

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION
REQUEST FOR APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL
YEAR 2025 AND THE FUTURE YEARS DEFENSE
PROGRAM**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES SENATE**

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

ON

S. 4638

TO AUTHORIZE APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2025 FOR MILITARY
ACTIVITIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, FOR MILITARY CON-
STRUCTION, AND FOR DEFENSE ACTIVITIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
ENERGY, TO PRESCRIBE MILITARY PERSONNEL STRENGTHS FOR
SUCH FISCAL YEAR, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

**PART 6
PERSONNEL**

MAY 8, 2024



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**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION
FOR APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR
2025 AND THE FUTURE YEARS DEFENSE
PROGRAM**

WEDNESDAY, MAY 8, 2024

UNITED STATES SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PERSONNEL,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
Washington, DC.

MILITARY AND CIVILIAN PERSONNEL PROGRAMS

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 3 p.m. in room SD-G50, all Senate Office Building, Senator Elizabeth Warren (Chairwoman of the Subcommittee) presiding.

Committee Members present: Senators Warren, Blumenthal, Hirono, Kaine, Duckworth, Scott, Sullivan, and Budd.

Also present: Senator King.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR ELIZABETH WARREN

Senator WARREN. This hearing will come to order.

Good afternoon and welcome to the Personnel Subcommittee's hearing to receive testimony on military and civilian personnel programs in the Department of Defense (DOD) and Military Services. Our annual posture hearing provides the Department and Military Services the opportunity to discuss their personnel priorities for the coming year.

It is also a chance for the Members of this Subcommittee to continue to address the major challenges confronting our All-Volunteer Force. I am pleased to see the Military Services are making progress in addressing their recruiting challenges since our last posture hearing. Nice work. It is critical that we welcome and support anyone who wants to serve their country.

There are several topics I want to focus on today with our witnesses. First, if we want to continue to have the most powerful military in the world, we need to be smarter about resources. Last July, this subcommittee held a hearing looking at opportunities to better manage the DOD workforce and, at the same time, to reduce costs.

Now, while most people think DOD workforce is made up only of military and civilian employees, there is also a huge band of contractors, providing consulting, legal, and accounting services. Witnesses from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) told us that we do not know

how many are on the payroll, or even how much we are paying. In September, the GAO released a report describing how we are missing out on billions of dollars' worth of opportunities to be smarter about how we manage this contractor workforce.

If we can be smarter with our resources it could save billions of dollars that could then be used to support servicemembers and their families.

There are two areas on this in particular that I would like to focus on. First is military housing. I have worked with my colleagues on this committee to address significant shortfalls in the quality of housing that we provide to our servicemembers, and we will keep working on that. But we also have another huge housing problem. There simply is not enough housing for Active Duty military.

By some estimates, we are short at least 7 million housing units nationwide, and that shortage has a big impact on military families. You know, every few years, sometimes every few months, we ask families to pack their bags and move, often to communities where there are not nearly enough affordable homes. These housing shortages force military families to strain their budgets and pay prices they cannot afford or to undergo long commutes. Those higher housing and commuting costs should be covered by the basic housing allowance that DOD provides to military families. But the most recent Blue Star Families survey found that nearly three-quarters of military families living in civilian housing are paying more than \$200 out of pocket.

Congress acknowledged this problem in fiscal year 2019. It created the Defense Community Infrastructure Program, DCIP, because we have to have an acronym for everything, to help communities address community infrastructure shortfalls near military installations. Now, DOD made clear from this program's inception, that its top priority—top priority—was, quote, “military quality of life, military resilience, and military value in that order,” close quote. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how this program could be used to help address our military's housing crisis.

Another area we should be investing in our military personnel is childcare. Accessing childcare remains a problem for all families, military and civilian. Two-thirds of Active Duty military families have children living at home. We must modernize and improve the way that DOD ensures that servicemembers and their families have access to affordable, high-quality childcare.

I know that this is a top priority for many of the Members of this Committee. I have very much appreciated Ranking Member Scott's partnership and commitment on this issue. Right now, there are thousands of vacancies for childcare workers across DOD Child Care Development Centers, which means fewer available childcare spots for military families. The Department has put together a plan to finally update the pay scale for childcare workers. I am particularly interested in hearing from our witnesses from the Military Services about how increasing childcare capacity could help us continue to recruit and retain the best in the military world.

We must do better to support our military families, and so I want to say to our witnesses, welcome. Thank you for appearing.

We are going to have two panels today. The first panel consists of officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense who cover the full range of military and civilian personnel programs.

The Honorable Ashish Vari, Variani—Varizani. I know I know how to do this. Did I get close? Vazirani. It just took me a minute to look. I apologize. Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

The Honorable Robert Keohane, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. Dr. Lester Martinez-Lopez, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, and Beth Foster, Executive Director of the Office of Force Resiliency.

The second panel will consist of the personnel leaders for the Military Services. I will introduce them when they sit down, and now I will turn to Senator Scott for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR RICK SCOTT

Senator SCOTT. First I want to thank Chair Warren and her team for this hearing today, and I want to thank Chair Warren for her commitment to trying to do everything we can to improve the opportunity for our servicemembers to live a very fruitful, enjoyable career.

I joined the Navy at 18, and I can tell you, back then it was \$125 difference in what they paid BAQ [basic allowance for quarters] to our apartment, and I was only getting paid \$334 a month. So it was a problem then, and it is still a problem today. But I did want the chair to care about this.

In preparation for our upcoming work on the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2025, this hearing is an opportunity for the Department of Defense senior leaders to identify areas where we, in the Congress, can help take care of our military's most valuable asset. It is the one committee I am on that actually—we were just talking about this—it actually works well together, it is a bipartisan committee, and you can have an amendment and you get your best shot at trying to get it in there.

So as we all know, the military's most valuable asset is the people who volunteer to serve our country, in and out of uniform. Military recruiting continues to be an area of concern, but we have heard about a lot of success lately. At the end of March, the Active Duty recruitment recruited approximately 1,200 more recruits this year than it did the same time last year, which is a positive. Most of the services are expressing cautious optimism about meeting recruiting goals this year, which is great. That is great. Unfortunately, we reduced our goals this year, so our goals this year are lower than last year.

Despite modest progress, we cannot let this issue fade. We have got to continue to find great men and women that want to serve, and there are great men and women all across our country, including my State, that want to serve.

I am concerned about the MHS GENESIS implementation and how this is impacting recruiting, and we are hearing that around my State. We hear a lot that GENESIS makes the process too long and disqualifies candidates too quickly for issues that can and should be waived. It is not helping our recruiting efforts, and we still have them.

As Secretary Martinez-Lopez has heard, I cannot understand for the life of me why we buy anything from China. Whether it is computers, drugs, whatever it is—we had a good subcommittee hearing I guess last week, and I think we had a good conversation about how we can try to figure out how we can improve that. So I want to thank everybody that is focused on that, but I want to buy nothing from China, absolutely nothing. They want to destroy each of our ways of life. They kill our citizens through fentanyl. They do all sorts of bad things. So I know the chair has the same goal that we do. We have got to figure out how to reduce our dependence on China to nothing.

We have heard a lot of concerns about the Department of Defense positioning itself to compete for civilian talent. There are lots of people that are complaining about that. What people are saying is it is not just a failure to compete in the private sector but also are losing out to other Federal agencies. I think our most important agency is Defense, and the most important thing we do in the Federal Government is defense. This committee has provided new hiring, pay, and management authorities for civilian employees every year in the NDAA. These were requested formally by components within the Defense Department because the former process is blocked in the Pentagon and at the Office of Personnel Management.

So clearly we have got to do something better. I want to continue to find out ways that we can improve civilian hiring to make sure that what we can do to improve hiring compensation, management skills, accountability, all these things.

Any of us that have come, and I think we all have had time in the private sector, you know you have got to find the best people and you have got to hold them accountable, so we have got to keep doing that better.

These three broad areas—recruiting, health care, and civil service reform—will improve overall military readiness but also have the additional benefit of improving military quality of life. More recruits will help lighten the load for those already in uniform because we are clearly understaffed right now. Better aligned resources for the military health system will improve quality and access to care for servicemembers and their families, and a reformed defense civil service will help ensure a high quality civilian workforce who provides administrative support for our men and women in uniform and our military families.

Thanks to all the witnesses for being here, and I look forward to working with you. Again, I want to thank the chair.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Ranking Member Scott.

Secretary Vazirani, you are recognized for an opening statement.

**JOINT STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ASHISH S. VAZIRANI,
ACTING UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR PERSONNEL
AND READINESS; THE HONORABLE RONALD T. KEOHANE,
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR MANPOWER AND
RESERVE AFFAIRS; THE HONORABLE LESTER MARTINEZ-
LOPEZ, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR HEALTH
AFFAIRS; ELIZABETH B. FOSTER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
THE OFFICE OF FORCE RESILIENCY**

Mr. VAZIRANI. Good afternoon, Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, distinguished Members of the Personnel Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, along with my Personnel and Readiness colleagues. We are proud to support the members of our Total Force, the 2.3 million Active and Reserve servicemembers, their 2.6 million family members, and the 900,000 civilian employees of the Department of Defense. They are the true inspiration for our commitment to this work.

We are here to testify that the President's fiscal year 2025 budget request enables the Department of Defense to execute the National Defense Strategy. We are addressing our current and future national security challenges in a complex global environment while taking care of our people and sustaining the finest fighting force in the world.

The value proposition we offer to our servicemembers currently serving, and those considering joining, is that our people will be the most valued component of our national security. Our value proposition includes a meaningful mission, quality training and education, robust pay, compensation, and a benefits package that includes retirement and world-class health care to servicemembers and their families.

The fiscal year 2025 budget includes a 4.5 percent basic pay raise that, if approved, would deliver nearly 15 percent in military pay raises over 3 years. The 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation is reviewing additional ways to improve the model across our ranks.

We are working to promote a culture of safety for our men and women in uniform. Our focus on eliminating unnecessary risk is integral to our training and operations. To this end, we are updating our policy and implementation guidance to mitigate the risks of blast overpressure and continuing to prioritize solutions that minimize mishaps and other hazards to the well-being of our Total Force.

Likewise, to maintain trust in our institution, the Military Service must be free of harmful, readiness-detracting behaviors. Sexual assault, harassment, and other destructive behaviors have no place in the Department. One instance is one too many.

Preventing suicide and increasing access to mental health care remain areas of focus and investment. As directed by the Secretary, we are taking deliberate and specific actions in line with the findings and recommendations of the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military and the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee. These actions, to include the primary prevention workforce, will continue to move us toward healthier command climates.

We believe service is a family commitment. Therefore, the Department continues to vest in programs and services that support military families. Numerous partnerships and programs support the employment of military spouses and the financial security, stability, and the overall quality of life for military families.

With the fiscal year 2025 budget request, the Department has taken steps to improve access to and availability of childcare. In addition, the Department of Defense Education Activity, which operates the highest-performing school system in the Nation, will now include universal pre-kindergarten, thanks to Congress' fiscal year 2024 appropriation.

Our value proposition extends beyond Military Service. We support servicemembers and their families in their transition to civilian life. The Transition Assistance Program is a robust, individualized experience to give servicemembers the tools they need for continued success after their service in uniform.

Finally, I want to highlight the Department's dedicated civilian workforce. Their importance and contributions to our mission cannot be overstated. They are the key to readiness, health, resilience, and safety of our fighting force, essential to the defense of our Nation. The viability of our All-Volunteer Force is dependent on the contributions of our civilian talent and their dedication to the national security mission.

It will take a whole-of-nation and a whole-of-government approach to promote a national call to service that inspires young people to give back to their country. As we continue to collaborate with this Subcommittee and the rest of Congress we will ask for your help and support in amplifying these messages.

Thank you for your continued support, and we look forward to your questions.

[The joint prepared statement of The Honorable Ashish S. Vazirani, The Honorable Dr. Lester Martinez-Lopez, The Honorable Ronald T. Keohane, and Ms. Beth Foster follows:]

JOINT PREPARED STATEMENT BY THE HONORABLE ASHISH S. VAZIRANI, THE HONORABLE DR. LESTER MARTINEZ-LOPEZ, THE HONORABLE RONALD T. KEOHANE, MS. BETH FOSTER,

Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of the Personnel Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, along with my Personnel & Readiness colleagues. All of us share the honor of supporting the 2.3 million Active and Reserve servicemembers, their 2.6 million family members, and the 900,000 civilian employees of the Department of Defense.

The Fiscal Year 2025 President's Budget Request supports Secretary Austin's commitment to the National Defense Strategy (NDS), which recognizes that people are critical to our mission and calls on the Department to attract, retain, develop, and promote a Total Force equipped with the skills and abilities needed to solve national security challenges in a complex global environment. The NDS and our ability to successfully implement it depend on our people, and we have an inherent and sacred obligation to take care of our people. My colleagues and I have the privilege and distinct honor of delivering the policies and programs that advance talent management and workforce development across our Total Force and promote the readiness, resiliency, health, safety, and well-being of our workforce. We do so with your support and partnership on this Committee and others. In so doing, we strive to articulate, advance, and deliver on the value proposition of national service, and engender that spirit of selfless service—not only in our current force, but in our future force as well—and maintain the bonds of trust and faith with our retirees and veterans who sacrificed so much in their service. These core principles of service, coun-

try before self, and mission apply not only to our soldiers, sailors, airmen, guardians, and marines, but also to their families and our dedicated civilian workforce.

We look forward to sharing with you some of the areas the budget request supports, and the initiatives that advance the value proposition of service of those serving our Nation in uniform or as civilians. Our uniformed servicemembers and civilians have all selflessly answered that call to serve and are rewarded with a vital and dynamic mission, a sense of purpose, and the knowledge that they are contributing to a cause larger than themselves.

BUILDING THE FORCE

Military Force

Last year we celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the All-Volunteer Force and, despite a challenging recruiting environment, our Force is the most ready and lethal in the world. The outlook for fiscal year 2024, while improving, still must take into account certain enduring challenges. There is a decreasing connection between Americans and the military. The value proposition that guides our brave young men and women to enlist or commission needs to be ever sharpened, refined, and communicated to those interested in serving.

We seek to advance a national call to service that inspires young people to think about how they can contribute to something bigger than themselves and highlights the broad range of professional career options and opportunities Military Service offers, and in answering that call to service in uniform, they will join a professional force and develop both life and career skills that will serve them throughout their lives, during their time in uniform and after. They will receive the support, services, and resources they need to thrive, helping them achieve their professional, education, and life goals. We look forward to working with our partners on this Committee, and throughout the Congress, as well as State, local, civic, community, and educational leaders to bridge a growing civil-military divide, increase propensity to serve, and espouse the value of service. For the Department's recruiters, improved, increased, and more consistent access to high school students is critical to achieving that goal. Additionally, civil-military programs such as JROTC, STARBASE, and the National Guard Youth Challenge program are important in cultivating the notion of service, whether in the military or in other ways. The budget request continues to support those programs and ensures that they have the appropriate levels of oversight and accountability for a safe and healthy experience for all who participate.

In addition to DOD's unmatched mission, a critical part of delivering on our promise to the force is ensuring that we have a total pay, compensation, and benefits package that includes retirement and health care benefits. The fiscal year 2025 budget request includes a 4.5 percent basic pay raise. We thank Congress for its support over the last 2 years to provide the largest annual basic pay adjustments in over two decades for our servicemembers.

A new Active Duty servicemember earns about \$50,064 per year as part of their regular military compensation, and it rises quickly to \$56,990 within the first year and \$63,960 by year three. This compensation package includes either government-provided housing or a housing allowance that is updated annually to reflect rental costs in the local community. In addition, servicemembers receive generous retirement benefits, including a defined benefit pension and government automatic and matching contributions to the Thrift Savings Plan, as well as health care with few out-of-pocket costs compared to typical employer-sponsored health plans. The ongoing 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC) is reviewing the basic pay

This generous compensation package, and the overall value proposition of service, is why today, despite a strong economy, we continue to enjoy high levels of retention across the force. Delivering on our commitments to servicemembers is the underlying premise of the Secretary's Taking Care of People priority and imperatives. With your support, the investments we have made—and continue to make—in quality of life and family support programs and the myriad other benefits the Department offers are paramount to our ability to recruit and retain, and further develop the most ready and lethal fighting force in the world.

Civilian Workforce

The value proposition of Military Service, and the readiness of our Force, is not achievable without the Department's dedicated and professional civilian workforce. Our civilians enable our servicemembers to focus on their core warfighting tasks by performing mission essential and readiness enabling functions across the globe. They protect the Nation from cyber and digital threats; serve as the backbone of

DOD's acquisition, medical, personnel and family support programs, and financial infrastructure; and are critical enablers of readiness at our shipyards, depots, and supply centers globally. Competition for talent is high and the Department must attract, acquire, and develop highly talented individuals who might never have considered government service before. The fiscal year 2025 budget request invests in workforce cultivation and talent management, with a focus on attracting individuals with critical skill sets and growing our cyber, data, artificial intelligence, coding, and software workforces. At the same time, our commitments to ensuring the safety, well-being, health, and quality of life of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, guardians and marines necessitate investments in our civilian workforce for integrated primary prevention, child care, and mental health care.

