



(U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Hubert D. Delany III taken April 25, 2019) U.S. Army Spc. ShaTyra Reed, 22nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, shares a moment with her daughter Amore near Fort Bragg, N.C., April 25, 2019.

Pregnancy or Promotion

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In the last decade, the U.S. Army has made a large push to modernize programs that assist pregnant Soldiers, from standardizing maternity leave policies to exemption from the Military Lethality policy following child birth. However, a policy still exists that hinders a pregnant Soldier's promotional timeline.

This article addresses the current promotional obstacle, the Select-Train-Educate-Promote (STEP) program, and proposes solutions to keep our pregnant Soldiers' careers on track during and after pregnancy while still meeting the Army's mission: "To deploy, fight and win our nation's wars by providing ready, prompt and sustained land dominance by Army forces across the full spectrum of conflict as part of the joint force." (Department of the Army, n.d.c, para. 1).

The Evolution of Change

In 2016, the Department of Defense opened all military occupations and positions to women without exception, making it one of the most progressive organizations regarding women's equality in the world (Department of the Army, 2015; Rosenberg & Phillipps, 2015). Additionally, in 2016 the U.S. Army released *Army Directive 2016-09 (Maternity Leave Policy)*, standardizing maternity leave across all branches of service, guaranteeing 12 weeks of leave to mothers (Murphy, 2016).

In 2018, women who are non-deployable due to pregnancy, or recent birth, became protected from involuntary separation under the military's "deploy or get out" policy (Shane, 2019). The intent of the policy is to separate Soldiers from the U.S. Army who are non-deployable for more than 12 consecutive months (Copp, 2018).

"Our people are the centerpiece of the Army." —Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. James C. McConville (Department of the Army, n.d., para. 4)

In 2019, in order to help split parenting duties of newborns between both mother and father, the U.S. Army released *Army Directive 2019-05* (Army Military Parental Leave Program), which replaced *Army Directive 2016-09*, and afforded leave for both parents of a child (Esper, 2019). Under the Army Military Parental Leave Program, the 12 weeks of nonchargeable leave, traditionally given to mothers, breaks down into two parts: six weeks of convalescent leave and six weeks of caregiver leave that can be split between either parent. This provides each parent an opportunity to take equal amounts of nonchargeable leave to bond with their child, or allows them to split the six weeks of caregiver leave however they choose (Esper, 2019).

And most recently, in February 2020, *ALARACT 016/2020* allows a 12-month deferment from deployment after the birth of a child (Department of the Army, 2020). This is another positive step towards modern parenting, but the Army's STEP program creates a disadvantage and promotional delay for pregnant Soldiers.

Current policy dictates all Soldiers on temporary profiles prior to attending noncommissioned officer professional military education (NCO PME) cannot begin their course - especially if pregnant (Department of the Army, 2019e; n.d.a; n.d.b). Because of the rigidity of the STEP program, it prevents pregnant Soldiers from being eligible for promotion because they cannot attend their required NCO PME for the duration of their pregnancy and postpartum recovery — on average 15 months (Department of the Army, 2019a; Tann, 2015) (see Figure 1).

According to *Army Regulation (AR) 40-502: Medical Readiness* and *Department of the Army Pamphlet 40-502: Medical Readiness Procedures*, once identified as pregnant, doctors place the Soldier on a temporary profile with increased restrictions. After delivery, the doctor issues a 180-day postpartum temporary profile

that exempts her from an APFT or being held to height and weight standards (Department of the Army, 2017; 2019a; 2019c; 2019d).

However, implementing exceptions to policy to allow pregnant Soldiers to attend NCO PME, or promoting them prior to obtaining military education, balances the STEP program for the Army across the board.

The Example

To illustrate the impact that pregnancy has on a Soldier's promotion timeline, compare the rank of specialist to sergeant and the delays associated with pregnancy (see Figure 1). According to *AR 600-8-19: Enlisted Promotions and Reductions*, in order to be eligible to attend the promotion board, a specialist must have 17 months time in service (TIS) and five months time in grade (TIG) for the secondary zone. Also, they must have 35 months TIS and 11 months TIG for the primary zone (Department of the Army, 2019b). They must also have a current passing record Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT), meet the U.S. Army's height and weight standards, and complete Distributed Leaders Course — level one (Department of the Army, 2019b; Myers, 2019).

