

First lady's priority: Taking care of families

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1/27/2010 - BOLLING AIR FORCE BASE, D.C. (AFNS) -- First Lady Michelle Obama was the featured speaker at the Joint Armed Forces Officers' Wives Club's 32nd annual luncheon Jan. 26 at the Bolling Officers Club here.

About 400 spouses from all branches of the military gathered to hear Mrs. Obama share her insights on military families, and announce a record budget request for military family support initiatives in her husband's forthcoming budget.

"You are all leaders in your own right," the first lady said. "You are that vital link between your husbands and the troops they command ... making sure their needs, and those of their families, are heard, and met. You're that mom away from home, the person other military wives go to for advice and support. And you do all this for other families even as your own families serve. For that alone, you deserve this nation's unending gratitude."

She recognized several groups for their service, including military wives and "Blue Star" mothers, women who have personally served in uniform, and the Arlington Ladies; a "remarkable group of ladies" who, for 40 years, have ensured no American is ever buried alone at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

The first lady also spoke about her family's first year in office, and their first year in a new city, new house, new school and more.

"And so when people ask me what I am most proud of this first year, I have two responses," Mrs. Obama said. "As a mother, I'm most proud that our two girls have adjusted and built a new life here and are happy and healthy. As first lady, at the top of the list is the time I have spent highlighting the service of our incredible military families."

She spoke about some of her and Jill Biden's, vice president's wife and "Blue Star Mom," visits to various military installations and their goal of listening to, and learning about, the needs of military

families.

"All of you -- our troops and families -- you do your duty and you do it without complaint," she said. "You give your all and ask little in return, only that we back you up, so our troops can do their job. That's why my husband and his administration have worked to do right by our armed forces and their families ... to be there for you like you have been there for us ... to lighten your load as you have lightened ours."

She then spoke of the president's move to increase the size of the military. Also, about how his first budget included military pay raises, funding for better military housing, more money for childcare, and funds for spousal counseling and support.

The budget also included the largest percentage increase in the Veterans Administration budget in more than 30 years and money to improve care and treatment of wounded warriors.

Mrs. Obama said she was also especially proud of the work of her husband and Congress to extend the Family and Medical Leave Act to all military families and caregivers of wounded warriors.

"I'm happy to announce that the president's 2011 budget, that he'll introduce next week, will further increase funding for military family support programs, by more than 3 percent, to a record \$8.8 billion," the first lady said. "This includes additional increases in funds for counseling and support to spouses and families -- including our Guard and Reserve families -- to \$1.9 billion. It includes \$1.3 billion to reduce shortages in military child care and to keep our military child care among the best this country has to offer."

Mrs. Obama spoke about the effects of military life on children and how they serve in their own way every time one of their parents is called to duty. She also explained that part of the allotted budget includes funds to improve and build new Department of Defense Dependents Schools stateside and overseas.

"We can never forget just how much these wars affect our military kids," she said. "And we all have an obligation to ensure they have the support they need at home and at school."

She said this money is budgeted toward these "major investments" as part of an ongoing commitment to care for troops and their families, even after the fighting ends.

One of her priorities includes asking all Americans to join the cause of supporting military families, because, in addition to government, supporting troops and their families require active citizens.

"Our men and women in uniform and their families sacrifice for every single one of us; and every

single one of us can do something in return, even if it's as simple as saying 'thank you,'" the first lady said. "As first lady, I can't thank you all enough and I promise you that I will use every ounce of my being to make sure that America always takes care of you."

Mrs. Obama joined a line of distinguished speakers at the officers' spouses' club event including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, former first ladies Laura Bush and Hillary Rodham Clinton (current secretary of state), former Secretary of State Colin Powell, retired Army general and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Shalikashvili, and former President George W. Bush.

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