



January 21, 2022

Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor
Honorable Don Harmon, President, Illinois Senate
Honorable Emanuel Chris Welch, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable Dan McConchie, 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- to 24-year-old Illinoisans from military service: obesity, poor education, and criminal records. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated such challenges and highlighted the barriers that exist to young people's opportunities for success in many areas. To better-protect our national security, address the needs of our families, and improve the chance for youth to thrive in whatever career they choose, we must prioritize their physical, behavioral, and educational well-being from their earliest years.

It was children's formative years that the bipartisan Early Childhood Funding Commission had in mind when it released its spring 2021 recommendations for improving the adequacy, equitability, and quality of programs for all Illinois children, from birth to age 5. These recommendations include creating a new funding model and increasing resources, consolidating administration of early childhood funding, and centralizing early childhood programs into one state agency. Illinois' Prenatal to Three initiative (PN3) shares similar goals for improving the resources provided to our state's youngest learners, and ensuring that these services are available to far more children.

In order to further these objectives, and help our state's children succeed in life, the retired military leaders of **Mission: Readiness, Illinois, urge you to increase funding for critical early childhood programs by at least 10% for Fiscal Year 2023.**

High-quality early learning programs for children from birth to age 5 are shown to significantly increase graduation rates, reduce childhood obesity, deter kids from crime, and lessen the likelihood that they are held back in school, according to numerous studies. Therefore, we respectfully request your support for the following policy priorities in the coming year:

- **Improve voluntary preschool and birth-to-3 opportunities by increasing the Early Childhood Block Grant in the Illinois State Board of Education budget by at least 10% (an additional \$54.4 million).** An additional investment in this grant would allow the state to continue improving the quality of this program, particularly through such measures as increased

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compensation for long-underpaid teachers and support staff. In addition, our state should continue progress towards providing voluntary access to quality preschool programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents want it, with a priority on the most at-risk children.

- **Strengthen home-visiting programs in the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) budget, through an increase of at least 10% (an additional \$1.7 million) for Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon.** Voluntary home-visiting provides “coaching” for new parents of very young, at-risk children, and the pandemic has underscored the crucial nature of these services. These programs are among the most effective strategies for reducing exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences and helping children to be successful later in life. An increase of at least \$1.7 million would be a step forward in actualizing PN3’s goal of reaching an additional 15,000 children and families by 2025.
- **Increase state general revenue fund support for the IDHS Child Care Assistance Program by at least 10% (an additional \$41.1 million).** The child care sector has been hammered as much as any other segment of the economy by the pandemic. Rebuilding our child care system must be a top priority for boosting our state’s economy and returning parents to work — not to mention strengthening a vital component of Illinois’ continuum of early learning services.

Your budget decisions regarding the well-being of our state’s children will impact Illinois’ economy, families’ livelihoods, and our national security for years to come. Our state must do its part to guarantee that children reach adulthood academically prepared, physically fit, and mission ready. We know state funding is limited, and yet we also know the aforementioned priorities are critical. While new, federal COVID-relief resources have helped with such efforts during the pandemic, more such assistance will be needed to further this important work.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these priorities with you. Please contact Shea Felde from our staff to make arrangements. She can be reached at sfelde@missionreadiness.org or (630) 405-6509.

Respectfully submitted,

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