

Shining a Light on Military Families' Economic Lifeline



Wheeler

As a military spouse herself, and with extensive expertise in family advocacy with the National Military Family Association (NMFA), American Logistics Association (ALA) Vice President of Strategic Communications and Marketing Candace Wheeler is well positioned to advocate for the military resale benefit as the point person for the Coalition to Save Our Military Shopping Benefits.

In her dual role as spouse and executive, Wheeler said she has seen firsthand how important commissaries and exchanges are to the military community, and how they serve as lifelines for so many patrons, not just those families living overseas and in remote locations.

In this exclusive interview with E and C News, Wheeler discusses her background in family advocacy; how she hopes to inform decision-makers about the critical role resale plays in the defense community, and educate and encourage greater numbers of patrons to maximize their use of this most worthwhile benefit.

On the need to protect the resale benefits for servicemembers and their dependents ...

As a military spouse, I have seen and experienced firsthand how important commissaries and exchanges are to our military community. These stores are a lifeline for families living overseas and in remote locations. They save families thousands of dollars a year compared to shopping in local grocery and department stores, which is especially important in today's economy, with food stamp usage in the military up 70 percent over the past year.

They also provide much needed supplies and a "touch of home" for deployed servicemembers, who may be experiencing their fourth or fifth deployment. No wonder the military community consistently ranks the resale benefit as one of their most important non-pay benefits.

In addition, commissaries and exchanges are also the largest employer of military families in the world and the leading employer of veterans in the nation, adding to the financial stability of families.

As the former co-chair of the Personnel, Compensation and Commissaries Committee for The Military Coalition (which is comprised of 34 organizations representing more than 5.5 million members of the uniformed services — active, reserve, retired, survivors and veterans — and their families), I believe the need to protect this quality-of-life benefit for military families is more important today than ever. In the past several years, this vital benefit has been under constant attack. Proposals to consolidate the commissary and exchange systems and eliminate the taxpayer subsidy for commissaries keep resurfacing in Congress, either as a payer for other legislation

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— ALA Vice President of Strategic Communications and Marketing Candace Wheeler

or as a budget-cutting measure. Although our nation must certainly get our fiscal house in order, we must not do so at the expense of our military families who have endured over 10 years of war.

On her earlier involvement with the NMFA ...

After hearing Joyce Raezer speak at the Army War College in 2001, I knew I needed to join the NMFA because of the important work they were doing on behalf of military families. In July of that year, our family moved to Washington, D.C. My husband was stationed at the Pentagon and was in the building on 9/11.

As a member of the military community, I felt compelled to serve. I became a volunteer for the NMFA, and eventually chairman of the board, in order to help military families through this critical time of war.

Like so many other military spouses, I wasn't aware there was an organization championing us in Congress and with the Department of Defense (DoD). After joining the NMFA, I soon realized they were more than the "voice" for military families. The association also spent a great deal of time and energy educating military families and empowering them to be their own advocates.

As Government Relations deputy director, much

of my time was spent educating our military community, as well as policy makers and community leaders. This experience helped prepare me for my new role at the ALA. The relationships I cultivated along the way will also be invaluable for the future. Chief among them is my relationship with the NMFA, which continues to do important work on behalf of military families. For 43 years, the association has been dedicated to strengthening military families, which is as evident today as when I first heard Joyce speak more than 11 years ago.

On her priorities in her new role, and other responsibilities with the ALA ...

As Government Relations deputy director for the NMFA, I worked closely with the ALA to help preserve and protect commissary and exchange benefits for our military servicemembers and their families. In my 11 years with the association, I cannot remember a time with as many threats to the military resale benefit as this past year. I accepted the position of vice president of Strategic Communications and Marketing with the ALA to help increase community and patron awareness of the value of this benefit, as well as the threats it faces.

