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House Armed Services Committee**

**STATEMENT OF
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HEADQUARTERS, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
BEFORE THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
ON
OVERSIGHT OF FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS
ON
JULY 22, 2009**

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Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Wilson, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to report on the status of the family support programs affecting the quality of life and the well-being of our Marines and their families. To echo the Commandant, "Our Corps' most sacred resource is the individual Marine." Our success as an institution is inextricably linked to enabling the readiness of our Marines and their families through investments in our quality of life programs.

We remain a Corps of Marines at war with over 27,000 Marines deployed in support of Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM. The young men and women who fill our ranks today recognize the global, protracted, and lethal nature of the challenges facing our Nation, and their dedicated service and sacrifice are in keeping with that of the generations preceding them. These Marines and their families know that their sacrifices are making a difference, that they are part of something much larger than themselves, and that their Nation stands behind them. We are grateful for the unending support of the Congress and American people.

The Marine Corps Family

Today, the Marine Corps Family is more than just the traditional nuclear family definition of parents and children; for example we now consider parents of single Marines when developing our family programs. 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.

Marine families experience multiple deployment separations and increased operational tempo, which directly impact the sponsor's time with family. Concerns of danger and worry over family conditions are mutually shared by the warfighters, their spouses, children and parents/grandparents. The Marine Corps has the youngest fighting force and youngest families. These young families are required to mature rapidly and are those at the greatest risk for set back.

Our Marine families, including activated reserves and independent duty Marines, are dispersed and do not live 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, creating challenges for civilian not equipped to help these families navigate the challenges of this military lifestyle.

From our Quality of Life in the Marine Corps Study, we know that Marine Corps families are proud of their Marines and believe in their mission to protect and defend the Nation. Marines and families understand the commitment to the Marine Corps comes with a sacrifice and stress to family well-being inherent in this worthy mission. The military lifestyle and expeditionary nature of the Marine Corps challenge the strengths and character of our families. We believe that as 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.

Transitioning Marine and Family Support Programs

In 2006, the Commandant of the Marine Corps challenged Marine Corps leadership to consider the needs of families in view of wartime requirements and future sustainment. He asked two additional questions — “Do we really know the needs of our

Marines and their families?” and “Are we providing our commanders good guidance and open communication lines to receive their execution feedback?” Family Support Program sponsors 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, Marine Corps Family Team Building, Exceptional Family Member, and School Liaison Programs, we have fundamentally changed the way we provide 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. The Commandant approved the resulting extensive transition plans and required funding for immediate execution. A brief summary of our progress to date follows:

Unit Personal and Family Readiness Program (UPFRP)

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 Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS), the primary community services support arm of the

Marine Corps, was capable of flexing to support deployments, sustained deployments stressed our service delivery model. 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, establishing Family Readiness Officers (FROs) throughout the Marine Corps who serve as part of the unit commanders' Unit and Personal Family Readiness Command Team, and procuring a technology suite. Today, there are 64 FROs and 150 Deputy FROs serving in the Reserve Component alone. The FRO, as a special staff officer and a trusted agent of the commander, 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. The FRO is also trained and aware of the multitude of programs and capabilities which provide needed support programs for Marines and their families.

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. We have staffed MCCA Area 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 to 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: 1) 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; 2) 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; 3) 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.

Marine Corps Family Team Building

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 programs 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. All of these programs are designed to assist families with the challenges they might face throughout the deployment process. The assistance includes programs such as Readiness and Deployment Support; Lifestyle, Insights, Networking, Knowledge and Skills (L.I.N.K.S.) and LifeSkills training.

Acknowledging the role extended family members play in fostering personal and family readiness, our family readiness support reaches out to parents and extended family members of Marines. 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.

Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

Today, we are actively helping over 6,500 families with 8,100 family members 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 robust case management services aimed at providing a continuum of care that facilitates a seamless transition from installation to installation. Our policy is to have an informed assignment developed among the sponsor, assignment monitors and local EFMP coordinators. In cases where acceptable care cannot be achieved at the proposed duty station, a continuation on current station will be offered the family. 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 may be used in conjunction with the TRICARE Extended Care Health Option (ECHO) respite care benefit. We recognize the challenges facing families who have members diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. We will continue to search for solutions, to include participating in a case study with the National Council on Disabilities.

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 increasing the number of states signing on to the “Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children,” which would enable reciprocal acceptance of enrollment, eligibility, placement and

graduation requirements. To date, 24 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. Although much progress has been made through our listening, learning, and responding actions, we still have much more to do. In the meantime, our families continue to provide feedback and express their satisfaction and appreciation for the newly refreshed or expanded programs.

Deployment Support for Marines and Families

The Marine Corps recognizes that achieving self-sufficiency and resiliency in family readiness is no easy task in the face of repeated operational deployments. Our deployment support program is focused on keeping the Marine ready, and is designed for both the Marine and family by providing information during preparation, support during deployment, and assistance with re-integration upon return. We have included family members in our expanded and enhanced pre, during, and post-deployment briefings to address the increased demands and potential impact of multiple, sustained deployments.

