

DoD Extends Paid Maternity Leave To 12 Weeks

By Meghan Portillo - NCO Journal

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Defense Secretary Ash Carter discusses reforms to his Force of the Future program to improve the quality of life for military personnel during a briefing at the Pentagon, Jan 28, 2016. (Photo by Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Adrian Cadiz / Department of Defense)

The Department of Defense is increasing military maternity leave and instituting other changes in an effort to support military families, improve retention and strengthen the force of the future, Defense Secretary Ash Carter said earlier this month. Women throughout the joint force may take 12 weeks of fully paid maternity leave, Carter told reporters at the Pentagon. The 12-week benefit is double the amount of time for paid maternity leave from when he became defense chief nearly a year ago, he noted. "This puts DoD in the top tier of institutions nationwide and will have significant influence on decision-making for our military family members," Carter said. Though an attractive incentive for recruiting and retaining talent, the secretary said, the benefit also promotes the health and wellness of mothers through facilitating recovery and promoting breastfeeding and bonding with the infant. "Our calculation is quite simple — we want our people to be able to balance two of the most solemn commitments they can ever make: a commitment to serve their country and a commitment to start and support a family," he said.

Sgt. Rachel Badgeley, who is stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, said she welcomes the new policy. After the birth of her son, Cannon, in December, she used six weeks of maternity leave and is now using 30 days of personal leave to be with her baby. At this stage of his life, "I can't imagine sending him to a day care," she said. "We have emotional needs. Bonding at this age is important for establishing a strong relationship."

Support for new parents

The maternity leave decision applies to all service members in the active-duty component and to reserve-component members serving in a full-time status or on definite active-duty recall or mobilization orders in excess of 12 months.

The new policy allows less than the Navy, which decided last year to institute 18 weeks of fully-paid maternity leave, Carter noted. Sailors and Marines who are pregnant or who become pregnant within 30 days of the enactment of the policy may still take the full 18 weeks of paid leave, he said.

In addition, the Department of Defense is seeking legislation to expand military paternity leave from the current 10-day leave benefit to a 14-day noncontinuous leave benefit, he said.

Any increase of paternal leave would be welcoming news for fathers, said Staff Sgt. Jose Ibarra, also stationed at Fort Meade. Fathers need time to be with their infants, too.

"Bonding is a definite plus," said Ibarra, a new dad who recently took his 10 days in addition to personal leave to be with his new son, Kai Roman.

In addition to bonding, Ibarra said he needed the time to help his wife, Ricel, recover and care for the infant.

Increasing hours of military child care

The Department of Defense subsidizes child care on military installations to ensure its affordability, Carter said. However, he added, military families often have to use outside providers because the hours at military child care facilities do not align with the work schedules of service members.

With those challenges in mind, the Department of Defense is increasing child care access to 14 hours of the day throughout the force, he said.

"By providing our troops with child care they can rely on from before reveille until after taps, we provide one more reason for them to stay on board," he said. "We show them that supporting a family and serving our country are by no means incompatible goals."

David Vergun, Army News Service, contributed to this report.