Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

First Lady Jill Biden meets with Soldiers, family members during Fort Drum tour

FORT DRUM, N.Y. (Jan. 31, 2023) – First Lady Dr. Jill Biden and Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks toured Fort Drum on Jan. 30, getting a snapshot of Army family life on post while meeting with community members.

During a luncheon at the USO, Biden said she felt honored to spend time hearing directly from families about their concerns, experiences, and goals.

“You are my military family. And family, as you know, is everything,” she said. “So, I’m grateful to get to know you today and hear your stories.”

Having been raised in a military family – her father served as a signalman in the Pacific during World War II – and as a military mom and grandmother, Biden said there is nothing more important than supporting military communities.

“We don’t demand military service of our citizens,” she said. “You all stepped forward on your own, and that is why we have to make sure service is an opportunity of dignity and honor, of pride and of accomplishment – for the entire family. And that means giving you all of the support you have earned so you can build good lives.”

Rosalinda White said that she spoke with Biden about the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), which supports family members with disabilities and special needs.

“I really wanted to thank her for coming here and it was really great to see her at Fort Drum,” White said. “I wanted to tell her how Fort Drum does great things for the families, in all aspects of family life.”

Nathaniel Reyes asked Biden to sign his sweatshirt because his friends at school didn’t believe he was meeting the first lady.

“I was telling her about my basketball game today, because I have to show my love for the team and my love for the school,” he said. “I was very happy for the opportunity to meet Dr. Biden.”

Biden said better opportunities for spouse employment was a recurring topic she heard from family members throughout the day. It is an issue she addressed in her own life, and it is one of the focuses of her Joining Forces initiative.

Biden, an English professor, made history as being the only first lady to have a full-time job outside the White House. Having taught for nearly 40 years, she said she understands what it means to be passionate about a career.

“You work really hard for those careers, those professions, and you are proud of what you do and love what you do,” Biden said. “And I don’t think it has to be the spouse who is giving up everything to follow someone else into their career. It’s important to both spouses.”

Earlier this month, the president signed a law that benefits military spouses and service members with out-of-state professional licenses when transferring their credentials to a new duty station. But Biden said much more can be done.

“There are so many different things that we can work on that is just fair, just right, for people who want to work – who love working like I do,” she said.

Biden joined representatives from service member and family support agencies for a roundtable discussion at the Fort Drum Family Resource Center. Among the participants was Meredith Taylor, an active-duty military spouse who works in the Fort Drum Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

Taylor became involved with the Hiring Our Heroes-Military Spouse Professional Network (HOH-MSPN) during the COVID pandemic. Although limited by online networking with employers and spouses, Taylor worked with a team that found employment for 150 community members in roughly four months.

Taylor had originally discovered her passion for spousal employment advocacy while working in the Employment Readiness Program. Chantee Collins provides similar support as a transition specialist with the Fort Drum USO Transition Program.

“I really enjoy working for the USO Transition Program because we’re helping not only the service members, but also the military spouses,” she said. “We focus on employment readiness. If they need resume support, if they need interview coaching, and if they need local or remote employment, then we will sit down and have that one-on-one conversation about their careers and help them find that employment.”

For the past decade, military spouse unemployment rate has hovered around 22 percent, making it one of the highest unemployment demographics in the U.S. According to Hiring Our Heroes research, roughly 39 percent of military spouses have talked with their service member spouse about leaving the military to support their career.

“Spousal unemployment is one of those issues that we see run across all of the military as a challenge area,” said Hicks.

Collins said that the greatest concerns she hears from spouses is the lack of flexible, transferable, and remote employment opportunities. She said when they move to a new duty station, the spouse is faced with starting their career from the beginning.

Amanda Root, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County executive director, has hired many military spouses from Fort Drum. She said that sometimes employers are hesitant to hire a spouse, knowing they will have to fill that position in a few years.

“I find that when we hire military spouses – and Meredith was one of them many years ago – we have amazing people who leave our program and our organization stronger than when they started,” Root said. “They come with a passion for the work they are doing, and they come with a diversity of experience that maybe we won’t always find in our local talent pool.”

At her final stop on the tour, a group of preschoolers were eager to show Biden their Valentine’s Day artwork at the South Riva Ridge Child Development Center.

“Look, Dr. Biden!” one child said, holding up a poster covered in hearts. Another child precociously asked her, “How’s Joe?”

She told the children that their art project will be displayed in a holiday exhibit at the White House.

“This has been a really wonderful visit for me,” Biden said. “I just love being a military family, myself, and I love seeing and meeting with other military families.”

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Photo Caption:

Dr Biden Visit\_1 - First Lady Dr. Jill Biden speaks with Fort Drum Soldiers and family members during a USO luncheon inside the Heritage Center on Jan. 30. She joined Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks on a tour of Fort Drum, which included a stop to speak with Pre-K children at the South Riva Ridge Child Development Center while they work on a Valentine’s Day art project that will be displayed at the White House. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

Dr Biden Visit\_2 - First Lady Dr. Jill Biden speaks with Pre-K children at the South Riva Ridge Child Development Center while they work on a Valentine’s Day art project that will be displayed at the White House. Biden joined Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks on a tour of Fort Drum on Jan. 30, where they spoke with Soldiers and family members during a USO luncheon and talked about employment opportunities for spouses during a roundtable discussion at the Family Resource Center. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

Dr Biden Visit\_3 - Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks greets Soldiers during her visit to Fort Drum, NY, January 30, 2023. (U.S. Army photos by Spc. Kasimir Jackson)

Dr Biden Visit\_4 - First Lady of the United States Dr. Jill Biden and Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks speak with 88 military families at the Fort Drum USO during their visit to Fort Drum, NY, January 30, 2023. (U.S. Army photos by Spc. Kasimir Jackson)