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**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
PERSONNEL SUBCOMMITTEE**

**ON
FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS**

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Chairman Nelson, Ranking Member Graham, and distinguished members of the Military Personnel Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to report on the quality of life and well-being of our Marines and their families and the status of our family support programs offered through Marine Corps Community Services.

Marine Corps Family

Today, the Marine Corps Family is comprised of many elements in and outside the traditional nuclear family definition. The expanded nature of family today means that they are often greatly dispersed from military installations and support mechanisms. The family is more than those who hold dependent identification cards. The parents of our Marines—particularly those under the age of 30 and part of the Millennial Generation have joined our definition of family and within our commitment of care.

For active duty families within the nuclear definition, we have just over 94,000 spouses and 110,077 children. Marines are also caring for parents and other dependents totaling over 500, bringing our entire family population to nearly 205,000. This does not include the over 100,000 retired Marines and their families we support. We should also note that the Marine Corps has experienced a baby boom with a 12 percent increase in infants, pre-toddlers and toddlers since 2007. Our parental unit—Mother and Father—experience multiple deployment separations and increased operational tempo which directly impact the time available with their family.

Concerns of danger and worry over family conditions are mutually shared by the warfighter, their spouses, children and parents/grandparents. The Marine Corps has the youngest fighting force and youngest family. These young families are required to mature rapidly and are those at

the greatest risk for set back. As an unfortunate result, our divorce rates have increased for the first time in many years, particularly for women Marines and enlisted.

Our Marine families, including activated reserves and independent duty Marines, are dispersed and no longer living solely on or around Marine Corps or other military installations. For example, our activated Reserve families are more likely to remain in hometowns scattered across every state. While civilians greatly respect and admire the commitment and contribution of our Marines, they often do not understand the role and commitment of our families. The civilian communities are often not equipped to help these families navigate the challenges of the military lifestyle, particularly the impacts associated with deployments and the wartime environment.

From our Quality of Life in the Marine Corps Study, we know that Marine Corps families are proud of their Marines and believe that his or her commitment to the Nation to protect and defend is a worthy mission. So worthy, that they agree to sacrifice and make a commitment to the Marine Corps and Nation that is recognized as stressful to family well-being. The military lifestyle and expeditionary nature of the Marine Corps challenge the strengths and character of our families. We believe that when Marines make the commitment to our Corps and Country, we owe them and their families an appropriate quality of life. We know that the Congress equally believes this and we appreciate your steadfast support to the family today and into the future.

Determining Family Member Needs--WE HEAR YOU

In 2006, the Commandant of the Marine Corps challenged our family support program management team to consider the needs of families in view of wartime requirements and future

sustainment. He asked two additional questions that gave us pause. He asked —“Do we really know the needs of our Marines and their families?” and “Are we providing our commanders good guidance and have open communication lines to receive their execution feedback?” For program managers in the fight—meeting tempo and delivering programs—we had to acknowledge that we perhaps were missing the big picture (mission requirements of the Marine Corps). It was also time to assess the needs of Marines and families and evaluate the capabilities of our programs.

In the ensuing time, we have conducted extensive program and customer research, including the previously noted Quality of Life in the Marine Corps Study, functionality assessments on four major family support programs, and a recent effort to look at the communication needs of our Marines and families. In the four areas of Unit Personal and Family Readiness, Exceptional Family Member, Marine Corps Family Team Building, and School Liaison Programs, we have fundamentally changed the way we view family support and our supported/supporting relationships. Eliminating variation, giving good guidance to commanders and refreshing program support to meet the current and future needs of families has been our underlying basis of improvement. We developed extensive transition plans and received the Commandant’s support for funding and immediate execution. A brief summary of our progress to date follows:

Unit Personal and Family Readiness Program and Supporting Role of Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS)

Unit commanders are accountable for their unit’s readiness and helping their Marines and families achieve a high state of personal and family readiness. In discharging these duties, the

commander typically called upon volunteers who utilized spouse-to-spouse connections and processes to contact and inform family members. Wartime operations and ensuing deployments overburdened our volunteer network due to increasing family contact and increased information requirements. This phenomenon occurred in the Reserve Component as well as the Active Component. While MCCA, the primary community services support arm of the Marine Corps, was capable of flexing to support deployments, sustained deployments stressed our service delivery model. Finally, making positive contact with Marines and families regarding their MCCA benefits and programs proved even more challenging. We have taken specific action to enhance the unit commander's capability by increasing staffing and procurement of a technology suite. Over 400 full-time primary duty civilian Family Readiness Officers (FROs) are now on duty throughout the Marine Corps serving as part of the unit commanders' Unit and Personal Family Readiness Command Team. There are 64 FROs and 150 Deputy FROs serving in the Reserve Component alone. The FRO, as a special staff officer, makes direct contact with unit Marines and families to convey official command communication, arrange required deployment or readiness training, and conduct information and referral services. Our volunteers are still in strong support of our unit programs, but we have been able to significantly reduce the burden of their extended volunteer service hours. Finally, we have staffed MCCA Coordinators at major camps to help the commander plan and conduct unit support or socialization events and have increased their discretionary nonappropriated unit fund allocations.