Once the specialist attends the promotion board and attains a promotable status, they must then complete Basic Leader Course (BLC) and earn the required amount of promotion points prior to pinning on the rank of sergeant (Department of the Army, 2019b). Yet the total cumulative timeline a pregnant Soldier is potentially on a temporary profile and unable to attend NCO PME is one year and three months (nine month average for the pregnancy and six months for the postpartum temporary profile) (Department of the Army, 2019a; "How Many Weeks," 2018). An additional child could result in two years and six months on a temporary profile.

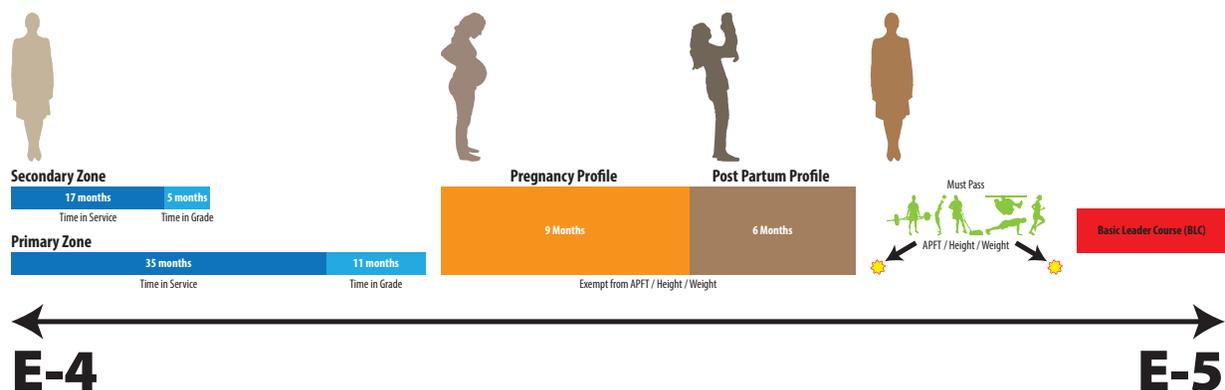


Figure 1

The current NCO PME requirements state:

“Soldiers who are pregnant prior to the start of the course may not attend BLC until medically cleared. A Soldier who is diagnosed as pregnant while attending BLC may continue, but she must provide written documentation from her medical provider stating that she can participate in all physical course requirements. (Department of the Army, 2019e, p. 12)”

Hypothetically, with this requirement in place, a pregnant Soldier may delay reporting her pregnancy in order to attend NCO PME, which may place both the mother and unborn child at risk.

Historical Challenges

***All references to previous NCO education systems will be referred to as NCO PME.**

Prior to adopting the STEP program in 2016, the U.S. Army operated on a system independent of NCO PME completion for promotion (Lopez, 2015). Completion of NCO PME was only required to obtain the next rank. An example of this is the completion of Basic Leader Course (BLC) to be eligible for promotion to staff sergeant, but not for promotion to sergeant (Lopez, 2015). Having the ability to be promoted prior to attending NCO PME allowed Soldiers who were unable to attend, due to deployment or pregnancy, to continue their career progression. In high operational tempos, this promotion system allowed commanders to allocate Soldiers to NCO PME and defer existing school dates based on unit mission requirements.

However, this promotion system placed a great burden on the U.S. Army by allowing over 14,000 NCOs to lead Soldiers without receiving the proper level of training through the NCO PME system (Tice, 2016). In addition, when commanders deferred Soldiers' school dates or when Soldiers were unable to attend school based on mission requirements, deployments, or pregnancy, there were no tracking systems in place to ensure NCOs attended NCO PME in a timely manner (Vergun, 2016).

Improving the Foundation

Upon the release of the STEP program, NCOs of all ranks expressed concern that reasons beyond Soldiers' control would hinder promotions. Former U.S. Army Training and Doc-

trine Command Command Sgt. Maj. David Davenport responded to these concerns by saying, “We understand that Soldiers have to be deferred from attending school for many reasons, but we want to add some discipline to the process” (Tice & Tan, 2015, para. 15). However, the STEP program had zero exceptions to policy and a backlog of promotions began to replace the backlog of uneducated NCOs (Seaton, 2016; Tann, 2016).