The fiscal year 2025 budget request continues to refine the Department's efforts to ensure that its civilian workforce is appropriately sized to complement and support our military personnel in successfully defending the Nation, and supports a skilled, agile, and professional civilian workforce ready to meet critical missions. We are committed to right-sizing and optimizing our Total Force—to include military, civilians, and contracted support—to achieve mission effectiveness and deliver warfighting capability and readiness.

HEALTH AND SAFETY OF THE FORCE

Military Health System (MHS)

For their willingness to lay their lives on the line, our promise to servicemembers is to provide world-class healthcare across the spectrum of care needs to servicemembers and their families. In December of last year, the Deputy Secretary of Defense directed a multi-year effort to rebuild the military's direct care system, bring beneficiaries back to Military Treatment Facilities (MTFs), and increase care at MTFs by 7 percent by the end of 2026. We strive to make MTFs, staffed by uniformed and civilian medical personnel, the primary choice for care for our servicemembers and their dependents. This stabilization effort, and the fiscal year 2025 budget request, continues our efforts to ensure adequate staffing at MTFs, ensure access to care, and maintain and sustain clinical skills for our medical force. We are already seeing the results of those efforts, with access to specialty care improving, resulting in a decrease of beneficiaries seeking specialty care from private providers, and we continue to invest in enhanced telemedicine capabilities for access to behavioral health clinicians.

Delivering on our promise of care to the Total Force depends on having the tools necessary to ensure integrated care across patients' touchpoints with the MHS. The introduction of MHS GENESIS, the military's electronic health record system, not only replaced paper medical records with digital records, but also unified disparate electronic platforms to provide more complete medical information about beneficiaries and enable more reliable, informed medical decisions. We believe MHS GENESIS is positively contributing to the long-term readiness of our military forces by improving our insights about the health of our current force, as well as our future force. We continue to make investments and improvements as we increase the capacity of MHS GENESIS, and leverage it to ensure a healthy, resilient, and ready force.

Our continued investments and the fiscal year 2025 budget support the continued evolution of the MHS in ensuring both a medically ready force and a ready medical force. These actions underscore the Department's commitment to Taking Care of People and are absolutely intrinsic to the value proposition of service that we seek to deliver upon. While the MHS' priority is, and will remain, caring for servicemembers and their families, the Department recognizes that it owes support to our dedicated civilian workforce and their dependents overseas, where securing certain medical care locally may be difficult. For instance, in places such as Japan, where differing medical cultures and language barriers limit non-MHS beneficiaries' access to care, the Department is taking immediate actions to make it easier for personnel to schedule host-nation care.

As part of our commitment to the medical readiness and well-being of the force, we are taking substantive actions and making investments toward addressing brain health and reducing traumatic brain injuries (TBI) as a result of blast exposure and otherwise. The Department has established a joint effort, the Warfighter Brain Health Initiative (WBHI), between operational and medical forces, which focuses on cognitive and physical performance as well as the identification of known and emerging brain threats in military environments. The WBHI unified approach to cognitive monitoring means that servicemembers will complete cognitive function tests upon entry and every 5 years after that. The availability of this objective data

provides an opportunity to enhance or restore cognitive performance of individuals and extend the health of the force.

Building a Culture of Safety

We have an inherent obligation to ensure the safety of our people—both uniformed and non-uniformed—and protect our resources and capabilities. As the science continues to develop, the Department is acting now on blast safety and mitigation to minimize and avoid unnecessary blast exposures. We are finalizing updated policy and implementation guidance to expand requirements for managing blast exposure risks and operationalize these guidelines. We are also providing training and tools to our leaders and personnel to ensure they have the information required to translate guidelines to the training ranges, units, and the field. These safety and training standards are central to protecting our servicemembers and civilians and maintaining the strategic readiness of our force.

The Department will continue to leverage senior leader advocacy, our robust safety governance structure, and data-driven insights and actions as tools to inculcate a culture of safety that is committed to driving behavioral change, reducing future mishaps, and increasing our readiness. We continue to underscore the importance of safety at every level of the force, from our newest recruit to our most senior commander, to ensure an environment where safety is a core value ingrained as an essential and integrated part of our training and operations.

The Department is steadfastly focused on investigating mishaps to identify and mitigate causal factors and drive actions to detect and mitigate risks before future tragedies occur. The Joint Safety Council, established by Congress, is a dedicated senior leader forum playing a key role in protecting our servicemembers from safety risks in both operational and training settings. It provides advice and recommendations through the Defense Safety Oversight Council as the principal forum governing the Department's comprehensive efforts to manage safety risks and reduce mishaps, as well as occupational illnesses and injuries. These structures are mutually supporting and work to prevent training accidents and protect our servicemembers.

TAKING CARE OF PEOPLE

Taking Care of People, and the value proposition of service, does not stop with the health and safety of the servicemember. Our commitments extend to our military families who serve alongside our servicemembers. This means ensuring that we invest in programs and initiatives to promote spousal employment, provide high-quality child care and school age education, and deliver on morale, welfare, and recreation programs that result in vibrant, healthy, and resilient military communities—recognizing that military families are central to readiness.

Military Spouse Employment

The Department provides robust programs to help spouses achieve their professional goals, such as installation-based Employment Readiness Programs and the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program (SECO). The SECO program offers virtual resources and tools for military spouses to find meaningful careers that can contribute to their family's financial security, stability, and resilience while on Active Duty and during transition. The Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) program connects military spouses with employers who have committed to recruiting, hiring, promoting, and retaining them.

The Department also recognizes that the States have differing requirements for licensed career fields, which can impede military spouse careers. The Defense State Liaison Office educates States on 16 occupational licensure compacts for which seven were developed pursuant to a Cooperative Agreement between the Department and the Council of State Governments. Most recently, the Department recently extended and improved its Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of State on the Domestic Employees Teleworking Overseas program, which helps military spouses secure and retain U.S.-based Federal civil service jobs while posted overseas.

Child Care

The fiscal year 2025 budget request also continues to invest heavily in delivering child care to our servicemembers, wherever they are stationed. Last year, we invested heavily in building additional child care facilities. Building on those investments, the fiscal year 2025 budget request continues that commitment by investing in the child development workforce by addressing recruiting, retention, and compensation modernization. DOD operates the country's largest employer-sponsored child care program, providing care to more than 160,000 children from birth through

12 years of age every year. This integrated system of care operates worldwide, including 739 child development and school age centers, 148 youth and teen facilities, nearly 800 family child care homes, and a robust child care fee assistance program. We are committed to expanding and implementing initiatives to improve child care availability, quality, and affordability while ensuring a safe and healthy environment for children to thrive.

Between December 31, 2021, and December 31, 2023, we decreased waitlists at Child Development Centers by 20 percent, reduced fees for most families making less than \$120,000 annually, expanded the geographic eligibility of families paying for child care in community rather than military facilities through the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS initiative and Child Care in Your Home pilot, as well as increased the monthly amount of fee assistance for this program to \$1,800 per child.

Dependent Education

Beyond early age child care, every soldier, sailor, airman, guardian, and marine who is a parent wants to ensure their children receive the best education possible. We believe our school system is a one-of-a-kind benefit for our servicemembers. The Department of Defense Education Activity student scores were the highest in the Nation across all demographic cohorts, including students with disabilities and English language learners, significantly outperforming the national average.

The fiscal year 2024 budget expanded this support by funding universal pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds at all our schools, and the fiscal year 2025 budget request continues that expansion. The expansion of universal pre-kindergarten will provide military families with no-cost educational opportunities for 4-year-olds and will roll out at 80 of our 90 schools worldwide this fall with the remaining 10 implementing as new or renovated facilities come online. We anticipate as many as 6,000 students benefiting once the program is fully implemented.

Reduce Harmful Behaviors

The value proposition of Military Service, and the contract that the Department makes with its All-Volunteer Force, extends beyond just providing a comprehensive pay, compensation, and benefits package. To maintain trust with our Force, we have an obligation to offer a safe, respectful, and accountable environment, free from harmful, destructive, and readiness-detracting behaviors. With Congress' partnership over the past several years, the Secretary's priority improvements in this space continue to be realized, and the fiscal year 2025 budget request continues to invest in combating these problematic behaviors.

Sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other destructive behaviors have no place in the Department—one instance of any is one too many and can harm the unit cohesion necessary to field the most ready, lethal force. At the installation level, the Department's On-Site Installation Evaluation (OSIE) allows us to comprehensively improve prevention efforts, advance the approved recommendations of both the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC-SAM) and the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC), and inform future policy development. This effort extends to the Military Service Academies, where we also focus on addressing command climate and training challenges. The changes underway are intended to ensure the Department continues to develop officers who are prepared to lead in a challenging and dynamic threat environment.

The Department continues to implement the recommendations of the IRC-SAM as approved by Secretary Austin, and the budget request supports that focus. That includes continuing to implement the bipartisan military justice reforms, enhancing victim assistance care and support, focusing on foundational prevention efforts, and improving climate and culture. As of April 2024, 32 recommendations are completed or have seen significant progress, while implementation of the remaining 50 approved recommendations is underway.

Foundational to our efforts is the Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce (IPPW), which seeks to reduce the incidence of harmful behaviors, such as sexual assault, domestic abuse, child abuse, harassment, retaliation, and suicide. The IPPW promotes the health of military communities while partnering with leaders to change policies and implement prevention activities. Our budget request seeks to continue hiring toward a goal of 2,500 dedicated prevention personnel, providing additional training and credentialing necessary to support their professionalization.

The IPPW also contributes to suicide prevention. Suicide remains a challenge for our force and is being addressed with urgency. The factors that drive servicemembers to consider suicide are numerous and complex, and the Department continues to respond with the necessary nuance and a range of resources appro-

priate to the many protective and risk factors that vary from one individual to another. Based on recommendations from the SPRIRC, the Department is taking 83 enabling actions across five comprehensive lines of effort. The budget request supports these endeavors to foster a supportive environment and improve the delivery of mental health care, address stigma and other barriers to care, revise and modernize suicide prevention training; and promote a culture of lethal means safety.

TRANSITION FROM SERVICE

Last, our obligation and commitment to the soldiers, sailors, airmen, guardians, and marines who comprise the All-Volunteer Force do not end with their time in uniform. The value proposition of service extends well beyond their time with the Department. Military to civilian transition is ever-evolving, complex, and multi-faceted because every transitioning servicemember has their own individual goals. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) ensures that our servicemembers are as successful after their service as they were during their service. TAP is an individualized, robust program with alternate pathways and multiple levels of assistance. Each step of the process is guided by trained counselors, allowing servicemembers to be in control of their transition and utilize programs, resources, and information that fit their specific needs and align with their individual post-transition goals.

In addition to TAP, the Department has other programs bolstering the post-service careers of our veterans and retirees. For example, the SkillBridge program reduces civilian employment skills gaps by providing job training and employment skills training, including apprenticeship programs and connects participants to employers. Our most recent data shows over 22,000 servicemembers enrolled or participated in fiscal year 2022 alone. SkillBridge is an important part of transition, and the Department is committed to affording maximum participation while ensuring that commanders can meet mission requirements and maintain unit readiness.

CONCLUSION

I want to end on the theme of the promise of service—both to and for servicemembers. The Department has a sacred obligation to provide for members of the Total Force in ways that might seem extraordinary from an outside perspective. Our efforts consider the risks members of the Total Force bear on behalf of their country as well as the frequent life disruptions they withstand to meet mission requirements. Our fiscal year 2025 budget request recognizes these commitments and makes well-reasoned and analytically based investments to provide our servicemembers with the very best pay, compensation, and benefits package possible, and essential support programs for them and their families.

In addition, I would be remiss not to highlight our civilian workforce once more. While the smallest and least costly segment of our Total Force, their contributions cannot be overstated. They are key to the readiness, health, resiliency, and safety of our fighting force and capabilities, and to the well-being of our military families. Often unfairly politicized, I would like to stress that our civilian workforce is a valued and essential component in the defense of our Nation.

It is our belief that, with the right national call to service, the value proposition of service for today's youth market will become increasingly apparent. In addition, we are continuing to enhance Quality of Life programs and support for the Total Force to ensure continued high retention. My colleagues and I are privileged to lead this organization, and I want to assure you that we are committed to taking care of the Department's workforce and partnering with this committee to ensure the health and readiness of our Total Force. Thank you for your continued support, and we look forward to your questions.

Senator WARREN. Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.

So this year the Pentagon requested \$850 billion in funding, and some of my colleagues are howling that that is not enough. But before we talk about spending more money, we should examine opportunities for DOD to save billions of dollars.

When we talk about defense contractors, as I was saying earlier, most people think about Lockheed Martin or Boeing, but DOD also relies on service contractors, which are contractors like Booz Allen, McKinsey, and CACI, hired to do things like consulting, accounting, and strategic analysis. DOD's Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation Office found that, in some cases, those contractors can

cost two or three times as much as a civilian employee doing the exact same work.

Secretary Vazirani, you oversee DOD's entire workforce, including the contractors. When determining the right mix of employees, servicemembers, and civilians, how important is it to have good cost data?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, as stewards of the taxpayer dollars, it is very important that we have good cost data, and we do our very best to get accurate cost data as we develop our budgets.

Senator WARREN. I am glad to hear you say that and I agree with you entirely.

You know, the Congressional Budget Office and the Government Accountability Office told this committee last year that DOD does not know how many contractors it hires, does not have reliable data to determine if hiring a contractor will cost more money or less money than a Federal employee doing the same job, and that these decisions make it possible about—it makes about service contractors pose one of the highest risks in government of taxpayers getting cheated.

The GAO released a report in September that found the Military Services are failing to collect and evaluate the workforce data that they need to clearly set priorities and identify efficiencies. The result is DOD is missing essential potential cost savings on service contractors, quote, "totaling billions of dollars."

Secretary Vazirani, spending on service contractors has more than doubled in just the past 25 years. The GAO estimates that we—estimates—that we spend about \$200 billion on these contractors, though the CBO thinks it is closer to \$300 billion that we are spending. So do you think we ought to know how much we are actually paying?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I think it is very important that we know how much we are spending on these contracts and on these contractors. I—

Senator WARREN. I appreciate your saying this, and I know that it may feel like the answer is, "Well, duh." But it is important that we get this on the record, and you are the one that is trying to run these programs, and it is critical that we get this information and have it when we are evaluating the decisions we make.

Now one of the types of contracts that DOD uses for these services is called an "indefinite delivery contract," which is used when DOD does not know the timeframe, or does not even know how many people that it needs to hire under these contracts.

So, Secretary Vazirani, about how often do you think that DOD uses an indefinite delivery contract to hire consultants and other contractors?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, an indefinite delivery contract is one of many contracted vehicles available to the Department. They are typically used when there are emerging missions and we need that flexibility. It is my understanding that we utilize those contracts about 50 percent of the time.

Senator WARREN. Yes, I think the GAO says it is 54 percent of the time.

I understand these contracts in extraordinary circumstances. But it cannot be a majority of the time that we are using contractors

and still call it a surprise in any way. More than half the time that we are signing these contracts we are not sure what we want, or when we want it, but we are committing to pay whatever is charged.

The civilian employees working alongside these contractors are under a whole lot more scrutiny, and we thank them for their service by asking them to endure pay cuts and freezes. As Ranking Member Wicker has pointed out, quote, "The Department also does not pay competitive salaries."

So, Secretary Vazirani, would you agree that failing to pay competitive salaries makes it challenging for DOD to build the civilian workforce that we need to protect our national security?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, the civilian component of the Total Force is critical to our mission. We do need to ensure that we can compete. Over the last several years the Congress has given us the ability to increase pay for civilian employees. This year, given the total, the fiscal constraints, we have had to make some hard choices. But we will continue to use the flexibilities provided by Congress to ensure that we can enhance our competitiveness. We also understand and support what is in the President's Budget with regard to changing some of the structure and ensuring that we can address issues like pay compression to ensure that we are——

Senator WARREN. I just want to underscore here though, Secretary Vazirani, I appreciate that you are doing the best with what you are given, and I am not quarreling about that.

I just want to get on the record that failing to pay competitive salaries makes it really challenging for DOD to build the civilian workforce that it needs in order to protect our national security. Do you agree with that?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I agree that as we are competing in a very tight labor market, we need to have a competitive pay structure.

Senator WARREN. Good.

The Federal Salary Council has found that Federal employees make 27.5 percent less than their private sector counterparts. This year's budget does not even keep their salaries in line with inflation.

So, Secretary Vazirani, I want to work with you and the rest of DOD to build the workforce we need to keep Americans safe. But that has to start with looking at where we can save billions of dollars, and investing in enduring capacity to keep DOD at the cutting edge that we need to do to protect our national security.

Thank you. Ranking Member Scott.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, Chair. You know, I do not think you are responsible for this but when I was Governor we had hurricanes in Florida. I am from Florida. The contract that the Army Corps had with the same companies to do debris pickup was ten times higher as what our counties and cities contracted. So we have got a lot of work to do at the Federal Government.

Secretary Vazirani, can you talk a little bit about the State of military recruiting. How do you think you are doing? Do you think your marketing is working? Can you just give me an update?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, thank you very much. We continue to focus on recruiting from the breadth of America and ensuring that we have the talent we need to execute the National Defense Strategy. We are starting to see progress and advances in our recruiting efforts.

The Department is really focused on three particular efforts in this area. One is ensuring that we increase propensity, and that is really this national call to service, making a connection with young people who want to serve, making sure they understand the opportunities that Military Service provides.