Understanding that communication is a key quality of life issue important to our Marines and their families, we conducted research and analysis to assess the effectiveness of current communication methods, identify communication needs of Marines and their families, and develop a formal organizational communication system that will facilitate three-way

communication: commands to Marines and families; Marines and families to commands; and Marines and families to each other. Three tools of that communication system have been developed and implemented: the Mass Communication Tool enables simultaneous broadcast of official communication via email, text messaging, or phone, and other technology enhancements to expand communications between the unit and Marines and their families regarding official communication or important unit training events; the Volunteer Tracking Tool is a web-based tool that allows Marines and families to track their volunteer hours and search for volunteer opportunities anywhere in the world; the Family Readiness Assessment Tool enables a commander to take a pulse on the health of his or her personal and family readiness program. All three of these tools are available to the Reserve Component as well as the Active Component.

The Unit Personal and Family Readiness Program is supported by the MCCA Marine Corps Family Team Building Program (MCFTB), which provides high-quality training to support the life cycle of the Marine and family through mission, career and life events. The UPFRP and MCFTB are enmeshed and that strong supported/supporting relationship is critical to ensuring personal and family readiness. We have expanded and enhanced our pre, during, and post-deployment training to address the increased demands and potential impact of multiple, sustained deployments on Marines and their families, including the Reserve Component through the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program. We have developed an inventory of LifeSkills training courses that specifically address challenges of military life, but also personal and family life. Acknowledging the role extended family members play in fostering personal and family readiness, we have extended our family readiness support to embrace parents and extended family members of Marines. We have incorporated Combat and Operational Stress Control (COSC) and Suicide Prevention programs into our deployment training cycles. Finally, our

MCFTB staff provides all Unit Command Teams training on the roles, responsibilities and supporting tools that are available to foster personal and family readiness.

One of the most beneficial results of these investments is having the FRO as a unit level representative trained and aware of the multitude of MCCA, local community and DoD family support programs and capabilities. As a trusted agent of the commander and having direct access to unit Marines and families, the FRO introduces these capabilities and resources as a positive force multiplier. The partnership of unit commanders, MCCA and the local community will continue to pay dividends for years to come.

Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) and Respite Care Program

Today, we are actively helping over 6,500 families gain access to medical, educational, and financial services that may be limited or restricted at certain duty stations. Marines and their families enrolled in the EFMP are now receiving case management services aimed at providing a continuum of care to facilitate a seamless transition from installation to installation. We are providing 40 hours of Marine Corps-funded respite care per month to all enrolled families. The EFMP Respite Care program is intended to reduce stress on Marine families who are caring for one or more family members with special needs, as well as handling the deployment cycle of one of the parents. This program, funded by the Marine Corps, may be used in conjunction with the TRICARE Extended Care Health Option (ECHO) respite care benefit.

Gaining access to services can be most challenging to families who have members diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The Marine Corps supports legislation, introduced in the House earlier this year, which would define ASD as a medical condition and authorize treatment if a health care professional determines that treatment is medically necessary.

We sincerely appreciate the increased Government limit that Congress approved for Fiscal Year 2009 for certain benefits available through ECHO, in particular, the Special Education benefit. When fully implemented, this increase will provide a more robust level of Early Intervention Services, especially Applied Behavior Analysts, to beneficiaries with ASD.

School Liaison Program

The education of over 52,000 school-aged children of Marine Corps parents directly contributes to the overall state of family readiness within our Corps. We recognize that our children, who are often as mobile as their military parents, face additional challenges associated with frequent moves between schools and educational systems of differing quality and standards. Some of these restrictive practices involve the transfer of records; course sequencing; graduation requirements; exclusion from extra-curricular activities; redundant or missed entrance and/or exit testing; kindergarten and first grade entrance age variations; and the power of custodial parents while parents are deployed. To address these challenges, we established School Liaison positions at each of our installations to help parents and commanders interact with local schools and districts. Installation School Liaisons work at local and district levels, while Regional School Liaisons work state issues. The national level School Liaison appropriately addresses Federal level issues and coordinates state agendas as necessary. Specifically, the School Liaisons advocate for school-aged children and form partnerships with schools and other agencies to improve access and availability to quality education as well as to mitigate education transition issues. School Liaisons are actively involved in efforts to assist school districts in applying for available competitive and noncompetitive grants focusing on issues arising with military school-aged children. Complimenting these efforts, the Marine Corps strongly supports the work of the

Office of the Secretary Defense (OSD) with respect to gaining the support of more states as signatories to the “Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children” to enable reciprocal acceptance of enrollment, eligibility, placement and graduation requirements. To date, 20 states have passed the Compact. We are very appreciative of the actions taken by those states to approve the compact and we are hopeful that the remaining states in session will take similar action to approve it and join this year.

