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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS

January 25, 2022

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin,

I write to request your consideration in supporting the inclusion of funding for the Reach Out and Read program in the FY2023 Presidential Budget Request. With the overall impact on children who survive the COVID-19 pandemic still largely unknown, fostering social and emotional health as well as strengthening parent-child bonds is needed now, more than ever. The Reach Out and Read program is ideally suited to meet this need; however, it is not currently available to children on all military installations. Additional resources are required to ensure that all children receiving care on military installations across the nation have the same opportunities and the best possible start in life.

Reach Out and Read trains military pediatric primary care providers on how to utilize a new, age and culturally appropriate children's book in every well-child check-up from birth through age five to survey the child's cognitive and speech milestones, gross and fine motor skills, and to observe parent/child interactions that are key to fostering social and emotional health. Clinicians also offer guidance to caregivers on shared reading behaviors that help strengthen relationships and optimize everyday brain-building activities with the child. The family is given the new book used during the visit to take home, supporting the prescription for reading aloud together each day. By the time a child turns five, they will have received 10-14 books, helping to build a literacy-rich environment at home, key to developing a love of reading and learning.

A growing body of evidence finds that Reach Out and Read is associated with more books in the home, more frequent reading aloud by parents, strengthened parent-child interactions, and significant increases in expressive and receptive language in early childhood. The American Academy of Pediatrics considers embedding early literacy promotion a best practice and notes the Reach Out and Read program as a model. All of this is provided for approximately \$20 per child per year.

I find this issue to be of the utmost importance and believe the Department of Defense should play a more active role in promoting early childhood literacy. As a veteran and parent, I know firsthand how children in military families face a unique set of challenges, from frequent relocation to anxiety during times of separation while a parent may be deployed. As a member of the House Armed Services Committee, it is my responsibility to support our military families and ease the stressors associated with military life. Providing funding for this program is a straightforward investment in our nation's future as children of military servicemembers grow up and become leaders and parents themselves.

Since launching its Military Initiative in 2006, Reach Out and Read has been able to support childhood literacy in 26 states and the Aviano Air Base, reaching nearly 57,000 children of military service members. Pediatric care providers who deliver the Reach Out and Read model serve both active-duty military families as well as those in the National Guard and Reserve units. The program includes 33,000 trained civilian primary care providers across the country impacting approximately 4.5 million young children annually.

Following the end of the Department of Defense's Reach Out and Read pilot program, most of its funding now comes from grants and private donations, limiting their reach and if not met, requiring programs to pause or discontinue. Relying on public investment (as opposed to uneven philanthropic grants) to support early literacy promotion in military pediatric care sites is critically important for program planning and sustainability. Moreover, consistent, predictable support conveys a commitment to quality and to improving the standard of care for young children in military families.

As you consider initiatives to fund for FY2023, I urge you to consider supporting early childhood literacy in primary care for the children of service members. The Reach Out and Read program takes big strides toward fostering a love of reading in children on our military bases. These children and families make enormous sacrifices for our country, and I believe it is imperative to support initiatives like this one.

Thank you for your full and fair consideration of my request. I look forward to working with you and your administration to further this initiative.

Sincerely,



CHRISSY HOULAHAN
Member of Congress