
Defense Report

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Child Care Centers on Military Installations—Who Should Pay for Them?

When military personnel and their families buy things in post exchanges they know they are paying prices that have been raised to allow for a profit — not to put money into the pockets of the exchange management but to accumulate what are called “nonappropriated funds” which will pay for morale, welfare and recreation activities not funded by Congress. Congress, in turn, said in 1970 that nonappropriated funds should not be used for things that are not potentially useful to the majority of military people and families. At that time, it was ruled that child care was one of the things that could not be paid for with nonappropriated funds.

At that time, too, we had a very different Army from the one we have today. The draft was still operational, the number of women in uniform was smaller and the Army, in general, had far fewer married people in its ranks. It might have been valid to conclude that, under these circumstances, child care was not a benefit to the majority and, therefore, should not be paid for by nonappropriated funds.

Today's all-volunteer Army is about 60-percent married and it has a substantially larger number of women. There are growing numbers of a new category of Army families in which both husband and wife wear the uniform. The question of what to do with the children of the more-married Army has become a nagging one and has led the Army to request funds to build child care centers with appropriated money. The phenomenon of having to deal with expanded numbers of children during military duty hours, it seemed to the Army, is a function of the changes Congress and several Presidents have made in the Army's composition and should be dealt with by appropriated funds.

But the House and Senate Appropriations Committees don't see it that way. Apparently harking back to the 1970 ruling, made under circumstances that no longer exist, the committees have ruled that the construction of child care centers should be paid for by nonappropriated funds and have stricken from the 1981 Military Construction Budget the Department of Defense request for that construction. The department is planning a rebuttal, but if it does not succeed military families will wind up paying for a service made necessary by the changes in military personnel policy directed from Capitol Hill and the White House.

The 1970 ruling that nonappropriated funds be used only for projects of benefit to the majority was probably the correct one. The child care centers, however, do not seem to be an item of morale, welfare or recreation support qualifying for nonappropriated support. They are, as a matter of fact, an operation of vital necessity for the married soldiers who comprise our volunteer Army, just as they are vitally necessary to families who must have federally supported civilian day care centers to be able to earn a living.

Must we ask our soldiers to pay for child care so they can perform their duties without undue worry? This problem was designed into today's Army by people other than those serving in the Army. The designers of the problem should be responsible for its solution.