The second is expanding eligibility, focusing on ensuring that those who want to serve can make through the accession process but also helping those who want to serve and maybe do not meet the standards, then raise themselves so that they can meet those standards. We are also looking at the medical accession requirements, to ensure that those who are physically qualified can make it through the process and serve.

Then the last area is really making resource investments into our recruiting infrastructure, each of the services focused on their recruiting structure and the talent that they have in the field. As a result we are starting to see improvement in our recruiting results.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you. Last week we had a subcommittee hearing on buying Chinese drugs. It was part of it. It is what I talked about a lot. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, I think we had a good conversation. What surprised me was that there were not any solutions. We did not come up with, okay, we know it is a problem, because why should our military be taking Chinese drugs when we know they want to kill us, and they are already killing 70,000 people with fentanyl.

Secretary Vazirani, what are you doing to make sure—I mean, talk about whether it is drugs, computers, whatever—what are doing to make sure we buy nothing from China? Communist China wants to destroy our way of life.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, one of the things that we are doing is we are ensuring that we are testing the supply chain and ensuring that we have the quality that we need in our pharmaceutical products. I will turn to Dr. Martinez. He can talk a little bit more about what we are specifically doing to address the supply chain issues.

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Senator, since the last time we met, I pursue this very seriously because it is a national security issue. I am reaching to the HHS [Health and Human Services]. They have the lead on drugs and security of the supply chain. So I am talking to the leadership of HHS for us to partner. But I am going to take the liberty of offering you an offer of help in the form of a letter to them, as well, to see if they welcome that now, and I hope they do.

But my message is, this is a whole-of-government. We have to take a whole-of-government approach. It is too serious of an issue for just DOD to answer. I think this is one of those where we are going to need the help of the committee, but also we are going to need the help of other departments.

Senator SCOTT. I think the chair is in the same position as I am, that this is a big issue, and so the more specific you are about what

we can do. But I believe just what the DOD buys, we can have a dramatic impact and get American-made products. I mean, I think all of us are in the position that we have got to get American-made products in everything. So thank you for that.

Secretary Vazirani, is this something that, in your management meetings, do you talk about making sure we do not buy Chinese whatever, since we know they want to destroy us?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, as we look at, and particularly in the area of health care, that we are taking care of our people, we are looking at the supply chains, we are ensuring that our supply chains are stable, and we look at sourcing of products, as well.

Senator SCOTT. Okay. I think Chair Warren is in the same position as I am, that we have heard from people in our states about access to mental health services. So Secretary Martinez-Lopez, there is a provider in Florida who says—she does telehealth appointments. But once these servicemembers move overseas they cannot continue. That does not make sense, does it?

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Senator, that is a very good question. You remember a few days in the health care industry. The issue is not technology. The issue is a licensing process. So it is not just overseas. I mean, if a patient moves to other states you will be exactly in the same boat.

So the good news for us, Title 10 allows for us, if the provider is in the Military Health System, there is portability of that license. In other words, we can take care of using telemedicine either abroad or to other states. But that does not translate to a private enterprise physician working in Florida.

So maybe in the future, as we expand our digital health strategy and apply more telemedicine, maybe we may have to come back to you and see if there is a way that we can get help.

Senator SCOTT. I think we are both in the same position. I mean, you know the process here. To get something in the NDAA we have got to get started, right. But if there is something on that, I think all of us up here probably all care about the same—this is a big issue, mental health services. So if you have ideas, we would love to hear them so we can try to solve the problem.

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Sir, I will talk to your staff.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you.

Senator WARREN. Senator Hirono.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Madam Chair. Secretary Vazirani, thank you very much for your recent response to my letter regarding the investigation of and accountability for major incidents like the Red Hill fuel spill that impacted the aquifer that Oahu residents rely on for their drinking water, basically, and the fire on USS *Bonhomme Richard*.

While I appreciate the work your team has put into improving and standardizing how the Department investigates, including establishing the high-level accidents category, I still strongly believe an additional higher threshold incident category is necessary for catastrophic incident and to hold appropriate people accountable.

So I only recently learned that there was a provision in the NDAA 2022 that asked for the creation of an Accident Investigation Review Board. You recently—to me, recently, because I do not even know if my office received a copy of this report that was put

out in October 2023, and the letter that I sent to DOD was after this report had come out.

But I think the idea or the concern is similar in that we want to know how investigations of what I would call major incident, where \$1 billion in property damage, or we are talking about \$1 billion in costs that would arise, which is definitely Red Hill, in my letter to you I would define major incidents as the loss of lives, and in the case of the letter I said five.

Now, what you all came up with is not how you will proceed in an independent, basically, investigation of these kinds of major incident, but I realize that is what the NDAA 2022 asked for, a review board. What this board would do, over a 3-year time span or review, is to see whether the services appropriately investigated and held people responsible.

That is not what I am talking about. I am talking about in these major incidents where it would not be up to the services themselves basically to investigate themselves, but that there should be an independent entity rising up to the level of the Secretary of Defense to do it.

So I am just wondering, having received your response, why is the Department so resistant to establishing my proposed major incidents category? Why just stick with these—what is your category? What is the category in your report?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we are taking an approach that looks at high-interest—

Senator HIRONO. Oh, high interest. That is about everything, because you define high interest very, very broadly, and pretty much that would be just about everything that is resulting in an investigation by any of the services. Would you agree with that?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we have taken a broad definition with high interest, when there is loss of life or there is major loss of property, or it could have high interest for our stakeholders, the Congress, the media, et cetera.

As we have looked at that, we do believe that whether it is a loss of one life or five, we have an obligation to ensure that we have quality, objective, timely, and transparent investigations.

Senator HIRONO. Of course. So I am not talking about the need to investigate any incident that can be deemed high interest, which is just about everything because your definition is very broad. What I am saying is that I am very interested in how the DOD investigates the kind of situations such as the Bonhomme Richard, where we lose a ship that is worth, I do not even know how many billions of dollars, goes up in flames. Red Hill, 98,000 or so people impacted by the quality of water. People had to go live with relatives, leave the State, live in hotels. We are still going to see the aftermath because we have had to create, thankfully, the Secretary of Defense decided, at his level, to close Red Hill, which was not scheduled to be closed, by the way, not in that timeframe. So I am talking about that level of what I call major incidents.

You know, needless to say, I am not satisfied with the Department's answer on why we should not have a mandatory, for example, separation processing policy for those found culpable in the catastrophic incidents that I am talking about. This has happened before. Former Secretary Gates relieved the Air Force Secretary and

the Chief of Staff in 2008, after mistakes involving the safety and security of nuclear weapons. So I know that this authority exists.

Let us just say that I am not looking for a report of an investigation that was done. I am looking for how these investigations will be conducted in the first instance, in what I would call major incidents. So we will have further discussions about this.

Madam Chair, I have some other questions that I will submit for the record. Thank you very much.

Senator WARREN. Senator Budd.

Senator BUDD. Thank you, Chair, Ranking Member, and the panel for being here today. Mr. Vazirani, good to see you again. We had a good conversation a few weeks ago in my office, and we talked about the selection for the World Military Games of 2027. My understanding is it is down between North Carolina, my own State, and South Africa, that are being considered for potentially hosting these games.

So as part of the bid I am understanding that DOD needs to endorse the bid for the International Military Sports Council, and that Armed Forces sports falls under your responsibility. Am I correct so far?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, that is correct.

Senator BUDD. Have you received the North Carolina proposal for this?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I understand that that proposal has come in to the P&R office.

Senator BUDD. Well, I think that we are strategically suited to host World Military Games. We have got the venues, the transportation, the colleges to do this. Do you know the status of this proposal?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I understand that that proposal came in earlier this week, and the team is starting to review that. I am looking forward to seeing the recommendation coming from the team. Senator, I commit to ensuring that we pass that recommendation forward.

Senator BUDD. Thank you. I hope that DOD, yourself, would give this all the due consideration, as it is between the United States and another country, South Africa at this point. So, I mean, what does it say to our military athletes and communities that we do not even attempt to secure the games? So thank you for your best effort there and forwarding this along.

Mr. Vazirani, last year's NDAA, it included a provision that required the Secretary of Defense to issue regulations requiring military accessions and promotions to be, and I quote, "be based on individual merit and demonstrated performance," end quote.

Here is kind of the question behind that. The Department informed the committee staff, right here, that it would not be issuing any new or updated regulations, even though there was new law in the NDAA about merit and performance. So why didn't the Department of Defense update the guidance as a result of last year's legislation?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I think you are referring to the MERIT Act—

Senator BUDD. Yes.

Mr. VAZIRANI.—and Senator, the Department has determined that we are in compliance with the MERIT Act and therefore did not need to issue new policy.

Senator BUDD. You know, that is my concern is it was Senator Wicker's bill, the MERIT Act, and it would have, for the first time, prohibited consideration of race in all DOD personnel actions. So I have been, and continue to be concerned that the DOD is pushing race as a factor for service academy admissions and officer promotions. I hope that perhaps the guidance and regulations would align with the MERIT Act that passed as law.

So thank you. I yield back.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Senator Budd.

Ms. Foster, I understand now that we have an integrated primary prevention workforce, and that it was designed to try to deal with a lot of interpersonal issues of sexual assault in the military, child abuse, other kinds of issues, and that you have been trying to hire nationwide for this. Can you just give us an update on where you are, what kind of challenges you faced, and what you see over a sort of near-term horizon for this, for this workforce?

Ms. FOSTER. Senator, absolutely. Thank you for the question. The Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce is a key focus of ours in preventing harmful behaviors at the Department of Defense. What I can tell you is that the Department has hired over 1,000 of those personnel. Our goal is to have in place 2,500 personnel across the globe, at every installation across the world. We have been really focused on making sure that this is a truly professional workforce. So that means that we have to ensure that this workforce receives adequate training to do their difficult work. One of the things that we have done is created a first-of-its-kind prevention credential. We are in the process of ensuring that those personnel that we have hired are getting that credential and getting that appropriate training.

Senator WARREN. I appreciate the update.

So, another issue I would like to talk about, and I said I would talk about at the beginning, is about housing. Families all across this country, military and non-military, are struggling because of our Nation's housing crisis, but this is hitting the military really hard. Nearly two-thirds of servicemembers live off base. Seventy-three percent of those troops are paying well over \$200 a month in out-of-pocket housing costs, despite the military providing them a basic housing allowance that, allegedly, covers their housing needs.

In Florida, a housing shortage led to a shortage of air traffic controllers at a base in Key West when sailors refused their assignments to the base because of its reputation for housing issues. Shortages have also forced some Navy sailors, who served on tour for months, to live on ships when they return home because there is no place on land for them to live.

Secretary Vazirani, when there is not enough housing to go around, how does that affect military readiness and personnel?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, quality of housing certainly impacts quality of service and quality of life, and the quality of life for a military family affects military family readiness and overall readiness.

Senator WARREN. So in fiscal year 2019, Congress created a pilot program called the Defense Community Infrastructure Program (DCIP), to help State and local governments improve, quote, “deficiencies in community infrastructures supportive of a military installation.” In other words, we can spend money to help out in the community if it would help our military base.

Now, DCIP has been so successful that Congress made this program permanent in last year’s NDAA. In the last year alone, these grants helped to replace aging stormwater infrastructure in the Port of Alaska and Norfolk, Virginia, to construct a new fire station in Florida, and create a multi-agency emergency command center in Louisiana.

Secretary Vazirani, have DCIP investments in off-base community infrastructure paid off for servicemembers and their families, in your opinion?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I think the DCIP program has been an effective program in investing in those communities where there are significant numbers of military.

Senator WARREN. Investing in the communities in a way that benefits the military. This is not just, “you got lucky and won the lottery, you have a military base.” It is that it actually helps the people who are serving on base, is that right? I just want to make sure I have got this right.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, that is correct.

Senator WARREN. The reason I want to push on this issue is because I want to build on the success of DCIP. According to a recent survey, shortages in off-base housing is one of the top issues facing servicemembers and their families. Expanding DCIP to prioritize projects that will increase the housing supply for families who cannot live on base, or who do not want to live on base, would be a good first step.

So, Secretary Vazirani, would more funding for off-base communities to build more housing to improve the readiness and quality of life for servicemembers and their families?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, access to affordable housing certainly will improve the quality of life for military families. We are very focused on that. As we look at, for example, the BAH, we evaluate that yearly, we look at what is available housing, we look at the quality of the housing level. We focus on areas where there is high quality housing, where there is low crime. We also look at where our military families are currently living as we set those BAH rates.

Senator WARREN. Good. I appreciate that.

I want to work with Senator Scott and other members of this committee to see if we can’t get more help through the DCIP program.

You know, there is a lot we need to do to improve current military housing, from getting rid of mold and abusive non-disclosure agreements, to fixing up conditions in barracks. I am going to be pushing hard to do that in this year’s NDAA, and I know I am going to get a lot of help here.

But at the end of the day, there is just no substitute for more housing. Congress should build on the success of the DCIP program

by expanding DCIP to help tackle one of the worst problems we are facing, and that is the housing shortage for our military personnel.

So, thank you. Senator Blumenthal. Is that right. Oh, sorry. Senator Scott. You are next. No, go ahead. You are next. My fault. Senator Scott.

Senator SCOTT. Sure. Okay. Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Vazirani, can you talk a little bit about, the Chairwoman brought up the childcare system. It is my understanding that the Department has completed a detailed study on how to improve the recruitment and retention of childcare providers. Can you talk about those recommendations, what you have implemented, and what you have decided not to implement, or what you are in the process of implementing?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator Scott, thank you. Childcare is a key enabler of readiness. It is an enabler of military spouse employment. So have placed some significant investments in our childcare workforce and in our capacity. In the President's Budgets there is significant investment in building capacity in childcare centers, and we have made investments, as well, in the childcare workforce and restructuring that workforce so that we can recruit and retain that workforce.

I will turn to Secretary Keohane, and he can give you a little bit more detail on that plan.

Mr. KEOHANE. Thank you, sir. Senator, with 160,000 children that go through the Childcare Center every year we certainly know that we, as the Department, are the largest childcare provider in the Nation, employer provided.

We have done a number of things to improve the programs. One of the things that we are working on, certainly as Secretary Vazirani mentioned, is compensation. This is all part of the President's recommendation for his 2025 budget. Additionally, that would allow us to be more competitive with our civilian counterparts, or our public counterparts, as well as the ability to hire new positions, for example, lead educator position, which would allow our childcare workers that want to progress through the system to move up to management if they so decide to do so.

Senator SCOTT. When I was Governor of Florida, we had 21 military bases and 3 unified commands, and so I met with all the base commanders about every 120 days. We did not focus on Federal issues. We focused on State issues. But childcare is a State issue, right. I mean, all this stuff that impacted the servicemembers' decision if they wanted to serve in Florida was a big deal to me because I wanted our military bases to be able to fulfill their mission.

Do you all do that? Do you guys meet with the base commanders, State by State, and see what—because in my State, what I did is I brought in all of the agency heads. So if the base commander says, "I am having a problem with encroachment" or "I am having a problem with health care," blah-blah-blah, whatever it was, then my goal was by the time of the next meeting we solved that. Do you do anything like that, State by state?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we engage with the Military Services and at the installation level and then the installation commanders. I think our colleagues from the services can talk about what the installation commanders do to engage their local community.

I think in addition to the things that Secretary Keohane outlined around building capacity and capability, the other thing that we have been very focused on is ensuring affordability of childcare. So we have made change to our childcare rates so that our lower earners are actually paying an equitable amount of their income.

We have also implemented dependent care flexible spending accounts, which will allow Active Duty servicemembers and their families to use pretax dollars to pay for their childcare.

Senator SCOTT. You know, another thing we did was we tried to find best practices for everything we were doing with the military, and then we put out a pamphlet to show that we were hopefully better than everybody else. Not always, right. It never works out that way.

Have you done anything like that, where you can show, you know, every State that you have military, how the State is doing? Because the State could be part of this. The State regulations have an impact. State reimbursement has an impact. All of these things. Because you are not going to be able to provide all of the childcare yourself, right. The Department Secretary is going to have to do some of it. Have you gone and looked at what the states are doing and find out the states that are not helpful and states that are more helpful, and put that out there?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, an area that we have even engaged with the states is in implementing our Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood Plus program. That is really focused on creating more programs that are civilian programs that we can then use our fee assistance, while those programs are focused on ensuring that they meet the quality standards. So that is one of the ways that we have been engaging with the states.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you. If we have more time I have another question.

Senator WARREN. You are welcome to it now, if you want.

Senator SCOTT. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, are you overall responsible for TRICARE?

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Yes, Senator.

Senator SCOTT. Okay. How do you think it is doing? What are you hearing? What sort of measurement do you do in the TRICARE program to understand what is people's perception? Because back when I was in the hospital business we bid on TRICARE contract. But I can just say, we did not get any of the contracts because you really need to be on the insurance side of it. But are you finding differences, depending on where they are in the country?

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Sir, I mean, it is one of the largest health care insurances in the country, very complex to regions. We just renegotiated the contracts. Hopefully they will come in line next year. We look at access. We look at the satisfaction of the patient, just like the rest of the industry.

