

Marines, Navy in San Diego benefit from aid for spouses

by Paul M. Krawzak - CNS

WASHINGTON - In its latest effort to recruit and retain service members by keeping their families happy, the Pentagon on Wednesday announced a program to help military spouses train for high-growth, portable careers.

Almost every base in San Diego is included in the first round of the pilot project, which will provide up to \$6,000 over two years to help eligible spouses pay for education and training.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and U.S. Labor Secretary Elaine Chao announced the joint initiative before a room packed with military spouses, government officials and job training executives at the Pentagon.

Gates said the \$35 million, first of its kind project would "open the door for our military spouses to have more fulfilling careers." Education is "often unaffordable for young families," he added.

Under the program, the federal government will provide \$10 million in funding to the state, which in turn will pass it down to the San Diego Workforce Partnership.

The funds include \$5 million for the first phase of the program in San Diego, and another \$5 million to be used to expand it to other locations in San Diego or elsewhere in California.

Chao said surveys have shown that 77 percent of military spouses want to or need to work. But she added that frequent moves and the high costs of education act as barriers.

As the two Cabinet secretaries signed an order to start the program, San Diego resident Gwen Bates sat between them to act as what officials described as a "witness" representing other military spouses.

Bates, who has an associates degree, said she has found it difficult to get financial aid to pursue additional training.

"A lot of it is for the active member, not the spouse," said Bates, a mother of three whose husband Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Alexander Bates is serving in Bahrain.

Bates said she is planning to pursue a career in medicine with the goal of becoming a physician, or alternatively a marketing degree.

Camp Pendleton and the San Diego Metro Complex - including the Naval Medical Center at Balboa, Point Loma, North Island and the 32nd Street Naval installation - are among 18 locations in eight states chosen for the pilot.

An estimated 1,100 military spouses in San Diego could take advantage of the program, according to Reg Javier, director of work force advancement for the San Diego Workforce Partnership, a nonprofit organization that coordinates local job training. The partnership will oversee the project in San Diego.

Miramar Marine Air Station and the Marine Recruit Depot are not included in the initial phase of the project, which could start as early as December. It could not be immediately determined why the two were not included in the project.

Javier said he's hopeful that when the program is expanded early next year, it will include Miramar.

"This is a huge deal to the Marine families at Camp Pendleton," said Col. Al Ingersoll, who flew to Washington to represent the base at the announcement.

He said the program will help the military retain Marines by keeping their families satisfied.

"If they're happy, they'll stay," said Ingersoll, the headquarters support battalion commander. "If they're not happy, there's not a big enough bonus you can give them."

In addition to spouses of Marines and sailors, spouses of other military personnel such as soldiers and airmen are eligible for the assistance as long as they are at participating locations.

Eligible spouses can seek \$3,000 per year in "career advancement accounts" to pay for training or education in high-growth fields such as health care, information technology, financial services, education and construction.

Mary Cate O'Malley, a spokeswoman for the San Diego Workforce Partnership, said the federal guidelines provide "a lot of leeway for the actual participant to choose their own training."

The funds can be used to pay for tuition, fees, books and equipment as well as credentialing and licensing fees.

The initiative drew praise from two defense analysts, who said the aid will benefit military families.

"This will make it easier to recruit and to retain high quality war fighters because they will not feel as if their spouse is making a sacrifice in order for their careers to go forward," said Loren B. Thompson, chief operating officer of the Lexington Institute, a think tank.

"It sounds like a sensible response to both the difficulties of recruitment and retention and the realities of military family life these days," said Thomas Donnelly, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Lisa Curtin, executive director of San Diego City College, was among local officials who attended the announcement.

She touted the ability of the state's community college system to provide the targeted, affordable training envisioned by the program.

Curtin said the community college's \$20 per credit hour fee would enable a student to take a full academic load for a year for less than \$3,000.

To be eligible for the program, a spouse must have a high school degree or equivalent. The service member cannot be slated for transfer out of the area for one year. Only spouses of junior enlisted service members, non-commissioned officers and junior commissioned officers in pay grades E-1 to E-5 and O-1 to O-3 are eligible.

In the Navy, this includes seamen recruits through petty officers second class, and ensigns through lieutenants.

In the Marines, it includes privates through sergeants, and second lieutenants through captains.

The departments of Labor and Defense began putting together the pilot project in June. Its genesis goes back to 2003, when a federal initiative to improve recruiting, retention and readiness in the Armed Forces included a recommendation to reach out to military spouses.

That recommendation led to the creation of the www.milspouse.org Web site in 2004 to provide spouses with access to information on education, training and employment, said Christine Ollis, chief of the adult services division in the Labor Department's Employment and Training Administration.

She said the pilot project is the latest outgrowth of that initiative.

Officials said San Diego was chosen over rivals such as the Marine base at Camp LeJeune, N.C., because of the high number of military spouses in the area who qualify for the program.

FOR INFORMATION ON APPLYING FOR ASSISTANCE

Military spouses seeking information on the Pentagon's new career advancement account program to help with education and training costs should visit www.milspouse.org.

The site describes how to apply and lists locations where applications are taken, including One Stop Career Centers and Employment Assistance Program offices located in or near military bases.

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