My primary responsibility at ALA will be to serve as the spokesperson for the Coalition to Save

Our Military Shopping Benefits, also known as "Save Our Benefit." I plan to engage the community in meaningful discussions about how important these benefits are to the quality of life of our servicemembers and their families. I will encourage military families to use their benefit and to play an active role in protecting their benefit. I will work with military and veterans service organizations (VSO) to increase our efforts to protect the military resale benefit, and enlist their participation as "Valued Associates" of Save Our Benefit.

On the strength of the benefit today and maintaining its viability in the face of cost-cutting measures and other threats ...

Yes, the military resale benefit has been a constant target for budget cutters. In the last year alone, there were several major attempts to undermine this important quality-of-life benefit for military families:

The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee voted to eliminate the federal subsidy for commissaries, and recommended the Department of Defense (DoD) consolidate the operations of the commissaries and exchanges in order to pay for the health care needs of veterans and their families exposed to contaminated water at MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C.

An amendment was proposed to last year's National Defense Authorization Act to consolidate the commissaries and exchanges and increase prices.

Senator Tom Coburn's "Back in Black" report recommended consolidation of commissaries and exchanges into a single, nonsubsidized retail system over five years.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) proposed defunding the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA), raising prices, and eliminating benefits for entire classes of current beneficiaries, including retirees.

Although the Caring for Camp Lejeune Veterans Act was passed within the Veterans Omnibus Bill, due to the outcry from the military community, commissaries and exchanges were not the payer for this important legislation. The other threats were averted for now, but sequestration still poses a real threat to the military resale benefit, as does Senator Coburn's recent report calling once again for the elimination of the taxpayer subsidy for commissaries.

It is important to note that the military resale benefit is stronger today than ever. While the cost of other quality-of-life programs have doubled or even tripled in the past five years, the cost of commissary programs has remained constant. However, if the federal subsidy for commissaries and exchanges is eliminated to compensate for the loss of funding, exchanges and commissaries would have to raise prices, and cut services, which would make local stores outside the gate more attractive to military patrons. With fewer commissary and exchange customers, prices would become even higher, driving more customers away — eventually leading to the complete collapse of the military resale system.

Military families and the nation cannot afford

ALA vice president of Strategic Communications and Marketing Candace Wheeler, shown here at The White House, has been on an accelerated mission to protect military quality-of-life benefits since 9/11. "If the federal subsidy for commissaries and exchanges is eliminated ... exchanges and commissaries would have to raise prices, and cut services, which would make local stores outside the gate more attractive to military patrons. With fewer commissary and exchange customers, prices would become even higher, driving more customers away — eventually leading to the complete collapse of the military resale system. Military families and the nation cannot afford for this to happen," she says.



for this to happen. The military resale system is too important of a benefit to lose. Last year, it saved military families \$5.6 billion and contributed billions of dollars to the military communities they support. The services have long recognized the importance of this benefit and often cite the military resale benefit as a critical recruitment and retention tool.

On the objectives of the Save Our Benefits coalition in 2013 ...

The Coalition to Save Our Military Shopping Benefits will actively be working to garner more patron and community support, "Valued Associates," and visitors to our website in 2013. In addition to making the site easier to navigate, we plan to incorporate a blog within our home page to engage our patrons.

Save Our Benefit will be working closely with the new ALA 365 virtual site and Military Resale and Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) Center for Research to help educate our military community on the resale system. The research center recently released a major economic review of the military

resale system, which documents and highlights the far-reaching nature of the program's benefits. The Coalition will be helping to educate the military community on the key findings of this important study.

The Coalition is also in the process of reaching out to members of the military community to serve on our Patron Advisory Council to help us protect and strengthen the military resale benefit.

On her message to patrons ...

I would like to take the opportunity to publicly thank all of the men and women who work to support and protect the military resale benefit. Their tireless efforts greatly enhance the quality of life of our military families. The commissary and exchange benefit is a bedrock of the military community and one that we must all fight to protect. That is why the Coalition to Save Our Military Shopping Benefits www.saveourbenefit.org was created. I encourage all of our patrons, military and Veterans organizations, and concerned citizens to join in our efforts. With all of us working together, we can and will Save Our Benefit!

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