Access is an issue for us all along because we thought that the network outside everywhere was going to be very robust, and now we are finding out that not to be true. You know, there are parts of the country where the network is not that robust, and may have to come out with a different way to address the patients' needs. Telemedicine is one of those ways that we need to leverage.

So yes, sir, we are looking at the feedback from the patients. We are learning. I hope the new generation contracts will be more on target. In the old days, for example, the contractor would just have network names, and all these doctors that were in the network. Well, it did not do anything to me as a patient because I would keep calling and I could not get an appointment. So the new contract is not about names. The new contract is about availability of appointments for our patient.

So we are learning. We are making it better. It is not online yet. It is going to take us a year to get there. But I am very optimistic that we are moving in the right direction.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you.

Senator WARREN. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Madam Chair. I want to come back to the recruiting issue. I understand Senator Scott raised it. Thank you, Secretary Vazirani, for coming to see us recently. Maybe you could give us an update on how recruiting is going.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we have focused heavily on the recruiting challenges. The services are making good progress. We have been focused in three particular areas. One is increasing propensity. So that is driving a greater connection with young people who have an interest in serving. Oftentimes we find that young people do not know what the opportunities are in Military Service.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. So let me ask you, and I apologize for interrupting but we all have limited time. What do the numbers look like for this year?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we are seeing that the Marine Corps, the Air Force, and the Space Force on the Active component are meeting their goals. The Army is doing better than they had been year-over-year. The Navy is still falling short of their goals, and the Reserve component, three of the elements of the Reserve component are also meeting their goals.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. So it looks like the Marine Corps, Space Force, and Cyber will meet their goals—

Mr. VAZIRANI. Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. But the Army is falling short and the Navy is shorter?

Mr. VAZIRANI. The Army is doing significantly better than they had last year, and is just short of goal. I think that our service components can talk a little bit more, but I think they are cautiously optimistic that they may be able to meet goal. The Navy still has some work to do.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. When we last spoke, one of the topics that Senator Sullivan and I were working on was access to high schools, if you recall, and I think the same question applies to colleges and universities. Are you finding any progress on those efforts?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we are seeing improved access certainly after COVID. But the level of access that we have is that we are getting the required level of access, not necessarily the desired level of access. Certainly if we had a greater frequency and more in-depth opportunity to engage with young people, not only in the high schools but in college, or those maybe who are no longer in college, we think that would give us greater opportunity.

We have submitted a legislative proposal to that effect to help us increase that level of access. So that would bring us up to a minimum, while we would at least be comparable with what the high schools are offering to other employers, or to colleges, at least a minimum of four times per year. It would also allow us to have access to lists from colleges or universities, particularly for those students who may have left the college or university. This would give us an opportunity to present them with options that the military can provide.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Do you find resistance on the part of some high schools or school boards?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I think we find that there are not any high schools or school boards that are not meeting that minimum requirement, but there are schools and school districts that are only providing the minimum requirement, and we would appreciate greater access.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Is there anything we can do to help with that effort?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I think that proposal that we have submitted, I think if the Personnel Subcommittee were to look at that and consider that, that would be helpful to us.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I want to ask you just very briefly about the Xavier Sandor Act, anyone who would like to respond. As you may know, I and others led the passage of a bill named after a sailor, Xavier Sandor, who died by suicide on the USS *George Washington*. He was a native of Connecticut. He took his own life 2 years after living in really abysmal conditions on a ship that was in for maintenance, and there was noise. There was no air conditioning. There were no really good facilities. This kind of problem evidently was fairly common among ships that were doing maintenance over apparently a fairly lengthy period of time, and that is fairly common.

Do you know how many sailors assigned to ships in long-term maintenance billets have been authorized to live off post since December of last year when we passed this measure, which authorized that kind of off-post billet? Any of you. Thank you.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I do not have that information. I will take that question for the record.

[The information referred to follows:]

Mr. VAZIRANI. All sailors with dependents are authorized Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH). But those who elect to live in privatized family housing may be on post or off post. As a result, the Department does not have a count of how many sailors in this category became newly authorized for BAH between December 2023 and May 2024 and if they lived on or off post.

All single sailors in paygrades E1-E3 were previously prohibited by law from receiving BAH. That prohibition is now lifted for sailors assigned to ships in maintenance, but they still require an exception to policy (ETP). The Navy is now placing these sailors in unaccompanied housing (UH) at normal installations and leased housing at shipyards if UH is not available at a nearby installation. No ETPs to authorize BAH were requested or granted between December 2023 and May 2024.

All single sailors in paygrade E4 with less than 4 years of Service between December 2023 and May 2024 could only be granted BAH as an ETP. The Navy houses these sailors in UH at normal installations and leases housing for them at shipyards and/or uses UH at a nearby installation. As a result, BAH is an option but not normally necessary.

All single sailors in paygrade E5 and all single sailors in paygrade E4 with at least 4 years of service may be authorized BAH if UH is not available. This is an

authorization made at the ship and installation level and as a result the Department does not have a specific count of sailors granted authority to receive BAH between December 2023 and May 2024.

All single sailors E6 and up are authorized BAH. As a result, the Department does not have a count of how many sailors in this category became newly authorized for BAH between December 2023 and May 2024 and if they lived on or off post.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Thank you all.

Senator WARREN. Senator Sullivan.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Madam Chair. Mr. Secretary, I want to followup on the work that Senator Blumenthal and I, and you, have been doing on recruiting. I think it is a really important issue, and look, it should not be controversial if a university or an American high school has misguided administrators who say, "Hey, we don't want the military around our students." It is a disservice to students to give them access and understanding. It is a disservice to our Nation.

So I think we need to be a little bit more forward leaning and hopefully the legislative language that you are talking about will have some things.

Let me give you one example. You mentioned minimal requirement. In a hearing on this committee last year, one of the Air Force senior officers described what you called "minimal requirement." They called it "suboptimal access," and here is how he described it. "An example experienced by many Air Force recruiters is a school that allows a lunchroom setup during non-optimal hours"—so not during lunch—"typically displaced into a section of the lunchroom away from the students, and told by school authorities that they are not to engage students unless the students engage them first," and they are provided this access once or twice a year. That school supposedly meets the standard. Okay, whatever the standard is, that should not be the standard.

That school, that example, we should, in my view, legislate that that is not acceptable. So if you can work with us—do you think that is acceptable, the way that Air Force recruiter described it in this committee last year?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I would agree that that is suboptimal.

Senator SULLIVAN. That is suboptimal. But that is legal, is it not?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, that is correct. That would meet the definition of required access, and that is why we are coming forward and asking—

Senator SULLIVAN. Yes. So I think it would be really important that we do this work to fix that. I mean, that is just not acceptable, and shame on those schools for doing that. But maybe they are led by people who are misguided, do not know a lot about the military, maybe had a bad experience with the military, so they are not providing.

So I think one of the things that we can do here, in this NDAA, is addressing that, and we want to work with you on that, so thanks.

Let me turn to, Mr. Secretary, you and Dr. Martinez-Lopez, the MHS GENESIS system is getting all kinds of bad press, all kinds of mentions. We had a full committee with the Secretary, and the Chairman came up. Senator Cotton was pressing them on that. It does seem to be something that kind of digs deep, and maybe too

deep, if you have a young—you know, I have heard of a story, well, a real-life story, of a young woman, really good athlete. She had taken antidepressants like when she was 12, 13, and the Air Force was telling her, “Hey, sorry. We don’t want you.” A straight A student, top university. We don’t want you—why?

It is kind of this Catch-22. Once you are in the military we want to take care of servicemembers’ mental health, but right now there are a lot of services that say if you had a mental health issue when you were 12, you are disqualified.

So I think that needs to be fixed, as well, because think about that young girl. She has either got to lie and say, “No, I never had a problem,” or if she tells the truth then she does not get accepted.

What are we doing on the MHS GENESIS health records, and do you believe it has been a challenge to our recruiting because it is bringing up things that in my view probably are not that relevant to whether you want to serve your country as a 20-year-old, when you were 13 and you took antidepressants.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, as we think about accessing people into the military, young people into the military, it is important that we have a good understanding of their health, for two purposes. One is we know that they are physically qualified to be able to make it through that basic military training, which is very rigorous, and then through that first contract period and to ensure that they are deployable.

What that MHS GENESIS system has done for us is given us that ability through the health information exchange to have that rich history. So it is providing us with—

Senator SULLIVAN. You call it rich history. Some might call it probing, deeply irrelevant. But keep going.

Mr. VAZIRANI. I think having that data informs us. What it is also allowing us to do is to get a better understanding of where we can adjust our accession standards. So we have the medical accession review pilot, which is allowing us, rather than going back and looking for a complete history, you can go back and look 1, 3 or 5 years, or through 7 years.

For example, in the area of attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, we have been able to adjust that standard, so now we only have a 1-year lookback period if an individual is stable and off medication.

So having that history is allowing us to use the science to be able to adjust the standards.

Senator SULLIVAN. If you could submit the final answer to that for the record, and particularly if there is no—you do not see any issues with MHS GENESIS. It is a getting a lot of criticism, part of the problem, on recruiting. But if you can submit that for the record.

[The information referred to follows:]

Mr. VAZIRANI. The current waiver process provides the Military Services with key information on which to make a risk assessment. While there is always room for improvement, we believe the current process is the most efficient and effective and places the minimum amount of burden on new recruits.

It is important that we have a good understanding of a new recruits’ health condition for two main reasons. First, the Department needs to know that the recruit is physically capable of successfully completing basic military training. Second, that the recruit has a reasonable chance to complete their first contract agreement and

remain medically deployable. The MHS GENESIS system, to include the health information exchange used by MHS GENESIS, is providing us with the information we need to develop a comprehensive understanding of a recruit's medical history. MHS GENESIS is also enabling the Department to have a better understanding of where we can adapt our accession standards.

While we continue to look for ways to improve the accession pipeline and process, the MHS GENESIS system has provided us with a new tool to help inform our qualification and eligibility decisions. We continue to look for ways to further optimize the process itself, especially the MHS GENESIS component; however, as with any change, we need to continue to adjust when needed. Based on the adjustments made and the programs we have initiated I do not believe MHS GENESIS is proving to be a significant barrier to recruiting.

Senator SULLIVAN. Madam Chair, I just have one really quick final question for the Secretary. I know I am out of time, but it is an important one, and maybe you could submit it for the record, Mr. Secretary.

As you indicate in your testimony, dependent education is a top priority for servicemembers as they are assigned to duty stations all over the world. Last month, at a base in Alaska that is really growing—this is Eielson Air Force Base. We now have two squadrons of F-35s there, and tankers that are going to be stationed there—the middle school, high school at Eielson Air Force Base had to close. One of the main reasons was funding.

My question, and maybe you can submit it to me for the record, how does the Department determine DOD impact aid and how is that distributed to states? Once it is distributed to states, is there any way to guarantee that it goes to schools that directly serve the base populations? Is there anything you can do on this Eielson Air Force Base closure issue that the Air Force can look into that?

Maybe, Madam Chair, if we can take that for the record, but try to get that back to us soon.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I would be happy to take that for the record.

[The information referred to follows:]

Mr. VAZIRANI. Impact Aid is a Department of Education program and DOD Supplemental Impact Aid follows the Department of Education policies for Impact Aid distribution and is governed by 20 U.S.C. § 7703a and 7703b. Alaska is the only State that considers Impact Aid as “Alaskan revenue” when it arrives in the State. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) applies for Federal Impact Aid for Native American children living at the Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school, as well as children living on Air Station Kodiak, Ft. Wainwright, JB Elmendorf-Richardson, and Eielson AFB. This allows Alaska to receive more funding per child than if the school districts in Alaska applied individually as is the case for school districts in other states. The Alaska DEED then passes the funds along to the school districts where the on-base children attend. In FY23, the Alaska DEED received \$2,662,394 for DOD Impact Aid Supplemental. Regarding Eielson AFB, it is not certain how much the State disbursed to Fairbanks North Star School District. In all other states, the impact aid is applied for by the local education agency concerned (e.g. the local school district), and goes directly to that local education agency.

Senator SULLIVAN. Great. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator WARREN. Thank you. Senator Duckworth.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Madam Chair, and good afternoon to our witnesses.

Mr. Vazirani, following our conversation during your visit to my office last week, I want to reiterate my expectation study regarding special and incentive pays should be accelerated. I do not want to be slow-rolled, and the timeline for the study to take potentially

another year is unacceptable to me, especially since this issue has already been studied within the last 2 years.

It has been 3 years since I first introduced legislation to make sure that Reserve and National Guard servicemembers are fairly compensated for maintaining critical skills and qualifications needed to accomplish their jobs.

Now I do not know why my colleague from Alaska would voluntarily jump out of a perfectly good aircraft, but if he voluntarily jumps out of an aircraft three times in 1 month as a reservist, he should get the same pay as an Active Duty person who jumps out of an aircraft three times in the same month, in terms of incentive pay.

At present, our servicemembers in the Reserve and Guard only receive a fraction of what their Active Duty counterparts are paid in special and incentive pay to maintain the same skills. My update in the fiscal year 2024 NDAA requires the service secretaries to go back and individually review each type of special incentive pay and certify certain types to be paid equally to members of the Active and Reserve components if those special and incentive pays are intended to encourage reservists to maintain a skill or proficiency identical—identical—to that required of Active component members, or to compensate them for identical exposure to hazards or risks, and if doing so will not negatively impact retention.

Last year's update to the NDAA 2024 was meant to clarify Congress' intent and provide flexibility. It was not intended to further delay implementation and slow-roll Congress. You need to fix this disparity between Active Duty and Reserve components now.

During our meeting last week, you mentioned that the RAND study regarding special and incentive pays will not be completed until the end of this year or early next year. This is unacceptable.

Can you commit to working with me to ensure that this study is prioritized and at least some of the findings be completed in the next 90 days so our Nation's Reserve and National Guard servicemembers receive the incentive and special pay that they deserve and that Congress intended for them to receive?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I appreciate the conversation that we had, and certainly value the contributions of the Reserve component as part of the Total Force.

We have prioritized the study. We are working through that. I can commit that within 90 days to come and provide an update on where we are on the study. I am not sure if there will be element that will be completed in 90 days, but I certainly will provide you an update on where we are.

I think as we are conducting that study we are developing a framework that will allow us to understand—and the Congress did give us the opportunity to implement those special incentive pays in a targeted manner. So the study will help us understand whether or not we meet the objectives, the retention or recruiting objectives by specialty or type of pay, and that is the intent of the study.

Senator DUCKWORTH. What clarification do you need to say that a National Guardsman or Reserve force's paratrooper who jumps out of an aircraft the same number of times in a month as an Active Duty troop should get the same jump pay as an Active Duty troop? What further study do you need?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, the initial study that we did was to certify for the 2022 NDAA whether or not there would be impacts to the Active component. The study that we are doing now is to understand the impacts those will have on the recruiting or retention objectives in the Reserve component.

Senator DUCKWORTH. You are slow-rolling me, and it is not acceptable.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I promise you we are not slow-rolling. We are really trying to be deliberate. It is a complex issue. We want to do it in a deliberate and thorough manner. There are a number of different pays that can be affected, and we want to make sure that we are doing this in the correct way.

Senator DUCKWORTH. You can start with key ones that are very clear. I will tell you that the guy or gal who is jumping out of that aircraft, it is very clear to him, and it is pretty simple.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator—

Senator DUCKWORTH. —to them you are slow-rolling.

Now I understand that last year's NDAA included report language requiring DOD to establish a framework for special and incentive pay, which was the trigger for the RAND report. I will note that this framework is not required. It is not required in order to certify special and incentive pays in line with the provisions that I mentioned before. Don't use it as a way to slow-roll. That framework is not required. You can actually start certifying some of those skills and those specialties.

Since DOD has decided to enter into an agreement with RAND to produce this framework, can you explain and clarify why a new study could take more than a year to deliver when this issue has already been studied by RAND within the last 24 months?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, the study that was conducted for the 2022 NDAA was to understand if there were impacts to the Active component. The study that we are conducting now is to understand if we are meeting the objectives, the retention, the recruitment objectives for the Reserve component, and looking at it by specific pay, as you pointed out. It gives us then the opportunity to prioritize certain pays, whether it is aviation pay, jump pay, dive pay, special operations pay.

Senator DUCKWORTH. So if you are waiting for this study, what is your timeline for developing an actual implementation plan, and if you have a working group set up to address this issue, what steps will you take to think through the issues of implementation now in order to expedite this entire process?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we are working with our colleagues in the Military Departments. Once we have this framework that will allow for and inform a very robust discussion, once we carry out that discussion and understand what decisions will be made, that is how we will proceed.

Given the complexity of this issue, I cannot commit to a particular timeline on that, but I can commit to ensuring that we inform you of those decisions, when the framework is completed and as we make decisions along the way.

Senator DUCKWORTH. So you have no timeline. You do not know when the RAND study is going to be done, maybe this year, maybe next year, for a study that was already done. Yet you have the au-

thority to start making decisions on some of the special incentive pay. I mean this is all, what, and you are saying you are not slow-rolling. It seems to me like you are doing this on purpose so that you do not have to pay these troops, especially the ones that have very clear, simple requirements that are exactly the same as Active Duty troops.

Madam Chair, I have an additional question that I am going to ask to be entered in the record on foreign medical facilities and medical readiness in the Indo-Pacific region.

