

December 26, 2023

Department of Defense  
Office of the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Privacy, Civil Liberties, and Transparency  
4800 Mark Center Drive  
Mailbox #24, Suite 08D09  
Alexandria, VA 22350-1700

Submitted Electronically

Attention: Comments in Response to Understanding Service Member Experiences with Family Planning; OMB Control Number: 0704-SMFP

Dear Ms. Joo Chung,

The undersigned organizations write to comment on the proposed public information collection, Understanding Service Member Experiences with Family Planning (OMB Control Number: 0704-SMFP) in regard to the RAND National Defense Research Institute's (NDRI) study on family planning and reproductive health care access across Department of Defense (DoD) service branches.

In October 2022, in response to the Supreme Court's devastating decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*, DoD announced important changes to safeguard reproductive health care access, including abortion, birth control, and fertility care access for service members and their families. Federal law prohibits DoD from providing abortion services at military treatment facilities and from covering an abortion under TRICARE, except in cases of rape, incest, or to save the pregnant person's life. In addition, TRICARE does not cover certain assisted reproductive services, including intrauterine insemination and in vitro fertilization. Because of these restrictions, service members and their families face challenging barriers to accessing abortion and fertility care as they are forced to go outside the military health care system, navigate the maze of state bans and restrictions on abortion, and pay for the care out of pocket - including paying copayments for some contraceptives for non-active duty service members and dependents depending on where they get their care.

DoD's most recent policy changes provide allowances for travel and transportation for service members and dependents to travel to the closest medical facility if they need abortion or fertility care that they cannot access in their local area or through the military. Additionally, DoD has implemented administrative absence policies across the Armed Services, ensuring that service members who can obtain care through the military can take time off for such care.

NDRI's study, which will include focus groups with military service members from all service branches, is vitally important to understanding the barriers these individuals face in accessing reproductive health care, including abortion. Additionally, it will provide critical insight into the benefits of DoD's policy changes for service members and dependents who need care - and the challenges they may face in utilizing such benefits. In particular, we encourage NDRI to consider common issues military service members face when seeking such care, including stigma, challenges from their chain of command, and concerns around privacy.

Given the current reproductive health care crisis - abortion is currently illegal or inaccessible in 21 states and other states are moving to ban or severely restrict abortion - the urgency of this study cannot be overstated. Such data will be important to ensuring that service members and dependents can utilize the benefits that are owed to them - especially since they cannot access abortion care in the military except in very limited circumstances. We urge you to avoid any delays in proceeding with this study, and to publicly report the results for DoD, advocates, and other stakeholders to begin to address any gaps that the study reveals.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

American Society for Reproductive Medicine

Guttmacher Institute

Ibis Reproductive Health

League of Women Voters of the United States

Minority Veterans of America

National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum

National Council of Jewish Women

National Partnership for Women and Families

National Women's Health Network

National Women's Law Center

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Power to Decide

Reproductive Freedom for All

Service Women's Action Network