As previously indicated, communications is a critical quality of life concern for families, especially when the Marine is deployed. The Marine Corps has successfully field-tested two Portable Morale Satellite Communications Systems that provide an internet and web-cam capability to forward operating bases (FOBs) in Afghanistan where

traditional “Internet Cafés” are unavailable. This not only provides Marines with an opportunity to connect to families, but also provides a recreation outlet at these austere and remote locations. While these systems are expeditionary and can easily be moved between FOBs, our intent is to expand this program to provide capability to at least 12 locations simultaneously. The Office of the Secretary Defense is studying the wider applicability of this system.

In Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the Marine Corps partners with the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) to provide Tactical Field Exchange (TFE) services. Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan have access to a variety of items from “home,” such as health and comfort items, movies, CDs, and snack foods. The Marine Corps has an average of 25 Marine Corps Exchange (MCX) civilian volunteers serving the TFEs in Iraq, many of whom have volunteered to go back for a second time, alongside uniformed MCCS Marines, some of whom are on their fourth tour.

In Afghanistan, we have been operating out of a TFE and using mobile Warrior Express Service (WES) Teams to provide MCX service to our Marines in outlying camps. Through our partnership with AAFES, we recently opened a 3,000 square foot facility that provides exchange service to our growing population in Afghanistan, and that will be expanded significantly in the future. We are preparing for increased quality of life support requirements as troop strengths increase.

Behavioral Health

Across the board, we are very concerned with suicides, domestic violence, substance abuse, and sexual assault instances. Marine Corps commanders are fully engaged in promoting the behavioral health of our Marines, Sailors, and family members.

The message to our Marines is to look out for each other and to know that it is okay to seek help.

The Marine Corps Combat and Operational Stress Control Program encompasses a set of policies, training, and tools to enable leaders, individuals, and families to prepare for and manage the stress of operational deployment cycles. Our emphasis is on the well-being and readiness of the force and in building resilient and cohesive units. Our training emphasizes ways in which to recognize stress reactions early and manage them more effectively to return Marines to resilience. Our assessments of stress responses and outcomes are rated on a continuum: unaffected; temporarily or mildly affected; more severely impaired but likely to recover; or persistently distressed and in need of professional assistance. Our leaders receive extensive training in establishing an environment where Marines who need help, seek it.

To assist leaders with prevention, rapid identification, and early treatment of combat operational stress, we are expanding our program of embedding mental health professionals in operational units – the Operational Stress Control and Readiness (OSCAR) program – to provide direct support to all active and reserve ground combat elements. This will be achieved over the next three years through realignment of existing Navy structure supporting the operating forces, and increases in Navy mental health provider inventory. Our ultimate intent is to expand OSCAR to all elements of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force. In the interim, OSCAR teams are filled to the extent possible on an ad hoc basis with assets from Navy Medicine.

The Marine Corps is now expanding the OSCAR construct and extending the capability down to the infantry battalion and company. We are doing this by providing

OSCAR training to the existing doctors, chaplains and Corpsmen in the battalion as well as designated officers and NCOs to provide peer mentors to our Marines – this will make help more immediately available and familiar, reducing any stigma of asking for help.

Suicide Prevention

With 42 Marine suicides in 2008, we experienced our highest suicide rate since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Through early July, we have 30 presumed or confirmed suicides this year. The loss of any Marine through suicide is a tragedy for the Marine's family and unit, and can never be accepted. Our numbers are disturbing; we will not accept them, or stand by idly while our Marines and families suffer.

Our studies have found that regardless of duty station, deployment, or duty status, the primary stressors associated with Marine suicides are problems in romantic relationships, physical health, work-related issues such as poor performance and job dissatisfaction, and pending legal or administrative action. This is consistent with other Services and civilian findings. Multiple stressors are usually present in suicide. We are actively engaged in prevention and early identification of problems that may increase the risk of suicide. Understanding that there is no single suicide prevention solution, we are committed to having an effect on the individual Marine through leadership and command involvement at all levels. Earlier this year, the Commandant required all of our commanders to conduct suicide prevention training for 100 percent of the Marines under their charge. This training educated Marines on the current situation in our Corps; it taught them how to identify the warning signs; it reinforced the responsibility of leaders; and it informed all of the resources available locally for support.

Today we are in the process of rolling out a new, high-impact training package for our NCOs and FMF Petty Officers. It will be taught by NCOs to NCOs to equip them to be that first line of defense. It contains interviews with Marines who attempted suicide, family members of Marines who died by suicide, unit leaders and unit members. This material sends a powerful message. At the end, we expect our NCOs will better understand the problem, and will embrace their key role in keeping Marines safe and ready.