Senator WARREN. Without objection.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator WARREN. Senator Hirono.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Secretary Vazirani, last month I joined several of my colleagues on a letter asking the Department to address recent news reports regarding failures to appropriately respond to childcare abuse at military Child Development Centers. My office just received your response this morning regarding this situation.

Can you provide an update, briefly, on this issue, and confirm that the Department has referred this matter to the DOD IG, that your office is conducting its own review of the applicable service policies to ensure consistent and effective oversight of the CDCs? With 160,000 children in your CDCs it is pretty important that they be safe. Can you confirm?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we take the safety of those children that we have under our care very seriously. When the article did come out I did refer this to the inspector general, so I can confirm that that has been submitted to the inspector general. I also directed our team to work with the Military Departments to understand and evaluate our policies and understand if there is ambiguity and where that needs to be resolved.

I can turn to Mr. Keohane to give you an update on where we are in addressing those policies.

Senator HIRONO. These reviews will be made available to our committee.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, as we go through those reviews and as we adjust policies, as necessary, I certainly commit to working with your staff—

Senator HIRONO. Thank you.

Mr. VAZIRANI.—and the committee on the direction that we will go.

Senator HIRONO. So Dr. Martinez-Lopez, in October 2023, my colleagues and I led a letter regarding servicemembers' access and coverage to Opill, the first FDA-approved oral contraceptive available without a prescription. The Defense Health Agency's Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee ruled that it would cover Opill in its uniform formulary if it was cost effective, which it has since been deemed. Of course, with the chaos following the Dobbs decision, it is very important that our servicemembers have access to reproductive care including contraception.

So while we appreciate that childcare now covers Opill, does the Department require servicemembers to obtain a prescription?

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Senator, thank you for the question. I will take it for the record. I do not know the answer, in particular, to that one.

Senator HIRONO. Well, the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] has said that this is safe without a prescription, so if the Department is saying that a prescription is required, I would say that you should eliminate that requirement.

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. I understand, ma'am.

Senator HIRONO. Will DOD direct the Military Service exchanges to stock the over-the-counter contraceptive without burdensome restrictions or delays?

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Ma'am, right now we are very proud that 130 of our MTFs, medical treatment facilities, offer walk-in contraceptive clinics and reproductive health clinics. So that talks about our commitment to make possible what you are asking. So I do not know the details, the specifics of this particular drug and about the requirements of the prescription, but I can tell you about our commitment to make sure all our servicemembers get the reproductive health care they need.

Senator HIRONO. Yes. This is really important, of course, because as I said, with the chaos following the Dobbs decision we have servicemembers who are deployed to places where they are not going to be able to receive the reproductive services that they deserve. You have situations where they may be in states where unless they are practically on death's door they will not receive emergency care.

So we need to make sure that whatever they can have access to, i.e., oral contraceptives, that they have that access.

For you again, I applaud the Department of Defense's development of walk-in contraceptive clinics and removal of contraceptive care co-pays. However, there was a provision in the 2016 NDAA that all armed services members must receive comprehensive contraception counseling at all military treatment facilities at least once every year. A 2022 RAND report found that only 25 percent of Active Duty service women received counseling and only 18 percent of Active Duty service women received counseling from a military health system provider prior to deployment.

Do you have any updates on the implementation of the congressional mandate in the 2016 NDAA for all servicemembers to receive comprehensive contraceptive counseling at least once a year and prior to deployment? Again, especially important with the chaos following the Dobbs decision.

Dr. MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Senator, we committed again to provide the best care to all our servicemembers. The decision on when or how to have a family is unique to every servicemember, so we owe them that. I owe you, for the record, the actual number of the implementation, but I can tell you our commitment to make sure that they do receive that counseling as we move forward.

Senator HIRONO. Yes. This has got to be an intentional commitment. So yes, I will check back with you as to whether or not we are increasing this percentage, because obviously the majority of your female servicemembers are not getting this kind of information.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Senator Hirono.

I want to thank our panel for being with us. I appreciate it. There may be additional questions that will come in, and we will be sure to get those to you.

With that I will excuse you and ask the second panel to come up.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Thank you, Senator.

Senator WARREN. Thank you.

[Pause.]

Senator WARREN. The second panel will consist of the personnel leaders for the Military Services. Lieutenant General Douglas F. Stitt, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel for the Army. General Stitt, I understand you are retiring soon, and this will be your last hearing before this committee. Let me say from both of us, thank you for your service.

Vice Admiral Rick Cheeseman, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Personnel, Manpower, and Training. Welcome.

Lieutenant General James F. Glynn, Deputy Commandant, Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

Lieutenant General Caroline Miller, Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services for the Air Force.

Ms. Kate Kelley, Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Human Capital.

So thank you all for being here, and we will hear from each of you, starting with Lieutenant General Stitt.

**STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL DOUGLAS F. STITT,
USA, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF FOR PERSONNEL, G-1,
UNITED STATES ARMY**

Lieutenant General STITT. Good afternoon, Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, distinguished Members of this Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the soldiers of the United States Army. I submitted a statement for the record, and want to highlight a few points from it now.

The United States Army is amidst a fundamental transformation. We are adapting and changing our capabilities, force structure, and accessions enterprise. These collective efforts combine to enable ready combat formations while ensuring the care of our people and their quality of life is commensurate with their service.

The Army's senior leadership directed necessary changes to improve the effectiveness of our accessions formation in the face of a challenging recruiting environment. These transformative efforts include enhancements of our recruiting workforce, engaging across the totality of the labor market, and a streamlined reporting structure. Compared to the same point last year, we are ahead in our accessions mission, and the Army is on pace to meet its targeted fiscal year 2024 end strength of 445,000.

The Army remains a great place to serve, as demonstrated by our historically high retention rates. In fiscal year 2023, we achieved 102 percent of our retention mission, and we are on glide path to exceed our retention mission again in 2024.

We are focused on critical programs that get upstream and prevent harmful behaviors from entering our formations.

Our civilian workforce is a readiness multiplier across the total Army, and our investments in their capabilities are crucial for meeting the needs of the Army of the future.

All of these efforts contribute to Army readiness and are vital for retaining our soldiers, civilians, and their families.

For Army families, we program \$1.6 billion across fiscal years 2024 to 2028 to improve the Army family housing inventory. For our unaccompanied soldiers, we invested over \$2.1 billion annually in the construction, sustainment, restoration, and modernization of barracks across fiscal years 2025 through 2029.

With congressional support, we will keep the Army on a sustainable strategic path as we transform for the future. We will deliver ready combat formations with advanced capabilities to defend our Nation and its interests. We understand the critical importance of preserving the All-Volunteer Force. We will continue investments in the quality of life for our soldiers, our civilians, and their families. We will maintain and build upon cohesive teams and foster climates of trust, grounded in our shared Army values.

Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, Members of this Committee, I thank you for your generous and unwavering support for our talented soldiers, civilians, and their families. I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Lieutenant General Stitt follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT BY LIEUTENANT GENERAL DOUGLAS F. STITT

Chairman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the men and women of the United States Army.

Our Army will remain the most effective fighting force in this fluid and ambiguous environment through continuous transformation. To maintain this competitive edge, our organizations, materials, and doctrine must be agile and adaptive to serve our force. As we change our force structure to grow new capabilities to support the joint force in Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO), we are transforming how we recruit and invest in our people, the most substantial overhaul in Army history. We are building the Army of the future, mindful that our personnel serve as its bedrock. Investing in our people is paramount to guaranteeing the readiness of the Army. The Army's People Enterprise is postured to support the Army objectives within a Multi-Domain Operations framework to win our Nation's wars. Moreover, enhancing soldiers' capacity to grasp and respond to evolving circumstances heightens their effectiveness, accuracy, and resilience. Our primary focus remains on selecting individuals best suited to serve our Nation and guaranteeing the well-being of our soldiers, Army civilians, and families.

CONTINUOUS TRANSFORMATION

Army transformation is well underway, but we must accelerate and intensify our efforts. We must transform our capabilities, force structure, and recruiting enterprise. We must deliver ready combat formations and take care of our people, ensuring the quality of life for our soldiers, Army civilians, and families. The Army is taking active measures to overcome recruiting challenges without compromising on our standards for high quality soldiers. We continue to develop and implement innovative ideas to invest in America's youth, and attract high quality recruits.

Transforming our Force Structure

The Army is transforming our force structure to incorporate new capabilities and refocus on LSCO. The legacy structure from the past two decades focused on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations and maintained authorizations to accommodate 494,000 soldiers. Our transformation will reduce the unfilled and excess positions and create space for new capabilities supporting LSCO in a multi-domain environment. The success of this restructure will rely on the Army's ability to gradually increase end strength from the current 445,000 soldiers to 470,000 by fiscal year 2029 to meet the requirements of the future force. This transformation in-

cludes a reduction of 32,000 authorizations across the force structure and an addition of 7,500 new authorizations, leading to a net decrease of about 24,000 authorizations. The overall reduction in authorizations will more closely align the structure to the authorized end strength to improve the readiness of formations by ensuring they are appropriately filled, while increasing their capabilities. New additions to the force structure will bring advanced capabilities to meet current requirements and ensure that we maintain overmatch against adversaries in the future.

Recruiting Transformation

To build these advanced capabilities and new formations that will ensure we maintain overmatch against adversaries, the Army is transforming how we recruit. This is essential to overcome the greatest existential threat to the All-Volunteer Force. Fixing recruiting is a “no-fail” mission. In October 2023, the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army announced a significant transformation of the Army’s Recruiting Enterprise. This effort to enhance how the Army recruits for a transforming Army is focused on 5 lines of effort to be successful.

1. Transform how the Army prospects.

Because the labor market has changed fundamentally since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, the Army will expand its focus beyond recent high school graduates. Today’s high school seniors comprise more than 50 percent of our annual contracts, however, they represent only 15–20 percent of the larger prospect pool from which we could recruit. Accordingly, in addition to the high school market, we need to attract and hire Americans in the college market or those already out in the job market. The Army leadership has set a goal of at least a third of the Army’s newest soldiers to have more than a high school degree by 2028, compared to 20 percent today.

2. Transform the Army’s recruiting workforce.

The labor market is increasingly competitive, and we recognize we have technical gaps among our recruiting workforce. As a result, the Army developed two new MOS’s: 420T and 42T; Talent Acquisition Technician and Talent Acquisition Specialist to better equip recruiters with skills and tools to achieve success. We are developing the Talent Acquisition team through a rigorous selection and training process to optimize a recruiter’s ability to identify, and contract interested young Americans. Soldiers are eager for these additional skills as indicated by the early interest in the program. Over 1,000 candidates are interested in applying to the Warrant Officer track. The 1st cohort, consisting of 122 current Warrant Officer applicants, resulted in 75 Warrant Officers invited to the mid-March assessment, from which 20–30 are expected to be selected.

Cohort 2 and 3 will also include enlisted soldiers applying to become Warrant Officers as a part of the selection process. Once complete, the 420Ts will serve as recruiting leadership, leveraging their skills and experience to standardize marketing strategies and inform talent acquisition policies. When coupled with the upcoming 42T noncommissioned officers (NCOs), we expect to see an increased capacity to leverage data and more effectively match interested recruits with Army contract opportunities.

3. Development of an Innovation and Experimentation Capability within U.S. Army Recruiting Command (USAREC).

The Army further identified the need for an innovation team, composed of recruiters supported by experts in information technology (IT), data management, survey design, labor market analysis, marketing, operations, and procurement. This will create a fluid culture of innovation which will allow the organization to navigate the current socioeconomic environment and keep Army regulations and policies current to support innovation and rapid tech advancements. This new innovation capability within USAREC has the authorities and resources to drive innovation and, importantly, scale successful innovations across the command. Ultimately, this will enable the development of new markets, methods, and technology to compete for talent without sacrificing current and future year production targets.

4. Enhance the evidence base for recruiting policy decisions.

To recruit the best qualified talent for our 21st century force, we must adapt and transform to provide applicants more tailored incentive packages. As such, the Army needs to improve the formal measurement and evaluation of recruiting policy decisions to better determine return on investment and more effectively allocate resources. To address this, we are establishing an evidence-based learning capability in the Army headquarters that will incorporate data collection and program evaluation design into accessions policy planning and implementation. As part of this line of effort, the Army will launch an Enlistment Incentives Pilot Program designed to enable a better understanding of the value our future soldiers place on monetary and non-monetary enlistment incentive offerings. This will help us to improve the

Army's value proposition year after year. Lessons learned from this pilot will enable the Army to reinvest in innovative programs supporting the recruiting effort while building Army readiness.

5. *Aligning Army recruiting leadership and structure.*

Finally, we are seeking to elevate USAREC to become a three-star command that oversees enlisted recruiting, Army Cadet Command, and the Army's Enterprise Marketing Office and reports directly to the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army in light of its critically important mission. The leadership of USAREC will serve for an extended tenure, building stability and expertise and decreasing the impact of frequent leadership changeover.

Quality Total Army Accessions

Army readiness depends on a high-quality All-Volunteer Force. The recruiting challenges facing the Army are not new, and they are not from a single cause. Several of the trends we are observing, and now responding to, were years in the making. We are in an intense competition for talent. Some of the benefits that long set the Army apart from the private sector, are becoming more common there such as healthcare and tuition assistance. The Army is addressing each of these challenges head-on, with all resources committed, to turn around recruiting. We are doing better this year at this same point compared to last year. We are laser focused on building back our end strength to grow additional capabilities that our Army needs.

The Army is carefully monitoring and as needed, adjusting incentives to position itself as a highly desirable employer of choice. We are adjusting enlistment bonuses to help recruit into critical skills specialties. Recruits can combine multiple enlistment bonuses and can combine up to four different incentives. Specific occupational training of choice and duty station of choice remain the most popular incentives.

Investing in the Army requires investing in our youth and helping them realize their full potential. The Army did not meet its recruiting goals in fiscal year 2023, it did however enlist 50,181 recruits in the Active Component (AC), 29,310 recruits in the Army National Guard (ARNG), and 9,319 recruits in the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) in fiscal year 2023. The majority of these were high school graduate recruits: 94 percent high school graduates for the AC, 98 percent for the ARNG, and 97 percent in the USAR. Similarly, 59 percent were Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) Test Score Category (TSC) I-III for the AC, and both the ARNG and USAR recruited 62 percent TSC I-III soldiers in fiscal year 2023.

Furthermore, TSC IV recruits only made up 3 percent of the AC and USAR recruits, and 4 percent of ARNG recruits in fiscal year 2023, ensuring we remained below the Department of Defense (DoD) standard of no more than 4 percent Category IV recruits. As of February 29, 2024, the AC achieved nearly 31 percent of its fiscal year 2024 recruiting mission of 55,000. In fiscal year 2024, the AC has recruited 94 percent high school graduates, and is currently at 56 percent TSC I-III. The ARNG achieved more than 44 percent of its fiscal year 2024 recruiting mission of 34,140. The ARNG is at 97 percent high school graduates and 58 percent TSC I-III. The USAR achieved more than 29 percent of its recruiting mission of 14,650. Of these recruits, 98 percent are high school graduates, and 58 percent are TSC I-III.

The Future Soldier Preparatory Course (FSPC) is yet another innovative and successful pathway we have developed and implemented in response to the tough environment we are amid. This program is an investment in America's youth. It is expanding our recruiting pool, while not sacrificing quality. FSPC is a holistic program to aid potential recruits to meet either the physical or academic aptitude standards to fully qualify for Army service. In fiscal year 2023, the success of the FSPC program provided upwards of three Brigade Combat Teams (12,887 soldiers) worth of additional combat power to the Army. 47 percent of graduates are scoring in Test Score Category IIIA or higher, thus ensuring we maintain our continued goal of accessions quality over quantity. 96.6 percent of academic track graduates and 95.4 percent of fitness track graduates have graduated Basic Combat Training which is higher than standard BCT graduation rate of 94 percent. Army is looking at ways to expand the program to provide a pathway for those with the propensity to serve.

Retention

Readiness depends on retaining the right soldiers in the right jobs at the right time. To do this, we are constantly adapting to the dynamic operational environment. As we see soldier trends change, we adjust our policies to meet soldier's needs, wants, and desires, to Army strengths and needs. These adjustments can include monetary and non-monetary incentives we use to drive behavior. A strong retention program further supports continued service in critical roles or skills needed as we transform to the Army of future. In fiscal year 2023, the Regular Army re-

tained 56,239 exceeding the prescribed objective of 55,110 by 2 percent. Another 7,041 of those scheduled to Expiration Term of Service (ETS) in fiscal year 2023 were transitioned into the Army Reserve or National Guard exceeding the established target of 6,379 by 10.4 percent. This year, the Army has established and missioned a reclassification goal in addition to the fiscal year 2024 and fiscal year 2025 reenlistment mission objective. The Precision Retention Military Personnel (MILPER) provides soldiers and families with an overview of the process the Army utilizes to achieve a balance among MOSs. It provides soldiers and their families with an outline of which MOSs have limited opportunities due to being overstrength, those with greater opportunities due to being understrength, and the process by which they can reclassify from one to the other. The Regular Army is on track to meet its fiscal year 2024 retention mission objective to retain 54,700 soldiers and has retained over 32,000 soldiers year to date which is a completion rate of just over 58 percent. Overall, Army retention is high, which signals soldiers are having a positive experience and achieving their goals and aspirations across our Army.

