



January 30, 2020

Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor  
Honorable Don Harmon, President, Illinois Senate  
Honorable Michael Madigan, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives  
Honorable Bill Brady, Minority Leader, Illinois Senate  
Honorable Jim Durkin, Minority Leader, Illinois House of Representatives  
Members of the Illinois General Assembly

Dear Illinois Leaders:

As retired admirals and generals, we are concerned that far too many young Illinoisans are ineligible to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, ultimately jeopardizing our national security. Three main limitations disqualify 70% of 17-24 year-old Illinoisans from military service: obesity, poor education, and criminal records. These challenges also pose barriers to opportunities for young people in many other areas. To protect our national security and the chance for youth to pursue career, college or military futures, we must prioritize their physical, behavioral, and educational well-being from their earliest years. To this end, we respectfully request your support for the following policy priorities in 2020:

**1) Concentrate more resources in the early years of children's lives**

Numerous studies show high-quality early learning programs that reach children from birth to age 5 can dramatically boost graduation rates, deter kids from crime, and reduce the likelihood they are held back in school. Recognizing the tremendous benefits of early care and education, the Department of Defense has invested in exemplary programs for military families—including child care, preschool, parent supports, and other efforts. To reach more Illinois children with these kinds of efforts, we must take the following steps:

- **Improve voluntary preschool and birth-to-3 opportunities by increasing the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) by an additional \$150 million in FY21.** High-quality preschool and birth-to-3 programs can help prevent childhood obesity, boost graduation rates, and reduce the likelihood children are held back in school. An additional investment in this grant would keep the state moving towards providing voluntary access to a quality preschool program for all 3- and 4-year-olds, with a priority on the most at-risk children.

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- **Increase home-visiting programs in the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) FY21 budget, by appropriating at least \$20.9 million for Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon.** Voluntary home-visiting provides “coaching” for new parents of very young, at-risk children. These programs are among the most effective strategies for reducing exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and helping children to be successful later in life.
- **Increase state general revenue fund support for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to at least \$482 million in FY21 to allow for continued quality enhancements and an increase in the number of working families receiving help.** State child care assistance for low-income, working families has long helped parents find reliable, educational settings for their children while they are at work. These programs are also a significant component of the early learning system; high-quality care can be as educational as quality preschool programs, and child care often helps families to access half-day preK services.

**2) Maintain physical fitness and physical education as a state priority in grades K-12**

High-quality physical education (P.E.) in schools is critical to maintaining a healthy body weight and ensuring that young people will be mission-ready for the military, or whatever future career they may choose. Research shows that high-quality P.E. can also help students learn in the classroom. In 2017, Illinois relaxed schools’ daily P.E. requirement to 3 days per week. We strongly encourage our state leaders to strengthen P.E. policies to meet CDC recommendations of 150 minutes per week in elementary school and 225 minutes per week in secondary school.

The decisions we make now will have a profound impact on the future of Illinois’ youth and our national security. Illinois will need to do its part to ensure that children reach adulthood academically prepared, physically fit, and mission-ready.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these priorities with you at your earliest convenience. Please contact Amy Eisenstein from our staff to make arrangements. She can be reached at [aeisenstein@missionreadiness.org](mailto:aeisenstein@missionreadiness.org) or 312-809-6850.

Respectfully submitted,

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