With every step we take in our family support transition plan, we have been careful to let our families know that “we hear you” and are taking action to improve our support capabilities. Their requests are reasonable and the Marine Corps is committed to response. While so much progress has been made through our listening, learning, and responding actions, we have so much more to do. As we have sought feedback and let families know that we hear their needs, they are overwhelmingly satisfied and grateful for the refreshed or expanded programs. But, there is still more that we can do to ease their burdens and provide appropriate quality of life support.

Identifying and Resolving Program Gaps

A recent study into the communication needs and styles of our Marines and their families conducted by J. Walter Thompson provided some interesting insights into the Marine Corps Family, particularly our Millennial families. As an example, we learned that a Marine Corps installation is the loneliest place on earth for a young spouse—particularly those that are pregnant. Many junior Marines arrive in the Corps missing basic life skills that prior generations might assume or take for granted (e.g., managing finances, living independently from parents). While the Marine Corps has dozens of resources available for families, they are generally used after problems escalate and not at the critical time of transition from civilian to military life. We

have also learned that our Millennials are digital natives who prefer to use social networking systems and peer to peer connections for their information sources. While we believe that our Family Readiness Officers will pay great dividends in connecting families to assistance, the challenge of effective and pointed communication is a gap that must be attacked through an organizational communication system that ensures information passed is of the “news you can use” variety.

Beyond the significant challenge of improving our communication effectiveness, there are other gaps noted below that need further research and problem resolution. We believe that critical coordination with Sister Services and OSD will help us in this regard.

Installation vs. Community-Based Programming. Military installations have served as the hub of our service delivery model for decades. Our program managers are naturally geared to development of programs and services that fit an installation delivery model—even when the customer resides off base. Our Marine Corps Reserve families are not well supported by installation-based programming and would be better served by community-based programming that utilizes and maximizes other Federal and state service platforms. Additionally, while we have significantly assessed our wartime footing requirements on installations, we have not considered fully the changes necessary to support the wartime “citizen soldier”. We have recently engaged in discussion with OSD and Sister Services on this topic.

Remote and Isolated Command Support and other Hot Spots. Many Marine Corps installations are located in remote areas or around local counties or cities whose community services infrastructure is not robust or capable of supporting Marines and their families. In these

instances, it is necessary for the Marine Corps to increase capabilities aboard the base. We have conducted initial assessments at remote and isolated commands and are continuing our analysis and requirements definition.

Long-Term Care of Survivors and Caring for the Caregivers of Injured/Ill. The families of our survivors and those of injured/ill often have individualized care requirements that present unique challenges. These family members—particularly surviving spouses—are not typically located around Marine Corps installation support systems. As noted above, a community-based programming approach is required. We have initiated action to explore partnerships with Sister Services, state and local agencies and non-profit organizations.

Access and Availability to Health Care. Over the past year, we have initiated town hall meetings through our Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, for the purpose of gathering customer feedback on health care concerns of our Marines and families. Following these meetings, we act to address and resolve local and systemic issues. We are joined at these town halls by the Navy Surgeon General and Tricare Management Activity (TMA). From a system-wide perspective, once in the system, Marines and their families are traditionally satisfied, but there are some specific challenges with gaining access to care, availability of specialty care, and reimbursement for mileage to long distance medical appointments. We are working directly with Navy Medicine and TMA to resolve these concerns.

Behavioral Health. Across the board, we are experiencing up ticks in suicides, domestic violence, substance abuse, and sexual assault. While we maintain our cautious concern, we must

also directly assess the quality and effectiveness of our prevention and intervention programs. Since January, we have had teams of program analysts assessing our installation program operations. From these assessments, we believe that improved prevention efforts and corrective policies and procedures are warranted.