We are investing in our recruiters by modifying how they are selected, improving their training, increasing their resources, and educating them on available family programs. Other initiatives to improve our recruiting efforts include the development of the Soldier Referral Program to provide an opportunity for soldiers in the AC, USAR, and ARNG to connect with youth where they are, share their Army story, and be rewarded when the referred recruit joins the Army. From implementation of the SRP in January 2023 through 31 March 2024, USAREC contracted 2,277 enlistees from referrals for the Regular Army and 490 for the US Army Reserve, of which 1,781 (RA) and 321 (USAR) have shipped to initial military training. The referrals for those who shipped to training were made by over 1,367 serving soldiers across the Army. Accordingly, all 1,367 serving soldiers were awarded the Army Recruiting Ribbon. Of the 1,367 serving soldiers, 596 were promoted to an advanced rank based on valid referrals that shipped to training under the SRP pilot. In January 2023, the Army began the Recruiter Production Incentive—Assignment Incentive Pay to incentivize recruiters to exceed their quarterly recruiting mission. This new program earns the recruiter \$75 for each contract over the requirement in CAT IIIB, and \$150 for each contract over the requirement in CAT I-III A.

Civilian Workforce Recruiting

Our civilian workforce is a force multiplier across the Total Army and our investments in their capabilities is crucial for meeting the needs of the Army of the future. The Army appreciates the many civilian direct hire authorities and other flexibilities that Congress has afforded the Department. These authorities allow us to reach top civilian talent and bring them on faster than through traditional hiring. In addition, direct hire authorities have allowed the Army to increase outreach and proactively recruit from a more diverse audience to acquire uniquely skilled candidates. The Army has implemented several initiatives as part of a broader strategy to reduce civilian time-to-hire and increase candidate quality. This multi-year strategy is designed to increase competency and skills-based hiring in support of Executive Order 13932, Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates, leverage Office of Personnel Management resources, and optimize Army hiring processes. As our multi-year strategy to reduce time-to-hire and improve candidate quality matures, we expect to achieve consistent reductions in the time it takes to hire civilian personnel while simultaneously ensuring a more qualified pool of candidates.

Marketing

The Army provides opportunities and possibilities for investing in oneself for a better life. The Army offers 178 career fields as options for new recruits, and Army Marketing is unrelenting on re-introducing this Army to America's youth. Serving in the Army is not a detour; it allows our youth to take an accelerated path to fulfill their dreams and realize their full potential. We must meet young people where they are and address their concerns that are barriers to entry. Our research informs us that prospects have a lack of knowledge about what Army service can offer, trouble identifying with service culture and lifestyle, and diminished trust that they will be treated fairly. However, the top concerns among the prospect audience continue to be that serving in the Army will either delay or put them "off-track" from their life goals or separate them from friends and family.

Our marketing efforts are tailored to assuage these concerns and show prospects that the Army will accelerate their path to achieving life goals. Last year, the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army announced the Army's first new brand refresh effort since "Army Strong" nearly 20 years ago. This effort was

the culmination of 2 years of research and preparation to bring the Army back to relevancy in the minds of Generation Z and others. The Army conducted extensive research among prospects and our important stakeholder audiences and influencers before deciding on the elements of this brand refresh, which include a modernized logo and the tagline “Be All You Can Be.” While this tagline is very popular among our veterans, it was not chosen for the sake of nostalgia; it was chosen because testing among our target audience and others revealed it to be the most favored and best suited for communicating the possibilities available with service in the Army and the purpose and passions of our prospect audience. Elements of this campaign are now in market and appearing in connection with events like the Men’s and Women’s National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Basketball tournaments, with more planned this fiscal year.

Over the last 12 months the Army put three distinct advertising campaigns in market to communicate from multiple angles to the prospect audience. “Know Your Army” communicated tangible employment benefits that the Army provides. The third Chapter of the “What’s Your Warrior” series informed prospects on the breadth of career fields available. Finally, “Decide to Lead” communicated how service as an officer provides unparalleled leadership training and experience. This was the first officer-focused campaign for the Army since 2009. As a result of this campaign, we exceeded our Army Reserve Officers’ Training Corps’ National Scholarship Board application goals. We have seen a positive cumulative effect on prospective lead generation by using multiple campaigns simultaneously in the market to address the interests of multiple audiences.

LEADER SELECTION, PERSONNEL MODERNIZATION, COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

The foundation of Army Readiness is personnel readiness. Programs, policies, innovations, and management models are transforming the Army’s personnel systems to meet future needs. These changes will provide our soldiers and civilians with more opportunities to excel; give our Army the enduring advantage of a transparent, data rich personnel environment; and improve our ability to compete for and retain talent.

Talent Management

Unit level commanders are in the best position to have positive impacts and influence in our soldiers. Identifying and selecting the very best leaders demonstrates the Army’s commitment to take care of its soldiers and maintain the All-Volunteer Force. This is critical in the Army’s efforts to prioritize human capital investment and talent management by acquiring and leveraging the Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviors (KSBs) of its soldiers, balanced with the needs of the Army.

The Command Assessment Program (CAP) improves the Army’s ability to select the best leaders at the battalion and brigade levels. In November 2023, the Army completed the fifth iteration of CAP. Over 7,000 leaders at lieutenant colonel, colonel, GS-14, GS-15, and E-9 levels have been assessed through CAP over the past 4 years. To date, CAP has identified 300 leaders with consistent counterproductive behaviors, contributing to more positive command climates. These non-selections for command are provided developmental feedback and encouraged to work on the “gap” in their leadership swing to potentially compete at CAP the following year. CAP has continually improved its feedback mechanism to contribute to individual and organizational growth. When compared to the legacy Centralized Selection List system, CAP assesses and identifies leaders who are more cognitively capable, better written and verbal communicators, more physically fit, more self-aware, more emotionally resilient and less likely to exhibit counterproductive or ineffective leader traits.

The Army Talent Alignment Process (ATAP) revolutionizes personnel utilization through a decentralized, regulated marketplace, empowering officers to align with unit needs based on a comprehensive assessment of critical talent data. ATAP operates under a set of robust business rules that delineate responsibilities for units, officers, and the Human Resources Command (HRC) during market cycles. These rules not only ensure fair and transparent operations but also enable the Army to dynamically adjust assignments to meet evolving readiness requirements, thereby strengthening overall force effectiveness.

To date, ATAP has successfully matched over 60,000 officers and warrant officers with assignments across eight cycles, highlighting the effectiveness of the market-style hiring approach in meeting both individual preferences and command requirements. Under the guidance of Army Senior Leaders, efforts are underway to formalize ATAP through the Army Directive, ensuring its integration into the Army’s talent management framework. Headquarters Department of the Army Executive Order (EXORD) 241-21 mandates the participation of Active Component units and

officers through the Assignment Interactive Module 2.0 (AIM2), further enhancing the reach and efficiency of the process.

The Integrated Personnel and Pay System—Army (IPPS-A)

IPPS-A is the Army's 21st Century Talent Management System. It is embracing emerging technologies, integrating modern personnel management and data analytics capabilities, and aligning with the Army's efforts to build a more effective and efficient force. It delivers a secure, comprehensive, and data-rich human resource (HR) talent management system to the Total Force.

Just over a year ago, IPPS-A Release 3 was deployed to over 1.1 million soldiers in all three components, providing the Total Force visibility required to support Readiness, Talent Management, and Auditability. IPPS-A is the Army's top human resources modernization effort and system of record for accountability of Army personnel. Over the last year, IPPS-A processed more than 2.5 million pay impacting transactions with an accuracy rate of approximately 99 percent, along with over 250 thousand Customer Relationship Management (CRM) cases actioned by H.R. and IT professionals. IPPS-A trained over 41 thousand H.R. Professionals on their roles and responsibilities with the new platform while also providing Self-Service and Leaders videos and user manuals. With the transition to Agile Software Development in July 2023, the team is able to easily flex to meet law, regulation, and policy change updates while also completing enhancement requests from the users. IPPS-A averages over 100,000 users daily with 380,000 downloads of the mobile app. IPPS-A is a soldier's system and it shows.

Compensation and Entitlements

Since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force, our compensation program has been instrumental in attracting and retaining qualified personnel to fill our ranks. Recent challenges in meeting recruitment goals underscore the importance of this fact, and we deeply appreciate Congress' support in maintaining a high-quality All-Volunteer Force.

Recent initiatives by the DOD and Congress to enhance the quality of life for servicemembers have resulted in several welcomed changes. The recent increases to Basic Pay, Basic Allowance for Subsistence, and housing allowances have been positively received by our members and will significantly impact the lives of soldiers and their families. Additionally, expansions in parental leave and the inclusion of bereavement leave demonstrate our commitment to supporting our soldiers and their families during times of celebration and sorrow. Furthermore, granting the Department authority to cover pet travel expenses during Permanent Change of Station reflects our concern for all members of our soldiers' families. Last, we commend the efforts of DOD and Congress in addressing food security for our soldiers and families through the Basic Needs Allowance, particularly benefiting our most vulnerable junior enlisted soldiers with larger families.

The steadfast support from Congress and the proactive efforts of the Department of Defense to improve the quality of life for servicemembers not only demonstrates our Nation's commitment to our soldiers and their families but also underscores our dedication to maintaining a high-quality, All-Volunteer Force. As we continue to face evolving challenges, we remain committed to ensuring that our compensation program and benefits align with the needs of our personnel, enabling us to fulfill our mission effectively.

Transition Assistance Program

The Army is fully committed to caring for its people, from the beginning of their tours in basic training until they leave the service. It is in the Army's and our Nation's best interest to ensure soldiers successfully transition back into our communities after their Active Duty Military Service and become Ambassadors for the Army within those communities. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is the overarching program that provides assistance, information, training, counseling, and services to eligible soldiers in transition to help them achieve career readiness upon separation, retirement, or release from Active Duty. During fiscal year 2023, 106,477 Active Army, Reserve and Guard soldiers transitioned off Active Duty with nearly half meeting TAP Career Readiness Standard (CRS) requirements and 80 percent beginning their TAP process at least 230 days prior to transition.

TAP offers soldiers the opportunity to participate in the Career Skills Program (CSP), also known as the DOD Skillbridge program. Soldiers have the option to participate in first-class apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, on-the-job training, employment skills training, and internships to obtain industry-recognized skills, and move into high-demand and highly skilled careers with little-to-no cost upon transition. During fiscal year 2023, 10 percent of transitioning soldiers successfully completed a CSP. This is a highly popular program that is continuing to gain more trac-

tion as commanders at all levels are being educated on the benefits afforded to transitioning soldiers.

Soldier For Life

The Soldier for Life (SFL) program is reconnecting the Army with communities throughout the country. SFL's outreach and advocacy efforts focus on engaging local governments, non-government organizations, private organizations, and non-profit organizations to influence policy, programs, and services that support soldiers, veterans, and families while also encouraging soldiers to remain Army Ambassadors upon their transition from service.

In fiscal year 2023, SFL focused on building greater awareness and knowledge of the Army within civilian communities across the country, especially where there are no Army installations. These efforts included: leveraging SFL relationships to improve institutional and community awareness of programs available to support the military community, expanding support to the accessions enterprise by leveraging outreach and centers of influence to support the recruiting mission, and building the SFL mindset by partnering with U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and Army Centers of Excellence to instill the mindset into the operational force through Initial Military Training, Professional Military Education, and operational touch-points throughout the soldier life cycle. Veteran support in communities was fostered with the launch of the SFL apparel line, now in over 30 military exchange stores and online.

In fiscal year 2024, SFL is reframing its mission and vision, with a focus on awareness, understanding, and embodiment of the SFL mindset in every soldier throughout the soldier life cycle. SFL's unique program directly reaches soldiers at military installations, in the Army Reserve, in the Army National Guard, and our retired soldiers as well. Efforts continue to identify issues that impact soldier transitions in the areas of education, employment and health and wellness. But employment efforts are being broadened by re-aligning the Army Partnership for Your Success (PaYS) Program from accessions to SFL.

The SFL mission remains critical because it directly connects external organizations to the Army. Soldiers in the SFL office are often the only contact that communities have with the Army. SFL's presence makes a difference.

CONCLUSION

The Army's mission remains unchanged, to fight and win our Nation's wars. To meet our mission requirements, while building and transforming the Army of the future, we rely on this Congress to support our efforts through the President's Budget and in our collaborative relationship concerning our personnel policies. This relationship and these investments in our people will ensure the Army's readiness today and into the future.

Rest assured, the Army's number one priority will remain our people—our soldiers, Army civilians, families, and Veteran Soldiers for Life. The people of the United States Army—these servicemembers who serve our Nation, both in and out of uniform, along with their families—are our strength and our legacy. Congressional support for our Army enables our ability to transform our force while showcasing our abilities and offering opportunities to allow careers and Families to flourish.

Thank you for your generous and unwavering support of our outstanding soldiers, civilian professionals, and their families.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Lieutenant General Stitt. Appreciate it.

Now we are ready. Vice Admiral Cheeseman.

**STATEMENT OF VICE ADMIRAL RICHARD J. CHEESEMAN, JR.,
USN, DEPUTY CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS FOR PERSONNEL,
MANPOWER, AND TRAINING, N1, UNITED STATES NAVY**

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Subcommittee Members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am honored to be here to serve and represent the sailors of our United States Navy, a high-quality, motivated workforce comprised of the best America has to offer.

The Navy's budget request for fiscal year 2025 funds holistic effort to support our warfighters and the foundation that supports them. It prioritizes our people with increases in military pay and basic allowance and additional funds for recruiting and retention bonuses. The budget also prioritizes several quality-of-life and service initiatives, including tools and education for our leadership specifically to address mental health, suicide, and other harmful behaviors that build upon quality-of-service investments from the fiscal year 2024 appropriation.

While I am grateful for your continued support of our sailors and their families, I must stress that our Navy remains most lethal and effective when we are able to execute under a full year budget.

We remain in a very challenging recruiting environment. Our current projected miss is 6,200 against an increased mission of 40,600 sailors, which is significantly better than what we anticipated at the beginning of the fiscal year, and I remain optimistic that investments in marketing and data analytics will show additional progress. As we position ourselves for success in the coming year, I look forward to sharing our continued performance improvement and to discussing these details today.

With recruiting challenges there is a need for greater retention. I appreciate your steadfast support in funding sailors' special incentive pays and bonuses, which are vital to targeting complex skill sets. These monetary incentives, coupled with several other initiatives, have helped us maintain our historically healthy high retention levels.

Last month, we rolled out Culture of Excellence 2.0, which focuses on building great people, great leaders, and great teams, and prepares our warfighters to dominate in combat, innovate and solve hard problems, and prevent harmful behaviors. It simplifies, streamlines, and aligns several programs and concepts into an actionable approach to building great culture while providing tools for commanders to better understand and act on the needs of their people.

Our women and men of the United States Navy—Active, Reserve, and civilian—along with their families, give our Navy the decisive edge. We must build strong warfighting teams, recruit and retain talented people from all across America, and provide them world-class training and education, and then ensure they are prepared for when their Navy story ends, whether it be a single enlistment or a full career.

You and every American can be proud of your sailors and their families. I appreciate your continued support, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Vice Admiral Cheeseman follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT BY VICE ADMIRAL RICHARD J. CHEESEMAN JR.

INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of the Personnel Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Navy's most important asset—our people. In an era of great power competition and growing global unrest, it is imperative that we not only build, maintain, train, and equip combat-ready, lethal Naval forces, but we must maintain the strong foundation of our most critical strength, our highly trained and skilled personnel. Our Navy builds Great People, Leaders, and Teams—to innovate, solve hard problems, and most impor-

tantly, to dominate in combat. By doing so, our Navy stands ready, from seabed to space, to deter or confront potential adversaries that endanger freedom around the world, disrupt open sea lanes and threaten the world's economy and global commerce.

Notwithstanding the global threats our Navy faces, we continue to face challenges in recruiting America's top talent. Let me say upfront that I remain confident in our current approach to aggressively attack this issue and appreciate the continued support and leadership from this committee and others. While I remain confident, I must acknowledge that these challenges exacerbate Fleet manning shortages, putting additional stress on our force, which could negatively affect readiness and potentially impact future retention, in an environment where retention is ever important.

While we are making significant headway, overcoming recruiting challenges requires not only MyNavy H.R. efforts, but also support of the collective Navy team and our country, from the Nation's leaders to supporting industries, communities, families, and veterans. To maintain the most combat-effective Navy in the world and achieve optimum warfighting readiness, we all must remain adaptable, innovative, and resilient, as we hold ourselves accountable to our sailors, their families, and our Nation.

ACCESSING OUR NAVY'S TALENT

We continue to face challenges in the current and forecasted economic environment and tough labor market, resulting in projected recruiting shortfalls in the coming years. The Navy continues to explore and evaluate new methods for attracting qualified, motivated and capable applicants. As we consider new policies and initiatives, we are committed to Recruit Training Command's boot camp and "A" school graduation standards. Navy is leveraging data driven processes to aggressively pursue the 40,600 Active Component contract mission. The Navy is projecting a mitigated miss of approximately 6,700 but continues to build pathways for all qualified individuals who want to serve throughout a myriad of recruiting initiatives.

