

WI Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Guard dependents part of White House discussion on military family support

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How best to support service members and their families dominated discussion when First Lady Jill Biden hosted National Guardsmen, spouses and children at the White House Nov. 28.

“For many Americans, our National Guard and their families are the only service members that civilians might know,” Biden said in a roundtable discussion with Guard families and adjutants general. Guardsmen live in almost every ZIP code nationwide.

National Guard leaders and Guard families from more than 30 states and territories attended the more than three-hour event that included breakout sessions with White House staff to focus on how best to support the families of all those serving in the nation’s Armed Forces. Joseph and Landon Schmitt of Lake Mills, Wisconsin — children of Master Sgt. Edward Schmitt, the first sergeant for the Wisconsin National Guard’s 54th Civil Support Team — were among the roundtable participants.

“We wanted them to be a part of this special day because they represent the heart of our communities — men and women who choose to serve even as they pursue other careers, who answer the call of duty in our hometowns as quickly as disasters strike and needs arise,” Biden said. “Though our nation relies on their courage, the service of our Guardsmen and women and of their families often goes unseen — especially children of National Guard members.”

Meeting with some of those children, the first lady also talked about the National Guard's primary mission as the combat reserve for the Army and the Air Force.

"Our National Guard members and families have served alongside our active-duty forces in every major conflict," she told the children, "and, here at home, you are a beacon of hope when hurricanes flood our cities, when fire destroys homes, or when a pandemic grips the nation."

President Joe Biden and the first lady's connection to the National Guard is especially strong. Their son, the late Army Maj. Beau Biden, was a member of the Delaware Army National Guard until his 2015 death from brain cancer — he also served a tour in Iraq.

"When Beau was deployed, I saw how much his children ... missed their daddy," Biden said in her discussion with children. "No matter how much we tried, we couldn't fill his chair at birthdays and holidays. Some of you may know that experience."

The first lady leads the Joining Forces initiative with a mission to support "those who also serve: military and veteran families, caregivers and survivors."

"We deeply appreciate the Joining Forces program and its recognition of the families of those who serve," said Army Gen. Daniel Hokanson, the National Guard's most senior general. "Today's meetings are so timely: Many service members are deployed and will miss the holidays with their families. We are especially grateful for everyone's support of our National Guard families, and that Dr. Biden invested time with the children of Soldiers and Airmen was so meaningful for all of us."

Adjutants general shared successful initiatives in their states and territories that could be applied on a national level, such as programs to support spouse employment, educate young adults about service, or help unemployed or underemployed troops find meaningful vocations.

The Guard leaders also highlighted areas for continued work, such as making professional qualifications transferable between states so spouses can more easily continue careers when a husband or wife's military service requires a geographic move. They also discussed ensuring all Guardsmen have health insurance regardless of duty status, and how to help Americans better understand the Guard's contributions to the nation.

Attendees, including Guard children, also joined the first lady's unveiling of the 2022 White House "We the People" holiday theme and decorations.

Landon Schmitt, 14, told the first lady he is proud of his father's service.

"I don't really see it as being different from anybody else," Schmitt said of his upbringing as a service member's child. "I just want to help my dad. If he's going to put himself out there to serve the country, then I can help at home while he's gone."

The National Guard's senior enlisted leader said that strength and dedication are what set Guard and military families apart.

"The resilience of our National Guard families and especially the children of Guardsmen in our formations is a force multiplier," said SEA Tony Whitehead, Hokanson's senior enlisted advisor. "Taking care of our people and their families will always be our highest priority."