, Volume 1407, *DOD Civilian Personnel Management System: Nonappropriated Fund (NAF) Classification* (January 6, 2012).

⁶²GAO, *Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families*, [GAO-23-105518](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2, 2023).

complete a minimum amount of training per year and that these trainings focus on specific, relevant topics, such as the social and emotional needs of children. DOD collects and reports data on child care worker completion of required training. Additionally, officials from all four military services told us they track child care worker vacancies. For example, Army officials told us they receive monthly reports from Army installations on the number of open positions filled and the number of remaining vacancies. Navy officials explained that the Navy tracks personnel data (which would include information on child care worker vacancies) monthly as it is entered into a human resources system.

Recruit Continuously Year-Round

Each military service ensures that its installations recruit child care workers on a year-round basis, according to military service officials. For example, Marine Corps and Army officials explained that many installations advertise for child care worker positions continuously and that they recruit year-round. Installations regularly hold hiring fairs to create interest in the position among prospective employees and for interested individuals to apply for jobs, according to some installation commanders, child and youth program directors, and child development center and school-age care program administrators at seven of the eight installations we visited. For example, at a Marine Corps installation we visited, the child and youth program director told us they and human resources staff hold hiring fairs on the installation for prospective child care workers. This director explained that officials also post job openings to websites such as <https://www.USAJOBS.gov> and job flyers on community boards.⁶³

Strategically Leverage Hiring Flexibilities

All four military services use hiring and administrative flexibilities to recruit child care workers.⁶⁴ For example, the Air Force hires some of its child care workers using a federal direct hire authority.⁶⁵ Air Force officials reported that a direct hire authority for fiscal years 2018–2021 allowed the Air Force to hire 763 child care workers. According to these same officials, this direct hire authority has been extended through 2025. Additionally, in 2023, the Marine Corps issued an administrative policy to

⁶³The USAJOBS website is the central online portal the federal government uses to post open jobs and that prospective employees use to apply for them.

⁶⁴Hiring flexibilities can help the government fill critical skills gaps or achieve certain public policy goals, such as the military services ensuring service member and family readiness by providing child care.

⁶⁵See Department of Defense Memorandum, *Direct Hire Authority for Certain Personnel of the Department of Defense* (April 02, 2020). "Direct hire authority" allows agencies to fill vacancies in the competitive service under certain circumstances.

allow its installations to rapidly hire military spouses and others who meet basic qualifications for child care employment.⁶⁶

Lastly, each military service can hire child care workers on a provisional basis.⁶⁷ Once they pass an initial background check, child care workers can begin training and working while in the presence of an employee whose background check is complete. Provisional hiring can be useful but can also create challenges because workers in provisional status must be supervised at all times by more experienced colleagues or supervisors, according to some child and youth program directors and child development center and school-age care program administrators on seven of the eight installations we visited.

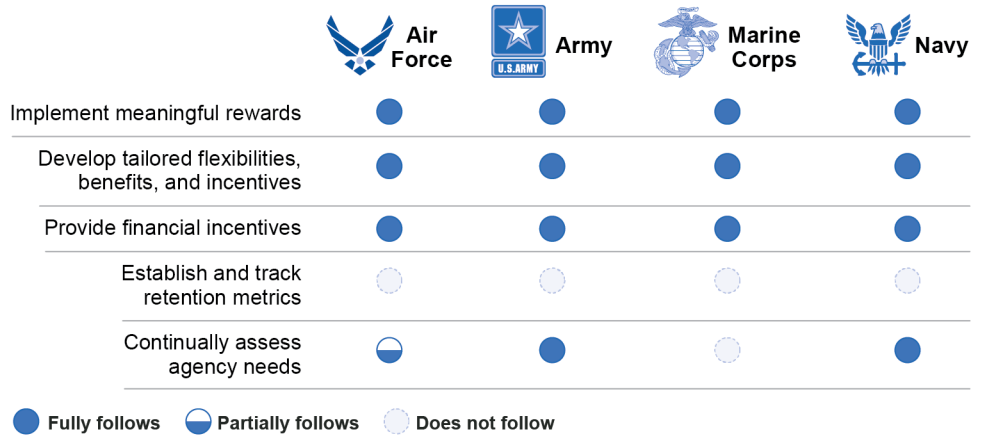
The Military Services Fully Follow Some, but Not All, of the Selected Retention Leading Practices

The military services fully followed three of the five selected retention leading practices for their child care workforces. No military service followed one retention leading practice: establish and track retention metrics. Two military services fully followed the selected retention leading practice to continually assess agency needs. However, one military service partially followed this leading practice, and one did not follow it. (See fig. 5 for a summary of the selected retention leading practices.)