Availability of Child Care. Per our annual report, we are providing 11,757 child care spaces and meeting 63.6% of the calculated total potential need. It is important to note that the Marine Corps has initiated rigorous data collection and analysis improvements. As a result, it will be necessary to correct the 2007 annual summary due to identified reporting errors. Our reported rate of 71% of calculated total potential need for 2007 is more accurately stated as 59.1%. To meet the DoD standard of 80% of potential need, we would require slightly over 3,000 additional spaces. It is important to note that the potential need data is not static and fluctuates. To address child care requirements, Congress has funded 915 spaces in FY 08/09. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and 2009 Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) projects provide 1,700 spaces. Based on forecasted data in 2010, we project an increase in our total potential need of approximately 500 additional spaces. The Marine Corps continues to assess requirements for infants and children through 12 years of age using multiple strategies and partnerships.

Family Member Employment Education and Training Assistance. An important quality of life concern for our Marines and their families is the ability of the spouse to establish and maintain a career regardless of the sponsor's duty station. As previously stated, the Marine makes the commitment to serve, but the family also serves. Independent needs, goals and desires for the

family or sponsor are often sacrificed or constrained due to frequent relocations and responsibilities of single parenting upon deployment or during high Optempo periods. While initiatives have been instituted to provide portable careers and education funding, we have more to do in documenting need and developing comprehensive and integrated strategies to support employment, training, and educational requirements of spouses.

Transition Assistance. The final program contact that we have with Marines and their families is through our Transition Assistance Management Program. It is critical that we ensure that this contact produces the kind of support that enables the return of responsible citizens to the civilian population who are accepted and productive in their new direction and life change. We are currently exploring opportunities to maximize our support by providing ways to more directly connect Marines and their families to education, training, or jobs as they exit the Marine Corps.

Impact of the Economy. As with all Americans, the Marines and their families are not exempt from financial challenges. As noted previously, many of our junior Marines lack basic financial management skills. We also have programs and services, such as our Marine Corps Exchange and Marine Marts, whose mission is to provide high value goods and merchandise. In our Exchange and Marine Marts, we have implemented value programs and pricing strategies specifically targeted to our at-risk populations. We have additionally conducted a functionality assessment on our Personal Financial Management Program and believe that opportunity exists to enhance our support.

Deployments and Impact on the Parental Unit. Every Marine is responsible for their family readiness. Family readiness means that they are self sufficient and resilient. It must be recognized, however, that when the Marine deploys, the parental unit is diminished with the absence of the deployed parent. Providing respite care, tutoring services and other parent support tools helps the family successfully navigate the deployment and gain confidence. We must continue to explore Parental Unit impacts associated with operational tempo and deployments to ensure that we help Marine Families succeed.

Resourcing our Programs and Requirements

We are grateful to Congress for providing supplemental funding during Fiscal Years 2008 and 2009 that enabled the initial start-up of our improved family readiness program. The Marine Corps' FY-10 Quality of Life Activities (OP-34) baseline direct support O&M budget request is \$378 million and sustains many of the family support requirements previously funded with supplemental appropriations. When including the important \$26 million of OSD-provided funding expected for the Family Advocacy, Transition and Relocation Assistance, and Drug Demand Reduction Programs, the Marine Corps' MCCA baseline O&M budget increases by \$119 million from originally budgeted FY-09 to FY-10. This enduring commitment across the spectrum of programs operationalizes the Commandant of the Marine Corps' Guidance to "Improve the quality of life for our Marines and our families," with the specific goal to "Ensure our Family and Single Marine Programs have fully transitioned to a wartime footing in order to fulfill the promises made to our families."

Warfighter and Family Services as Category A MWR Activities

The Marine Corps intends to fully implement the recent OSD policy change that allows Warfighter and Family Services (WFS) programs to be treated as MWR Category A activities. This welcome change will greatly improve how we provide WFS programs to Marines and their families. This change will allow us to use nonappropriated fund (NAF) support practices, such as NAF human resource and procurement practices. MWR and WFS programs are both vital to building the social fabric of the military community, and directly impact readiness and retention. Operating them via the same NAF mechanisms will offer a more integrated approach to providing service for Marines and families, and mission support for commanders.

Conclusion

Going forward, we are committed to continuing improvements to our family readiness programs and equipping our families with the knowledge and skills to meet and surmount the challenges of a wartime military lifestyle. Our programs must contribute to the Marine Corps goals for recruitment, retention and readiness, while they address the varying needs of our “generations” of Marines and families. On-going assessments, surveys and program evaluations will be instrumental in determining program effectiveness and further identifying service gaps and program requirements to be elevated to Marine Corps leadership. We recognize that more work needs to be done to deliver programs and services which meet reasonable quality of life expectations of our Marines and their families. On behalf of the Marine Corps and Marine Corps families, I thank the Committee for your continued advocacy and attention to the well-being of all America’s Service Members and their families. It is most sincerely appreciated.