Recruiting Initiatives:

- *Recruiting Operations Center:* The Navy Recruiting Operations Center (ROC) was created to monitor recruiting efforts in real time, focused on data driven processes to increase production per recruiter and remove variance among our 26 Talent Acquisition Groups. Navy Recruiting Command is now led by an experienced two-star admiral (traditionally run by a 1 star in his/her first flag job).
- *Every Sailor is a Recruiter:* Program for currently serving sailors to share their experience and provide leads of interested applicants to Navy recruiting.
- *Navy Recruiting Reserve Command:* Established to better focus on the prior service mission.
- *Increased Marketing and Advertising (M&A)* dollars to improve public awareness, understanding, and positive perceptions of the Navy's mission and Navy service in the long term.
- *Increased Recruiter Manning* enables the Navy a greater reach and engagement with the youth population across Recruiting Nation.
- *New Job Opportunities* created to keep competitive edge against adversaries and parity with the civilian workforce, the Navy established both the Cyber Warfare Technician (CWT) and Robotics Warfare (RW) ratings.
- *Enlistment Bonus* program leveraged to attract high-quality recruits for high demand ratings. Future Sailors can earn up to \$140,000 in bonuses (by successfully completing requirements for critical jobs in the Navy).

Future Sailor Preparatory Programs:

- *Future Sailor Preparatory Course Physical Fitness (FSPC-P):* Bring potential Future Sailors who are marginally out of body composition standards into line with Navy and Department of Defense (DoD) requirements.
- *FSPC Academic (FSPC-A):* For Future Sailors with lower Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) scores, Navy has implemented a course designed to increase their proficiency in basic academics through structured classroom instruction and independent study. This could reduce attrition in later training, while broadening the Navy occupations these sailors are able to train to.

Policy and Waiver Expansion:

- *Category IV:* A limited number of our total accessions can join the Navy if they attain an AFQT score of 10–30, as long as they have qualifying line scores to

fill an open rating. These Future Sailors will complete the FSPC-A at Recruit Training Command (RTC) before they begin basic training.

- *Single Parent Policy*: Waives dependency status for the Active Component (AC) and Reserve Component (RC) enlistment of unmarried individuals with custody of up to two dependents under the age of 18.
- *Tier 2*: Authorized the contracting and accessing of Tier 2 applicants who scored 31 or above on the AFQT. Tier 2 applicants are non-high school graduates who hold a GED, previously only accessed with a 50 or greater AFQT.
- *Tier 3*: In January 2024, the Navy began recruitment of Future Sailors without educational credentials, but who score a 50 or above on the AFQT. This policy expands the pool of highly qualified applicants by a projected 500 to 2,000 people.
- *Receptive Acclimation at RTC*: In response to high historical attrition rates, RTC redesigned training during Processing Days (P-Days) to increase teamwork and cultural acclimation to combat attrition due to psychological reasons.

MANAGING OUR TALENT

Navy continues to evaluate and improve our capability to attract, develop, and manage a talented and diverse workforce in order to maintain a Fleet prepared to fight and win in long term strategic competition. The Navy is modifying our talent marketplace to be a modern, flexible, and transparent assignment process that more effectively balances a sailor's assignment, location, and advancement opportunities with the Navy's mission and operational needs.

We continue to execute the Detailing Marketplace Campaign Plan (DMCP), with specific emphasis on Billet Based Advancement. As one of my strategic pillars, it is focused on giving sailors choice to extend or return at sea going billets with greater responsibility, pay and rank. While we are testing this policy implementation across all paygrades of two sea-intensive ratings now, we are targeting expansion to all ratings and for duty both at sea and ashore in the coming years.

We continue to employ the expanded Defense Officer Personnel Management Act authorities enacted in the fiscal year 2019 National Defense Authorization Act and appreciate the strong support for the various authorities and initiatives that reinforce our ability to attract and retain a talented officer corps. We highlight three areas that yielded discernible results:

- *Promotion Merit Reorder*: Demonstrated the value and primacy of merit over simple time in service.
- *Expanded Continuation Authority*: Most recently enabled us to have senior officers fill shortages in the Acquisition Corps communities for fiscal year 2023.
- *Expanded Officer Spot Promotion Authority*: Facilitated filling at-sea and operational O-4, O-5 and O-6 billets with officers possessing critical skills (post-operational or operational command executive leadership).

RETAINING OUR TALENT

Our annual Health of the Force (HOF) survey asks participants to indicate their current career plans. Compared to previous years, more O-1 through O-3 and E-1 through E-6 intend to remain in the Navy until retirement, a nod to the quality of service and job satisfaction that our Service provides. Overall, Navy enlisted retention remains healthy. We ended fiscal year 2023 meeting or exceeding our retention benchmark forecasts across most of our zones of service. Navy officer retention has some challenges, which continue to be addressed with a combination of monetary and non-monetary force management levers focused on Aviation, Explosive Ordnance Disposal, Surface Warfare, Submarine Warfare, and Naval Special Warfare.

Navy anticipates meeting our fiscal year 2024 retention targets. To help address recruiting shortfalls, we are applying a combination of authorized monetary and non-monetary force management levers including:

- Programs that provide investment in a sailor's personal (or family) development in exchange for additional obligated service in the Navy.
- Direct monetary compensation for retention decisions in critical ratings, skillsets, and career milestones.
- Expanding the ability to offer geo-stability, which has proven successful, including co-location with a military spouse and assignment policies that allow sailors to extend at sea or take tougher jobs in exchange for guaranteed assignment at a location.

QUALITY OF SERVICE

Quality of Service (QoS) is a Navy priority. The Navy uses our annual Health of the Force (HOF) survey to garner insight into the Navy's culture and climate, including the protective factors of cohesion, connectedness, inclusion, organizational commitment, and trust. The percentage of participants with moderate to high levels of these key factors increased in 2023, a testament to the initiatives and commitment to continue to advance our Navy's culture. The Navy continues to monitor sailor or well-being through risk factors associated with stress and burnout, which remain concerning due to inadequate manning and mission demands. To get after this, MyNavy HR, alongside the greater Navy efforts, are aggressively pursuing QoS initiatives to improve the quality of life and quality of work of our sailors.

ADVANCING OUR NAVY'S CULTURE

Everyone in the Navy deserves to serve in an environment of trust and respect, where connectedness and inclusion are high. Building on the Navy's call to think, act, and operate differently, the CNO launched the Culture of Excellence 2.0 construct that focuses on building Great People, Leaders, and Teams. COE 2.0 charges leaders to prioritize a sailor's holistic wellness of mind, body, and spirit; master self-awareness and emotional intelligence; and build teams that create a sense of belonging. By simplifying, streamlining, and aligning our existing people programs, COE 2.0 will foster a Navy culture where sailors feel supported and empowered to be their very best.

We will measure and assess culture through existing tools, such as the Command Climate Assessment (CCA) and the Health of the Force (HoF) Survey, and with new tools, such as the Virtual Commanding Officer's Suggestion Box. The CCA provides a snapshot of harmful behaviors through use of both the Defense Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) and focus groups conducted post-survey by Command Resilience Team (CRT) members. The DEOCS collects information on risk and protective factors including sexual and racial harassment and discrimination, workplace hostility, diversity and inclusion, and other aspects of organizational climate. The occurrence of specific behaviors, such as sexual assault, sexual harassment, suicide risk, or domestic violence may be identified via DEOCS comments or follow-on focus groups. The HoF and suggestion box provide us opportunities for feedback on command culture and climate.

COE 2.0 is designed to be a living document, updated as necessary to include best practices learned from the Fleet. By prioritizing command culture alongside combat readiness, COE 2.0 will prepare us for victory in combat by innovating to solve hard problems and reduce harmful behaviors.

SUPPORTING OUR TALENT WITH H.R. SERVICE DELIVERY & MODERN IT SOLUTIONS

The Navy remains focused on providing convenient, intuitive and transparent H.R. services, empowering sailors, commands, and H.R. professionals to actively participate in a streamlined H.R. resolution process, using technology to guide users to their desired outcome. Navy Personnel Command (NPC) and MyNavy Career Center (MNCC) continue to improve the quality of service for our sailors and their families, delivering improved pay and personnel processes to meet the Navy's future mission and workforce requirements.

MyNavy H.R. transformation continues to advance across all five lines of effort: Single Point of Entry (SPoE), Navy Pay and Personnel (NP2), Learning Stack (LS), Enterprise Customer Relationship Management (eCRM) and Authoritative Data Environment (ADE). Each line of effort is being pursued to make sailor access to IT data faster and easier, modernizing how the Navy handles digital information.

With the increased reliance on smart devices, we strive to provide many solutions in the palm of sailors' hands and streamline the myriad of digital administrative resources provided to the Fleet. Answering the call for increased productivity in recruiting, MyNavy H.R. delivered increased capability on hand-held devices, empowering recruiters to immediately input applicant information anywhere, at any time, reducing administrative burden and enabling more time in the field for interactions with Future Sailors. Additional upgrades to hand-held devices have empowered recruiters to engage with potential recruits across popular social media platforms and now provides cloud-optimized mapping routes for engagements with Future Sailors.

Transformation is a work in progress with forthcoming pilot programs that will allow sailors to gain secure and quick access to their career and personal data, as well as track and initiate cases for issue resolution and increased visibility into the Permanent Change of Station process through a modern, more user-friendly inter-

face, all in a continued effort to ensure that the MyNavy H.R. vision remains aligned with sailors' needs.

FLAG OFFICER REDUCTIONS

The Navy continues to face challenges following the reduction of more than 8 percent of its Flag Officer billets in support of the Space Force and as required by the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). These cuts come at a high cost to maintaining operational readiness, impeding Navy's efforts in an already challenging operational environment, and in direct conflict with the demands of strategic naval competition which require more rather than less senior uniformed leadership and expertise in the dominant physical domain of concern: the maritime domain.

The reduced number of Flag Officer billets has resulted in shifting critical work to other Flag Officers and Senior Executives increasing demands on those Flag Officers and Senior Executives by double and triple hatting of positions. At present, nearly one third of the Navy's remaining 150 Flag Officer billets are double or triple hatted with some positions having more than a dozen direct reports. Rather than streamlining processes, the reductions have increased direct reports, multi-hatted positions, and the reliance on Selected Reservists, impeding those processes, creating inefficiencies and complexities in our command and control structures, and increasing overall risk to mission accomplishment.

CONCLUSION

I have complete confidence in the collective efforts of the MyNavy H.R. team to attract, develop, and retain Great People, Leaders, and Teams, which will ensure we maintain our competitive advantage. We will keep striving to do better every day, fix what needs fixing, and commit to improving the quality of our services. I'm eager to continue working with this committee and others to maintain our strong warfighting teams by recruiting and retaining talented individuals across the United States. On behalf of the United States Navy personnel and their families, I thank you for your sustained commitment and unwavering support.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Vice Admiral. Lieutenant General Glynn.

STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL JAMES F. GLYNN, USMC, DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR MANPOWER AND RE- SERVE AFFAIRS, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

Lieutenant General GLYNN. Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is my privilege to appear before you today, along with Sergeant Major Reiff, sitting behind me, to provide an overview of our Marine Corps personnel.

Your Marine Corps and your marines remain strong. Despite headwinds, we met the recruiting and the retention missions in the last year, and we expect to do so again this year. We have done so while maintaining top quality, something on which we will never compromise. The high caliber of marines directly contributes to the warfighting capability and readiness of your United States Marine Corps.

Despite our success, recruiting still presents challenges, including a shrinking pool of eligible youth, who are increasingly unfamiliar with the value of Military Service. To counter these trends we are modernizing how we recruit and working to increase access to schools, and we ask for your continued support of these efforts. Together we can and must ensure the health of the All-Volunteer Force.

I am pleased to report that we also continue to retain marines at a historic pace, both in number and in quality. It reinforces that once one becomes a marine, they desire to remain a marine. The

desire for continued service speaks to our ethos—being part of a team, accomplishing the mission, taking care of one another, and serving something bigger than yourself. It also shows to us that marines believe in their leaders and the processes that assign, promote, and award in a fair and transparent manner.

Our talent management efforts remain foundational to the force design that you have heard much about and the future success of our Corps. Our overarching goal remains to increase Marine Corps warfighting capability and sustain our lethality, as well as maintaining our responsibility to be the Nation's premier expeditionary force-in-readiness. In fact, to that end, more than 30,000 marines are forward deployed or forward stationed, prepared to respond right now.

Warfighting readiness is built on trust, including trust in Marine Corps support to its families. Family readiness is quite simply readiness, whether it is a childcare issue, health care, housing—these things matter to marines, they matter to our families. Consequently, they matter to me.

We continue to work hard to prevent destructive behaviors and increase resilience. In the past few months we have emphasized Marine Corps total fitness as our innovative, holistic, and integrated strategy that is being implemented right now. It strives to enhance marine resilience and readiness across all domains, with specific emphasis on mental, spiritual, social, and physical. I look forward to our dialog on these topics so we can continue to provide marines with the highest quality of life.

It is my honor to represent your Marine Corps today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Lieutenant General James F. Glynn follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT BY LIEUTENANT GENERAL JAMES F. GLYNN

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is my privilege to appear before you today to provide testimony on Marine Corps personnel. The Marine Corps' performance in future battles will be defined in large part by the talent management investments made today and in the future. That is why we are in the midst of implementing a modernized talent management system that better harnesses, develops, and retains the unique skills and strengths demanded of marines by Force Design and in support of our Nation's defense.

RECRUITING

The significance of Marine Corps recruiting efforts is highlighted by the fact that all—officer, enlisted, regular, reserve, and prior service—fall under the Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC), the Commanding General of which reports directly to the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC).

Your Marine Corps made its recruiting mission in fiscal year 2023 and is currently on track to meet it again this fiscal year. Officer and prior service recruiting missions for the Marine Corps continue to be successful, despite enduring enlisted recruiting challenges. As we embark on the next 50 years of the All-Volunteer Force, we are reminded that it is more accurately an "All-Recruited Force." Service to our Nation and the military remains an aspirational pathway to greater opportunities—both in and out of uniform. Service as a marine continues to attract those who meet our standards and aspire to prove themselves worthy of earning the title. We must collectively ensure the health of our All-Volunteer Force and the strategic advantage it provides—talent, capability, and warfighting excellence. The CMC remains committed to providing resources and sending the very best marines to become recruit-

ers in order to achieve the accession mission while sustaining quality and standards. One in four of our general officers have been recruiters during their career, and we pride ourselves in assigning a sergeant major to every recruiting station. This is the bedrock of successful Marine Corps recruiting.

A significant concern now and going forward is our start pool of 22 percent, which was leveraged to ensure mission accomplishment, and is now well below the traditional 50 percent level. This requires marine recruiters to focus on finding individuals to ship in the near-term, impacting their time to physically and mentally prepare for the rigors of the transformation process to marine. We are working to grow the start pool, but it is a slow and deliberate process. Re-alignment of recruiters and recruiting assets will help. In keeping with marines' tenet of "exploit success," we are increasing our recruiting force by several hundred recruiters. We will continue to need robust resourcing—to include advertising and modernization funds—to ensure success. We also look forward to the Department's assessment of the medical screening process from the Military Health System GENESIS Task Force with a focus on finding efficiencies and increasing staffing of MEPCOM's medical providers.

What We Are Doing to Address the Challenge

Sustaining Quality. Your enlisted marines are exceptionally talented, skilled, dedicated, and motivated to serve—meeting our high standards; we will never sacrifice this quality. The Marine Corps exceeds Department of Defense (DOD) standards by every measure of quality, and it takes marine recruiters connecting with communities in every zip code to sustain.

Expanding Markets. Marines are the strength of the Corps, and we deliberately and continuously engage young people from the full spectrum of backgrounds, experiences, race and ethnicity, and gender to draw the best talent into our ranks. Over the past decade, racially/ethnically diverse enlisted accessions increased from 34 percent to 57 percent, and the same category of officer accessions more than doubled from 16 percent to 35 percent. Enlisted female accessions remain steady at 9 percent, and female officer accessions have increased to 13 percent.

Adapting Advertising. The Marine Corps advertising program is essential to building awareness among high quality populations that are increasingly unfamiliar with Military Service. Advertising funds repay many times over, producing lower first-term attrition, higher quality marines, and increased readiness. Robust and sustained advertising funding is essential, now more than ever. We are thankful for congressional support to modernize how we recruit in today's increasingly online world.

Where We Need Assistance

National Dialogue on Service. Those who have served in uniform depart the ranks with professionalism, maturity, leadership, and skills that translate well into the civilian workforce. Veterans serve ably in industries, commercial sectors, and government across the Nation, bringing enhanced leadership and an exceptional work ethos back to their communities. However, messaging about service to the country competes within a crowded and fragmented media environment—which often promotes a different narrative. We must challenge the misconceptions and misinformation about Military Service. We must converge at the highest levels and bolster a whole-of-Government national dialog to inform young men and women, and their parents and influencers, about the value of honorable service in uniform and not solely rely on service messaging. We recognize our veterans are a key part of this and we seek to better leverage opportunities like Skillbridge to enhance the dialog on service in and out of uniform.

Access to High Schools. We thank Congress for its continued support for recruiter access to high schools and colleges. The fiscal year 2024 national Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) provided additional timeliness guidelines for recruiter access to directory lists. However, continued vigilance is essential to ensure that recruiters have consistent and quality access to ensure the ability to recruit the best. The single biggest reason we hear from young people for not joining the Corps is that they simply weren't aware of the potential opportunities. Maintaining consistent access to high schools and student directories remains a top priority for ensuring continued opportunity for all qualified individuals to serve. We will certainly come to Congress with new ideas to further improve recruiting.