⁶⁶Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs (CDPs)*. The basic qualifications for DOD child care workers are that (1) they must be at least 18 years old; (2) hold a high school diploma or equivalent; (3) read, speak, and write English; and (4) successfully pass a pre-employment physical, maintain current immunizations and be physically and behaviorally capable of performing the duties of the job.

⁶⁷Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25, Volume 1403, *DOD Civilian Personnel Management System: Nonappropriated Fund (NAF) Employment*. DOD implemented a policy that allows child care workers to provide care once a portion of their criminal history background check is complete while other portions are pending. The child care workers can provide care as long as the people are within the sight and under the supervision of a staff member whose criminal history background investigation is complete. Once child care workers' background checks are complete, they can work unrestricted.

Figure 5: Extent the Military Services Follow Selected Retention Leading Practices for Their Child Care Workforces



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense and military service documents, interviews with military service officials, and military service written responses. | GAO-24-106524

Implement Meaningful Rewards

If child care workers satisfactorily complete their training and meet experience requirements in child care settings, DOD requires that workers are advanced to the target level.⁶⁸ Moreover, when child care workers move to the next level (i.e., progressing from entry-level to intermediate-level or from intermediate to target-level), the military services must provide a minimum 6 percent hourly wage increase or the minimum pay associated with their location (whichever amount is higher).

In addition, to help child care workers progress in their careers, the four military services pay for the cost of child care workers earning and renewing their Child Development Associate credentials.⁶⁹ This credential program is for professionals working in early childhood education who

⁶⁸See Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25, Volume 1405, *DOD Civilian Personnel Management System: Nonappropriated Fund Pay, Awards, and Allowances* (June 26, 2014) (Incorporating change 1, Effective March 31, 2022). A target-level child care worker has to have a minimum of 18–24 months of experience in a child and youth program and successfully complete DOD’s standardized training courses (see fig. 1).

⁶⁹The Child Development Associate credential program has a minimum requirement of completing courses in specific early childhood education topics, such as supporting children’s social and emotional development, and receiving 480 hours of experience working with young children. The Council for Professional Recognition sets policies and procedures related to the credential, publishes the competency standards involved, and administers assessments.

serve children from birth to 5 years of age.⁷⁰ Earning a Child Development Associate credential can help child care workers move into positions with greater seniority and additional responsibilities. Specifically, in the Army, a child care worker can move into the target-level or higher once a worker has earned a Child Development Associate credential.

Develop Tailored Flexibilities, Benefits, and Incentives

All four military services have developed flexibilities, benefits, and incentives to help retain child care workers. For example, all four military services have civilian employee assistance programs that child care workers can use. These programs offer free and confidential legal, financial, and mental health services to all civilian employees who may need assistance working through personal and work-related challenges. In addition, DOD requires that the military services offer Morale, Welfare, and Recreation programs to child care workers.⁷¹ These offerings include movies at on-installation theaters and outdoor recreation options, such as access to boats and camping facilities.

In addition, the Army conducted a pilot program that offered child care workers access to commissaries (installation grocery stores that typically charge significantly lower prices than civilian grocery stores). Army officials told us this pilot program, which ended in November 2023, originally operated at 17 of its 51 U.S. installations, and child care workers reported that they appreciated commissary access. The Army plans to expand commissary access to child and youth program employees on all Army installations in fiscal year 2025.

Provide Financial Incentives

Each military service offers multiple financial incentives, in addition to its benefits package. For example, as mentioned earlier, all four military services offer bonuses that can help with retention. In addition, the Air Force and the Navy offer service-wide tuition reimbursement to their child care workers. The Air Force's program reimburses child care workers who use this program up to \$4,500 per fiscal year, if workers meet eligibility requirements. These requirements include having an acceptable performance appraisal rating.

Establish and Track Retention Metrics

While officials in the four military services told us retaining child care workers has been a challenge, none of the military services have

⁷⁰The Council for Professional Recognition also has a program for professionals to earn a Military School-Age credential. This is for adults working with school-age children and youth on installations.

⁷¹Department of Defense Instruction 1015.10, *Military Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) Programs* (July 6, 2009) (Incorporating Change 1, May 6, 2011).

established metrics to track the effectiveness of their retention initiatives, according to Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, and Army officials with whom we spoke. Air Force officials said they are working towards developing metrics to measure the effectiveness of their retention initiatives. In addition, Air Force officials said they are implementing a new data system that will help them collect data, but they do not know when the system will be ready to collect data on these initiatives. Marine Corps officials explained that the service does not have the resources to develop metrics on its retention initiatives, including not having enough staff at its headquarters level.

