



Spc. ShaTyra Reed, 22nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, plays with her daughter in Fayetteville, North Carolina, April 25, 2019. The Army's new directive, AD 2022-06, aims to alleviate many administrative burdens Soldier-parents face and help them better care for their children while advancing their careers. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Hubert D. Delany III)

Redefining Army Support for Soldier-parents

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In April 2022, Secretary of the Army Christine E. Wormuth endorsed Army Directive 2022-06 (Parenthood, Pregnancy, and Postpartum) (Wormuth, 2022), marking a significant milestone in the commitment to align protocols with the Secretary of Defense's priorities. This directive represents a pivotal shift in the Army's approach to supporting Soldier-parents and reflects broader initiatives to prioritize military families' well-being.

The directive set a 365-day Army Combat Fitness

Test (ACFT) and continuous duty deferment, lactation considerations, short-term child care needs, extended maternity leave, and improved child care facilities (Wormuth, 2022). This article examines these provisions and explores their implications for Soldier-parents.

Policy Highlights: A Closer Examination

The Parenthood, Pregnancy, and Postpartum directive introduces groundbreaking policies to enhance Soldier-parent support throughout the

parenthood journey. Notably, pregnant Soldiers now benefit from a 365-day exemption from the ACFT, allowing for gradual returns to post-pregnancy fitness training. Additionally, birth parents receive 365-day deferments from continuous duty events, ensuring essential parental presence during children's crucial first year (Wormuth, 2022).

Commanders must provide lactation breaks and designated lactation areas, underscoring the Army's commitment to supporting breastfeeding Soldiers (Wormuth, 2022). Recent studies highlight the multifaceted challenges experienced by military families, particularly children, during and after parental deployments (Dahlberg et al., 2020). The findings underscore the critical need for effective strategies to support military families navigating these demanding circumstances.

Furthermore, the directive emphasizes flexibility for unforeseen parenting requirements, exempting Soldiers from using long-term guardianship provisions for short-term child care needs (Wormuth, 2022). As the Army implements these progressive policies, it's essential to hear the voices from within and personal testimonies that shed light on the challenges and triumphs of military parenthood.

Voices from Within: Personal Testimonies

Embedded within this narrative are personal accounts from two senior leaders who have experienced firsthand the transformative effects of Army Directive 2022-06.

Sgt. Maj. Melinda Miller shares her journey as a dual military parent, highlighting the challenges she faced before the directive's implementation. Sgt. Maj. Lisa Walker reflects on her experiences navigating parenthood within the military, underscoring the importance of extended parental leave and enhanced child care services. Their testimonies underscore the directive's positive impact on Soldier-parents and the broader military community.

Miller

Throughout her journey, Miller faced distinctive parenting challenges, navigating the complexities of being a dual-military and single parent. She takes pride in the Army's positive strides in prioritizing parenthood. However, it's essential not to overlook what brought her to this point.

When she found out she was pregnant with her son and then again six years later with her daughter, the fear and excitement was palpable. However, the challenges of military life quickly took center stage. During both

pregnancies, the Army's policies were vague on what pregnant Soldiers could and couldn't do.

During her first pregnancy, she was expected to conduct unit physical training. At seven months pregnant, she was required to run in weekly company runs, believing it would help her bounce back and lose weight faster after pregnancy. She was expected to participate in a monthlong training event five months into her second pregnancy. However, with the Army's new parenting directive, command teams and Soldiers now have clear limitations.

Limited maternity leave meant Miller had only six weeks to recover and bond with her newborn. At the same time, her husband received no paternity leave, leaving the immediate responsibilities squarely on her shoulders. On-post child care options were scarce, and operating hours weren't conducive to the hours required by their leaders, compounding the difficulties.

This dynamic led them to rely on unlicensed day care providers or face consequences for lacking a family care plan. Some leaders expected their Soldiers to find day care at a moment's notice to meet requirements.