The Marine Corps will continue to pursue initiatives to prevent suicides, to include reevaluating existing programs designed to reduce the stressors most correlated with suicidal behavior; developing and distributing new prevention programs; and refreshing and expanding training materials.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

Sexual assault is a crime, and we take every reported incident very seriously, while also recognizing that many incidents may not be reported. The impact on victims and the corrosive effect on unit and individual readiness are matters of great concern. Although the Marine Corps is in compliance with OSD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) policy, we have identified the need to do more “to the left” of the incident, especially considering our at-risk population. While there is also the opportunity to address what we are doing after an incident occurs, we believe that incorporating aspects of behavioral health in our values-based training and more specifically involving senior leaders, will bring increased awareness to sexual assault and also focus our prevention efforts. We are also staffing full time SAPR managers at installations.

Our Marine Corps Inspector General's office is currently leading a task force to examine the training and implementation of our program at the installation level, through surveys and focus group discussions. All Marines receive sexual assault prevention and awareness training upon entry and are required to receive refresher training at least annually. We have also incorporated sexual assault prevention into officer and noncommissioned officer professional development courses and key senior leader conferences and working groups. At the request of our field commanders, we have also increased the number of Marine Corps judge advocates who attend specialized training on prosecution of these crimes and have assembled a mobile training team to teach our prosecutors how to better manage these cases.

In August, a senior leader of the Marine Corps will lead a study of best practices of Sister Services and academia in raising awareness of sexual assault, prevention, and bystander intervention. The Operational Planning Team effort will develop a way ahead for making our SAPR training more effective in reaching our Marines.

Wounded Warrior Regiment Support to Families

Just over two years ago, the Marine Corps established the Wounded Warrior Regiment, which instituted a comprehensive and integrated approach to caring for our wounded, ill and injured Marines and Sailors. An important part of this care is providing vital support for their families, who equally endure the challenges of the recovery process. The Regiment continues to implement family care programs that provide support through all phases of recovery regardless of geographic location. The effectiveness of these programs finds its foundation in accessible resources and proactive outreach.

The Regimental family readiness programs ensure critical support through multiple resources accessible to families. The Regiment's family support staff includes Family Readiness Officers, Family Support Coordinators, Chaplains, Patient Affairs Teams, Veterans Affairs Liaisons, District Injured Support Cells, and Recovery Care Coordinators. All work toward developing relationships with Marines and their families to provide the best possible care and support. In addition to the daily support offered by the staff, families can contact the Sergeant Merlin German Wounded Warrior Call Center. The Call Center is staffed around the clock, by operators trained to assist families with benefit information, resources and referrals, and community reintegration needs.

The Regiment relies on proactive outreach to families to ensure they are receiving the care and support they need. Town hall meetings, a quarterly newsletter, outreach calls initiated by the Call Center, and questionnaires and polling are some of the means to regularly assess the quality of services and to identify areas for improvement.

Our combined approach of accessible resources and proactive outreach casts a wide net of vital and immediate support available to families during all phases of the recovery process regardless of geographical location. This critical support to both Wounded Warriors and their families creates the most promising environment for recovery. The Regiment will continue to provide ongoing advocacy for all wounded, ill, or injured Marines and their families, embodying the Marine Corps tradition to always take care of our own.

Identifying and Resolving Program Gaps

A recent study provided some interesting insights into the communication needs and styles of our Marines and their families, particularly our millennial families. For

example, we learned that a Marine Corps installation is the loneliest place on earth for a young spouse – particularly one who is pregnant. Also, many junior Marines arrive in the Corps missing basic life skills that prior generations might assume or take for granted, such as managing finances and 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 millennial generation of Marines 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 resolved 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, we have identified other gaps which require 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 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. As we have conducted initial assessments or required needs at remote and isolated commands, we have learned that many Marine Corps installations are located in remote areas or around local counties or cities whose community services infrastructure is not capable of supporting Marines and their families. In these instances, it is necessary for the Marine Corps to increase capabilities aboard the base.

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 and a community-based programming approach is required. We have established a Long-Term Care capability within our casualty section at headquarters Marine Corps, and 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. The Navy Surgeon General and Tricare Management Activity (TMA) also participate in these meetings. 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. While we maintain our cautious concern over the up ticks in suicides and incidents of domestic violence, substance abuse, and sexual assault, 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. We are providing 11,757 child care spaces and meeting 63.6% of the calculated total potential need. 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 family support 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 have conducted a functionality assessment on our Personal Financial Management Program and believe that opportunity exists to enhance our support. In addition, we 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.

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' FY10 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 FY09 to FY10. 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."

Conclusion

Going forward, the Marine Corps is committed to continuing improvements to our family readiness programs and equipping our Marines and their families with the knowledge and skills to meet and surmount the challenges of a wartime military lifestyle. At the same time that our family support programs contribute to the Marine Corps goals for recruitment, retention and readiness, they must address the varying needs of our "generations" of Marines and families. On-going assessments, surveys and evaluations of program effectiveness will serve to further identify service gaps and additional program requirements for consideration. 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

you for your continued advocacy and attention to the well-being of our Marines and their families. It is most sincerely appreciated.