Navy officials told us the Navy's current focus is on developing metrics on how long it takes to onboard a new child care worker. Lastly, Army officials explained that they implemented many retention initiatives simultaneously but did not collect specific data on the initiatives to help determine why child care workers stay in their positions. By developing metrics to track the effectiveness of their retention efforts, the military services may be able to identify which initiatives are most effective. They may then use these initiatives to improve retention of child care workers and help prepare for future child care program needs.

Continually Assess Agency Needs

Officials from two of the four military services told us they continually assess the needs of their child care workforces. The Army conducts surveys of its child care workforce when employees leave their jobs to determine the reasons why they leave. Additionally, in December 2023, the Army completed an engagement survey to gauge child care worker satisfaction. Army officials told us they hope to conduct additional surveys focused on employee onboarding and benefits in fiscal year 2024.

Navy officials said the Navy assessed its child care workforce needs through focus groups with regional and installation child and youth program directors and made changes to better support child care workers. For example, in 2023, the Navy used its strategic planning tool to identify actions it needed to take to improve recruitment and retention of its child care workers, such as implementing leadership and management skills training for Navy installation child and youth program directors. Officials also told us the Navy developed a staffing model that puts a lead teacher in every child development center classroom. Lead teachers can provide more support and coaching to child care workers. Navy officials hope these actions and others will reduce child care worker burnout and low retention.

Of the other two military services, the Air Force partially assesses the needs of its child care workforce. In spring 2023, the Air Force conducted a retention study of its child care workforce, which included a workforce survey. This survey asked child care workers about job satisfaction and how likely they were to leave their jobs with the Air Force's child and youth program, among other topics. Approximately 1,000 child care workers responded to this survey, which is about 17 percent of the total number of child care workers the Air Force employs across its installations. The second part of this study plans to collect information through focus groups in 2024. However, beyond this one-time survey and the focus groups, the Air Force has not fully assessed the needs of its child care workforce. Air Force officials told us the service has been more focused on recruiting child care workers so it can open more classrooms and reduce the number of children on its child care waitlist, rather than on assessing its child care workforce needs.

The other military service, the Marine Corps, has not continually assessed its child care workforce needs. Officials told us they have not conducted any studies on staffing or shortages. They also said that while the Marine Corps previously conducted interviews when child care workers left their jobs, the military service is currently not conducting these interviews while it searches for a new third-party contractor to provide that service. While the Marine Corps reviews its staffing levels as part of its annual child care program inspection process, it has not taken additional steps to assess its broader child care workforce needs. A Marine Corps official explained the service does not continually assess its needs because individual installations make decisions about their child care staffing needs, rather than Marine Corps headquarters taking a service-wide approach. This official further said that Marine Corps headquarters may need to help its individual installations address this.

By continually assessing their child care workforce needs, the Air Force and the Marine Corps may be able to address issues with training or identify new child care positions that can help child care workers learn how to better support children with behavioral challenges. This may help the Air Force and the Marine Corps retain more of their child care workforce for longer and allow them to better plan for their future child care program needs. Moreover, by continually assessing their child care workforce needs, the two military services can better help meet the needs of service members and their families, thus improving military family readiness.

Conclusions

Providing child care to service members and their families is one way the military services can support military family readiness. The military services have taken some steps toward implementing several recruitment and retention leading practices, but they do not engage in others that could help them address current and emerging workforce needs. For example, the Marine Corps does not have a strategic workforce plan for its child and youth program. As called for by leading practices, having a strategic workforce plan will ensure that individual installations are staffing child care programs according to service-wide needs and goals. Establishing a process to develop and maintain such a plan will ensure that efforts to conduct service-wide planning are effective and efficient and aligned with the Marine Corps' broader child care program staffing goals. By following this recruitment leading practice, the Marine Corps may be able to address lengthy waitlists and long wait times for on-installation child care.

Moreover, the military services do not establish and track the effectiveness of specific retention initiatives for their child care workforces. Engaging in this leading practice will help the military services better evaluate the success of their retention initiatives. While the military services have implemented many programs and benefits to help retain child care workers, they have not adequately assessed the impact of these retention efforts. By establishing and tracking metrics of success for improving child care worker retention, the military services will have information to better manage retention issues and help address reported staffing shortfalls. It will also allow the military services to determine which retention initiatives are worth continuing to help with future child care worker retention.

In addition, the Air Force and the Marine Corps do not conduct regular assessments to help them identify program workforce needs, such as hiring more child care workers who can support children with challenging behaviors and care for children with special needs. This will put these military services in a better position to understand their current and future child care workforce needs and possibly increase worker retention. Establishing a process for doing so can assist the Air Force and Marine Corps in meeting the needs of service members and their families.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of seven recommendations, including four to the Secretary of the Navy, two to the Secretary of the Air Force, and one to the Secretary of the Army.