The new directive aims to alleviate many administrative burdens Soldier-parents face and help them better care for their children while advancing their careers. Miller remembers being told many times she would have to work late or arrive early with little to no notice, making it extremely difficult to find care for her children. The



Soldiers take part in the 3rd Infantry Division Pregnancy and Postpartum Physical Training Program, a modified Army Combat Physical Fitness Test (ACFT) in 2021. Pregnant Soldiers now benefit from a 365-day exemption from the ACFT. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Michael Udejiofor)



A Family Child Care provider sings with children during circle time at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Feb. 8, 2024. Improving on-post child care services aims to provide military families with quality and licensed providers. (U.S. Army photo by Kayla Cosby)

answer for everything was “use your family care plan.” Often, she felt forced to leave her children with complete strangers so she could complete her military obligations out of fear she would be forced out of the Army and not have the means to financially support her children.

Miller was a wheeled vehicle mechanic during her pregnancies. Her primary duty was working in the motor pool on military vehicles. Being a new mother who breastfed her children and worked in the motor pool presented an added hurdle, since there were no provisions for breastfeeding.

Today, the Army’s directive represents a positive transformation in addressing these challenges. Extending parental leave for mothers and fathers acknowledges the importance of family support. Improving on-post child care services aims to provide military families with quality and licensed providers.

The directive’s emphasis on flexibility for breastfeeding mothers and individualized fitness standards recognizes postpartum Soldiers’ unique needs. Moreover, updated Family Care Plan policies and operational demand considerations strike a better balance between military requirements and family needs, reflecting the Army’s commitment to prioritizing its personnel’s well-being.

Walker

Walker’s journey as a dual-military parent began with the birth of her first son and an unexpected hurdle. She went on Temporary Duty (TDY) for five

weeks shortly after her six-week maternity leave. This abrupt disruption threw a wrench into her plans as she was still breastfeeding.

She had to stop breastfeeding and deal with medical issues stemming from such an abrupt stop while away from her son. The Army’s new directive takes this challenge into consideration and helps Soldiers who decide breastfeeding is best for their families (Wormuth, 2022).

Confronted with the challenges of numerous leadership assignments, deployments, and TDYs, she decided to keep her family small, opting for just one child. Retaining military women has historically been negatively impacted by their intention to have children, particularly when parenthood holds significant importance for them. This correlation suggests that some women foresee difficulties in balancing their work and family roles (Orthner, 2019).

At that time, the military landscape didn’t prioritize parenthood, and service demands made raising families considerably challenging. Later in her career, Walker decided to expand her family through adoption. However, the process proved intricate. She had to navigate the complexities of pausing adoption proceedings to deploy and subsequently undergo a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) move. Now, adoptive parents have similar rights to birth parents (Wormuth, 2022).

The purpose of sharing these experiences is to illuminate the significant strides the Army has made

in recognizing and addressing the challenges military parents face.

Walker's journey, from the difficulties of her first son's birth to the complexities of adoption later in her career, reflects the Army's positive transformation and the directive's impact in prioritizing and supporting military families' unique needs.

With a family-friendly focus, the military can attract diverse and talented groups of people, promoting inclusivity in leadership. It's crucial to observe how these changes play out over time.

Conclusion

The Army's commitment to supporting Soldier-parents is not just a policy change but a testament to its dedication to people's well-being. Implementing Army Directive 2022-06 lays the groundwork for more inclusive and supportive military environments where Soldiers can excel professionally and personally.

Through continued collaboration and feedback, the



The 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team established a dedicated space for nursing mothers at Fort Carson, Colorado. The Army's new directive, AD 2022-06, supports Soldiers who decide breastfeeding is best for their families. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Taylor Graham)

Army can refine its policies to better meet Soldier-parents' evolving needs and ensure a brighter future for all military families. As we look ahead, we must sustain the momentum of progress and remain steadfast in our commitment to fostering a culture of support, inclusivity, and excellence. ■

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