Taking Care of Soldiers

In September 2018, the U.S. Army instituted an exception to the STEP program's *AR 600-8-19: Enlisted Promotions and Reductions* (Department of the Army, 2018). The NCO PME deferment policy allows operationally deployed Soldiers, who are fully qualified for promotion, to defer NCO PME up to 24 months after they return home (Tann, 2018). As it pertains to deployed Soldiers, Davenport said, “they're doing everything, they're fit, they've knocked out their SSD [now known as DLC], they're doing everything right, but they don't have the opportunity to attend NCO PME like those in the states or home station” (Tann, 2018, p. 2). So what about pregnant Soldiers who are doing everything right, knocked out their DLC, stayed physically fit, and do not have the opportunity to attend NCO PME? Without granting an exception to



(U.S. Army photo by Kelly Morris taken Feb. 26, 2018) U.S. Army 1st Lt. Brandon Valle and 2nd Lt. Brandie Valle share a family moment with their daughter after earning their U.S. Aviator Badges at an Initial Entry Rotary Wing graduation ceremony the U.S. Army Aviation Museum, Fort Rucker, Ala., Feb. 28, 2018.

the NCO PME policy for pregnant Soldiers, unintentionally, the U.S. Army is asking female Soldiers to make a choice between promotion or pregnancy.

Air Force Policy

The following Air Force policy demonstrates a service branch waiving temporary profiles for pregnant military students. *Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-2656*, paragraph 4.7.3.1 states that Airmen can obtain a waiver to attend school while on a temporary profile approved through the school commandant; however, their current fitness assessment must be valid through the graduation date (Department of the Air Force, 2018).

In an email interview, U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Christopher Moore (Air Force Officer of Special Investigations, Field Support Squadron Superintendent) stated:

“Pregnant Airmen are approved in all cases where it is safe for the member to attend the course. It is only if there are complications or if they were scheduled to be in the course around their expected delivery date that a commandant would not approve the waiver. It is very common for pregnant Airmen to attend school. (2019)”

Proposed Solutions

***The following solutions and ideas are by no means complete and comprehensive plans. They are meant to initiate a conversation toward waiving pregnant Soldiers to attend NCO PME without a long promotional delay.**

A one size fits all solution to waiver pregnant Soldiers on a temporary profile is difficult because schools vary in length. A waiver to a one-month long BLC course is easier to imagine than a waiver for the 10-months long Sergeants Major Course where the birth of the child is guaranteed to happen during the course.

In terms of the APFT requirement, if the Air Force pregnancy policy were to be adopted, then the test on record must be valid through the graduation date and the entrance/course APFT could be waived since the Soldier showed that under normal circumstances they can pass an APFT. Or if a course APFT is required, it can be deferred for one (or two) years post graduation — depending on the timing of the pregnancy and postpartum profiles.



Females conduct Pregnancy / Postpartum Physical Training in accordance with the P3T program. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

A second option could be to allow a 24-month NCO PME deferment to pregnant Soldiers that have all other requirements completed, much like the previously mentioned deployed Soldier policy where a Soldier can be promoted to the appropriate rank but has 24 months to complete the associated NCO PME (Tann, 2018).

A third option could be that instead of class/unit physical training, pregnant students are put on a personalized Pregnancy/Postpartum Physical Training Program (P3T). This way there is a physical portion to the course but it's tailored to the medical needs of the pregnant Soldier. The P3T program is supported in multiple Army regulations to include *AR 350-1*, *FM 7-22*, *AR 40-502*, and *DA PAM 40-502* (Army Public Health Center, 2019; Department of the Army, 2012; 2017; 2019a; 2019d).

AR 350-1 states:

“Commanders will ensure that all eligible Soldiers participate in the PPPT Program and that personnel are available to conduct the physical training portion of the PPPT Program for the pregnant/postpartum Soldier in a manner that is consistent with the content, standards, policies, procedures, and responsibilities as set forth by the Public Health Command...(Department of the Army, 2017, p. 194)”

A final recommendation would be to establish a medical pregnancy progression cutoff. For example, they must be able to finish their NCO PME before the 28-week mark (start of third trimester). This is when *DA PAM 40-502* begins placing restrictions on responsibilities and available working hours. This timeline is by no means perfect, but would protect pregnant Soldiers so they have

time in their third trimester to obtain all the prenatal medical care and appointments needed, especially if complications in the pregnancy arise (Cardini et al., 2019; "The Third Trimester," n.d.).

Conclusion

Creating exceptions to policy requires vast amounts of planning and foresight. Parenthood shouldn't negatively impact the U.S. Army's mission of ensuring national

and global security, but also shouldn't delay a pregnant Soldier's career. The U.S. Army is on a talent management mission to attract and retain the best and brightest Soldiers across the nation. Implementing exceptions to the current policy and allowing pregnant Soldiers to attend NCO PME in order to be promoted in a timely manner ensures equality and long-term retention across the board. ■

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