The Secretary of the Navy should direct the Commandant of the Marine Corps to develop and implement a Marine Corps Child and Youth Program strategic workforce plan to document its human capital goals and strategies. This plan should include strategies and activities to address staffing needs as well as elements to ensure the Marine Corps is able to monitor and evaluate progress toward its goals. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of the Navy should direct the Commandant of the Marine Corps to develop metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of the Navy should direct the Commandant of the Marine Corps to conduct a needs assessment of its child care workforce to inform future workforce planning. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Navy improves upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Air Force improves upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Air Force improves upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by conducting a needs assessment of its child care workforce to inform future workforce planning. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of the Army should ensure that the Army improves upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives. (Recommendation 7)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Defense for review and comment. On April 5, 2024, DOD's Associate Director for Child and Youth Programs Operations met with us to provide the agency's technical comments orally, which we incorporated into the report as appropriate. Additionally, the Air Force provided technical comments, which were incorporated into the report as appropriate.

In their written comments, reproduced in appendix I, DOD and the military services concurred with our recommendations that the services implement selected leading workforce practices to assist with their child care worker retention efforts and noted steps they planned to take or are currently taking. For example, DOD said the Navy will explore opportunities to improve upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program's retention efforts. In addition, DOD said the Air Force is conducting a study on child care staff retention, which it said will inform future workforce needs.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Air Force, the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Kathryn Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.



Kathryn A. Larin, Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Defense



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RESERVE AFFAIRS

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4/26/24

Ms. Kathryn A. Larin
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Larin:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the Government Accountability Office Draft Report GAO-24-106524, "MILITARY CHILD CARE: Services Should Assess Their Child Care Worker Retention Efforts," dated March 20, 2024 (GAO Code 106524).

Enclosed is DoD's response to the subject report. My point of contact is Ms. Heidi Welch who can be reached at heidi.e.welch.civ@mail.mil and (571) 232-2316.

Sincerely,

ANGERS.JEFFREY
PAUL.1007947417

Digitally signed by
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Date: 2024.04.26 16:18:24 -0400

Jeffrey P. Angers
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
for Manpower and Reserve Affairs

Enclosure:
As stated

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED MARCH 20, 2024
GAO-24-106524 (GAO CODE 106524)**

**“MILITARY CHILD CARE: SERVICES SHOULD ASSESS THEIR CHILD CARE
WORKER RETENTION EFFORTS”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS**

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of the Navy should direct the Commandant of the Marine Corps to develop and implement a Marine Corps Child and Youth Program strategic workforce plan to document its human capital goals and strategies. This plan should include strategies and activities to address staffing needs as well as elements to ensure the Marine Corps is able to monitor and evaluate progress toward its goals.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees with the recommendation and will ensure the Secretary of the Navy in collaboration with the Commandant of the Marine Corps explores opportunities to develop and implement a Marine Corps Child and Youth Program strategic workforce plan to document its human capital goals and strategies, to include strategies and activities to address staffing needs as well as elements to ensure they monitor and evaluate progress toward its goals.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of the Navy should direct the Commandant of the Marine Corps to develop metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees with the recommendation and will ensure the Secretary of the Navy in collaboration with the Commandant of the Marine Corps explores opportunities to develop metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of the Navy should direct the Commandant of the Marine Corps to conduct a needs assessment of its child care workforce to inform future workforce planning.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees with the recommendation and will ensure the Secretary of the Navy in collaboration with the Commandant of the Marine Corps explores opportunities to conduct a needs assessment of its child care workforce to inform future workforce planning.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Navy improves upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees with the recommendation and will ensure the Secretary of the Navy explores opportunities to improve upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Air Force improves upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees with the recommendation and will ensure the Secretary of the Air Force explores opportunities to improve upon its strategic workforce planning.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Air Force improves upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by conducting a needs assessment of its child care workforce to inform future workforce planning.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees with the recommendation and will ensure the Secretary of the Air Force explores opportunities to improve upon its strategic workforce planning efforts. The DAF is currently conducting a child care staff retention study which will inform workforce needs and be incorporated into the DAF Child Care strategic planning process.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Secretary of the Army should ensure that the Army improves upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department agrees with the recommendation and will ensure the Secretary of the Army explores opportunities to improve upon its strategic workforce planning efforts by developing metrics to track the effectiveness of its child care program retention initiatives.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Nora Boretti (Assistant Director), Robin Marion (Analyst in Charge), Rebecca Gertler, and Christophe Beaumier made significant contributions to the report. Also contributing to this report were James Bennett, Stephen Brown, Gina Hoover, Lauren Mosteller, Aaron Olszewski, and Meg Sommerfeld.

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