RETENTION

As a result of Force Design, we shifted from a "recruit and replace" to an "invest and retain" model with immediately positive results. We are in the midst of transitioning to a more experienced enlisted force characterized by increased retention and contract utilization; this will give us the technical and leadership intensive

skills necessary on 21st-century battlefields. At the same time, the Service is increasing investment in quality of life and quality of service initiatives most closely related to the care of and retention of marines and their families. We have implemented five major reforms initiatives: 1) the Commandant's Active and Reserve Retention Program, 2) the extended FTAP retention model 3) the small unit leadership initiatives, 4) promotion allocation fulfillment, 5) Marine Corps Graduate education Program Enlisted pilot. All efforts are focused on sustaining combat readiness by increasing the number of trained, experienced, and deployable marines across the Total Force.

Although recruiting conditions are challenging, once your marines become marines, they want to "stay marine." We had historic retention in fiscal year 2023 and are on track to meet mission again in fiscal year 2024. We are seeing success across demographic groups as well. Enlisted women have been retained at a 5 percent higher proportional rate at both their first re-enlistment and subsequent term re-enlistments when compared to male re-enlistees. Female officers retain higher than their male counterparts at typical decision points which coincide with end of initial contracts, end of obligation due to accepting orders, and retirement eligibility. Despite these successes, the retention environment is competitive. We continue to experience challenges retaining certain communities, like aviation, cyber, and some of our intelligence specialties. Of particular importance is aviation retention. Assessments have shown this must be viewed holistically and cannot be solved by bonuses alone. We are exploring monetary and non-monetary incentives, to include improving aircraft readiness rates and flying hours, and increasing the production pipeline throughput, all of which will support increased operational readiness. We pride ourselves on the ability to develop quality citizens, and a successful transition from uniformed service can be just as important as the initial transformation of becoming a marine. To that end we continue to study transition and support programs as we seek to better balance benefits to the individual against operational requirements of the Corps.

We thank Congress—especially this Subcommittee—for the incentives, flexibilities, and special pays you have authorized. They enable the development of better strategic talent pools and increase access to our talent for longer periods and with more options to better access and match it to warfighting requirements. The current and future environment also necessitates employment of non-traditional approaches, skillsets, and talent management systems to enable the Marine Corps to prevail and win against peer-competitors, while competing with industry and others to attract and inspire the highest quality of individuals to serve. We are studying and implementing many of these as part of Talent Management.

Incentives & Special Pays

We continue to use both monetary and non-monetary incentives to retain, match, and assign marines to billets that are appropriate for their experience and skill. Selective Reenlistment Bonuses for Active and Reserve marines allow shaping specific personnel requirements by targeting critical military occupational specialties and supporting lateral movement of marines to these billets. For fiscal year 2024, we continue to be proactive in the retention campaign by designing complementary monetary and non-monetary incentive packages—tailored to individual marines with unique desires and aspirations.

The Marine Corps has established a Pacific (PAC) Cell to focus solely on improving quality of life and morale for our marines, civilian workforce, and families throughout the strategic Indo-Pacific. The PAC Cell is engaged with those units stationed throughout the Pacific and has solicited feedback directly from them. One idea we are studying is the adequacy of policies regarding shipment and storage of privately owned vehicles for marines stationed overseas. This would improve spouse employment, access to childcare, and other quality of life priorities. We are also considering other monetary and non-monetary incentives to reduce the cost and stress of executing orders to overseas locations for those in uniform and Civilian marines. We thank Congress for your support in marine quality of life and look forward to working with you on any policies that may require legislative action.

Compensation

Competitive compensation is a foundation of the All-Volunteer Force with impacts to both recruiting and retention. Currently, basic pay and accompanying benefits, such as housing, medical care, bonuses and allowances, and tax advantages, are competitive. However, inflation impacts the value of military pay, so we appreciate the 5.2 percent pay raise this year. We must ensure that our marines receive competitive pay and are positioned to be less susceptible to economic volatility. The Department is studying compensation holistically as part of the Quadrennial Review

of Military Compensation, and we are participating in this study and look forward to its results.

Audit

As we invest in new platforms, barracks, and training, it is our responsibility as good stewards of taxpayer funds to continue to prove that when the Corps is provided a taxpayer dollar, we can show exactly where and how it has been invested—a responsibility we take very seriously. Following a rigorous 2-year audit, the Marine Corps achieved an unmodified audit opinion, the best possible outcome—and the first time in the Department of Defense’s history that any service has received an unmodified audit opinion. These results demonstrate how seriously the Marine Corps takes its stewardship of taxpayer funds and our ability to account for and put to best use every dollar trusted to the service. This audit supports what we have believed for a long time—when Congress provides the Marine Corps a dollar, we invest it wisely, and we can tell you exactly where and how it was spent to further our Nation’s national security objectives. The Marine Corps worked with independent public accountants to validate budgetary balances and records and to audit physical assets at installations and bases across the globe. These actions included counting military equipment, buildings, structures, supplies, and ammunition held by the Marine Corps and our DOD Partners. The audit’s favorable opinion was only possible through the support and hard work of numerous dedicated marines, civilian marines, and many other partners across DOD. Nonetheless, we will not rest on our laurels; the audit report pointed out some areas for improvement, and we will use these recommendations to make our fiscal practices even better.

Healthcare

Healthcare remains consistently highlighted by marines and families as a factor in their career retention decisions. Quality healthcare for our marines is the minimum standard and vital to the retention of the force and family. To care for our families, and those who support our service adjacent to our ranks, is also imperative. It is a growing perception that access and quality of medical care is eroding, and it has emerged as a factor in decisions to continue to serve in uniform.

The challenge is particularly acute overseas in locations such as Japan, where network care in the civilian community is not always readily accessible nor at the standard set by the Department of Defense for our marines and their families. The United State Indo-Pacific Command is of heightened strategic importance and access to quality healthcare must be a priority. We look forward to the results of the review of healthcare quality directed in the fiscal year 2024 NDAA.

TALENT MANAGEMENT

Talent Management (TM) is the act of aligning the talents of marines with the needs of the service to maximize the potential of both—increasing Marine Corps combat capability and readiness. It describes a fundamental redesign of our personnel system to maximize the number of fully trained, qualified, experienced, and deployable marines within our Total Force. The overarching goal is to increase Marine Corps combat capability and remain the premier expeditionary force-in-readiness. TM requires that we recruit and retain the best talent, modernize the assignment process consistent with our warfighting philosophy, introduce new measures to increase career flexibility, and utilize modern digital tools, processes, and analytics, with transparency. Throughout this redesign, we remain committed to our high standards that attract young Americans to the Marine Corps and drive warfighting outcomes and the sacrifice, pride, and dedication necessary to achieve the hard-earned title marine. We honor the commitment as new marines arrive in our ranks expecting meaningful and challenging assignments and a culture of professionalism, pride, mutual trust, and respect. Marines are responding to efforts to recognize their talents, and I ask for your continued support of these efforts. Much like the overarching approach to Force Design, TM is a multi-year, Total Force effort—a service-wide strategic design process that we are executing.

Some of our promising talent management initiatives include:

- *Commandant’s Retention Program (CRP)* identifies the most competitive marines and offers them an opportunity to stay a marine via a pre-approved reenlistment. Since introduction in fiscal year 2023, the number of marines selected for CRP increased steadily to over 3,000 marines recently selected for fiscal year 2025. In order to capture the benefits of both Early Reenlistment Authority and CRP, these two programs were combined for fiscal year 2025.
- *Staff Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) Promotion Board Realignment* realigns promotion boards to better sequence the assignment and reenlistment processes to reduce SNCO billet gaps in the fleet and condense the processing time of re-

enlistment packages. The realignment also provides greater predictability for SNCOs and their families while reducing change of stations moves affecting families during the school year.

- *Special Duty Assignment (SDA)* Volunteer Program expansion allows marine volunteers to provide duty station preference for volunteer recruiters, drill instructors, and combat instructors. This program increased volunteers by 62 percent, which reduces involuntary screenings and improves morale and retention.
- *Direct Affiliation Program (DAP)* affords qualified Active component marines the opportunity to seamlessly transition to the Reserve component with no break in service. This program also provides numerous benefits not offered to traditional Reserve accessions from the Individual Ready Reserve to include bonuses of up to \$25,000 for a 3-year drilling commitment.
- Increasing Lateral Movement allows marines to follow their career goals, while staying in the Marine Corps family. To ensure the even distribution of retained talent across the force, we will continue incentivizing lateral move opportunities for qualified marines by reducing administrative barriers to lateral moves and offering targeted bonuses for high-demand, low-density skills.

Other initiatives in development:

- *Improving MOS assignment.* We are developing a better, more predictive, data-driven matching tool that will optimally align applicant interest, Primary Military Occupational Specialty (PMOS) skill requirements, and the needs of the Marine Corps. Using this new Marine Corps Occupational SkillsMatching (MCOSM) tool for enlisted marines, we will better align interests and talents with the needs of the Service. Potential applications for MCOSM extend beyond accessions, and we plan to utilize it to assist in PMOS classifications and career retention.
- *Retention Prediction Network (RPN).* We are currently developing the RPN, a program used to identify potential recruit's likelihood to enlist and continue to serve through their first enlistment and beyond. RPN was a multi-year collaborative effort with academia that harnessed vast quantities of manpower data to provide data-informed talent management decisions. The objective is to better recruit individuals with attributes aligned with becoming marines.
- *Talent Marketplace.* The Talent Management Engagement Portal (TMEP) will modernize the current assignments system with a Total Force, transparent, data-based environment that allows marines, commands, and duty assignment professionals to collaborate on the assignments process. At full implementation, TMEP is envisioned to utilize advanced analytics supported by artificial intelligence and machine learning elements to enable a market-style assignment system. It will allow for more informed decisions throughout a marine's career, providing data on factors including billet availability, assignment desirability, family considerations and potential career paths.
- *Promotion Opt Out* allows officers to opt out of promotion without penalty and enables them to complete a broadening assignment, advanced education, career progression requirement, or other assignment. We implemented this authority in calendar year 2022 and we will continue to assess program efficacy and measure the impacts on the deliberate development of our leaders.
- *Marine Corps Graduate Education Program—Enlisted* has opened attendance at the Naval Post-Graduate School (NPS) to selected enlisted marines to earn a master's degree in specific programs. Six highly qualified enlisted marines were selected for the initial and second cohort and will be ready for assignment later this year or next depending on degree received.

The talent management success thus far is dependent on modern technology systems, and we are working toward modernizing the IT portfolio and consolidating older, disparate systems into a small subset of interoperable, multi-faceted applications that ride on a single IT system hosted in the cloud. Cloud migration allows IT efficiencies and effectively scaled applications, data bases, and services across the enterprise to meet emergent requirements in a dynamic environment. As we migrate to the cloud, we will be able to optimize and capitalize on the promise of artificial intelligence and machine learning. An area of interest and future support is acquisition authority for software development and update. Our vision of cloud-based, application-accessible platforms must move at the "speed of relevance." The goal is to have modern technology with increased capabilities to enable the management of marines' careers.

Building Strong Teams

The United States Marine Corps is a notable example of a meritocratic institution. The Corps takes pride in commitment to recognizing and rewarding excellence among its ranks in a fair, transparent, and methodical way. Whether it is accessing,

assigning, promoting, awarding, or retaining marines, we remain dedicated to merit-based treatment of warriors. To remain the most ready and lethal force, we capitalize on the knowledge, skills, abilities, performance, and potential of every marine, and provide each marine the same opportunity for success on their merits.

Since 2010, racially/ethnically diverse enlisted accessions have increased from 34 percent to 57 percent and similar officer accessions have increased from 16 percent to 35 percent. Women serving in combat arms units are continuing to increase. Currently, nearly 20 percent of Brigadier Generals and Brigadier General selects are of diverse racial, ethnic or gender background. We remain committed to efforts to reach out to every segment of this Nation to find those patriotic youth inspired to become a marine.

TAKING CARE OF MARINES AND THEIR FAMILIES

Fighting effectiveness is not just built on unit training; it is also built on trust and maintained with a marine's support structure at home and in their communities. Marines rely on the institution to provide them and their families with stability. To that end, we recognize the importance of marine and family predictability and support it as a major line-of-effort for successfully achieving our talent management goals and combat readiness.

Marine Corps Total Fitness. The Marine Corps is promoting and strengthening support of Marine Corps Total Fitness (MCTF) across the enterprise. MCTF is a framework for optimizing human performance, mission readiness, and resilience that emphasizes four primary domains: Mental, physical, spiritual, and social. The goals of MCTF align with the Marine Corps integrated primary prevention efforts to improve overall wellness and resilience for marines and families. We are developing Warrior Athlete Readiness and Resilience (WARR) centers that will consolidate health, wellness, prevention, and performance capabilities. We seek enhanced coping and resiliency skills through stress identification and mitigation, positive psychology informed approaches to relationships and parenting, and peer-to-peer mentorship. Thus far, WARR centers have opened at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twenty nine Palms, with others in the works. We appreciate Congress' support of this initiative to promote the performance and resiliency of the Corps and our families.

Family Support

Permanent Change of Station (PCS) Flexibility. The Marine Corps continues to prioritize stability for units and reduce the stress placed on marine and their families. PCS moves, while essential, can be disruptive. Since 2016, we have reduced PCS moves by utilizing Permanent Change of Assignment (PCA) orders more often. Through TM, we seek to further increase PCS flexibility, balancing it with both the needs of the individual marine's career, their family, and the service.

Childcare. High quality childcare is one of the many important child and youth programs we offer. It is a readiness priority for the Marine Corps. Our CDCs currently serve more than 30,000 children, and we have wait lists for less than 1,000 children, primarily at Camp Pendleton, Hawaii, Quantico, and Camp Lejeune/New River.

While wait lists are caused by a variety of factors, we share the national challenge of employee turnover rates. We are addressing childcare wait list issues through emphasis on hiring efforts and a non-competitive childcare employee transfer program. We added over \$100 million to the Child and Youth Program portfolio beginning fiscal year 2023 through 2027 to hire more employees at increased wages to help retain a professional workforce. Our average CDC employee salary is now higher than those outside the gate at most installations, and direct care employees are also offered priority placement and a childcare fee discount. Many of our CDC employees are marine spouses, which contributes to annual turnover due to PCS. To address this challenge, we have implemented a CDC employee non-competitive transfer program to enable employees to transfer from their current position to one at a different installation with ease. This has provided dividends, allowing retention of more than 180 spouse employees we may have otherwise lost. As a result of these efforts, current CDC employee turnover rate is 20 percent, considerably less than the 34 percent rate last year.

We also offer childcare fee assistance for eligible marines who are assigned to an installation with a significant wait list. Over the last three fiscal years, the rate of fee assistance utilization has increased steadily for both community-based childcare providers as well as children served. In Fiscal Year 2023, over 1,600 children were enrolled in the fee assistance program at over 620 community-based providers, at a total cost of \$6.1 million. We recently increased the maximum amount of fee as-

sistance, which will undoubtedly help our marine families, especially those in high-cost areas.

Spouse Employment. Spouse employment is also important for many Marine Corps families and can be a significant factor in their financial security, readiness, and retention. Family Member Employment Assistance Program is available at each Marine Corps installation and provides employment related referral services, career and skill assessments, career coaching, job search guidance, portable career opportunities, and education center referrals/guidance. We also reimburse eligible marine spouses up to \$1,000 for State licensure and certification costs arising from relocation to another State. We appreciate Congress' recent expansion of this program and continued support.

Sexual Assault / Sexual Harassment

Sexual assault is a crime—these behaviors are antithetical to our culture of honor, courage, and commitment, and respect. The Marine Corps Sexual Assault Prevention & Response program's (SAPR) goal is to counter sexual assaults before they occur and to provide services for those affected by these crimes. We continue to encourage prevention, reporting, investigation, and prosecution of these criminal behaviors to our fullest extent. Through rigorous implementation of the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC-SAM)'s recommendations as approved by the Secretary of Defense, we are striving to increase prevention and stop sexual assaults before they occur. We will also remain steadfast in holding perpetrators appropriately accountable for their crimes, and commanders and senior enlisted leaders for the climate of their unit.

We aim to identify and prevent harmful behaviors by training and educating marines from a holistic wellness approach of mental, physical, spiritual, and social influence through the Marine Corps Total Force Fitness Program. SAPR services have also been expanded to victims of sexual harassment.

We continue to professionalize the SAPR workforce by hiring full-time employees in support of the approved IRC-SAM recommendations and prevention efforts. The Marine Corps implementation plan includes more than 350 new civilian hires in fiscal year 2024, and a total of over 800 positions hired by fiscal year 2027 across multiple prevention and response programs. This workforce expansion builds upon the Prevention Plan of Action. Hiring this number of personnel has illustrated the need for additional staffing for Human Resources Offices and methods to expedite the Federal hiring process. The remote location of several Marine Corps installations adds to the challenge in hiring these professionals. We appreciate Congress' support as we continue these efforts.

As of December 2023, the Office of the Special Trial Counsel is fully staffed and operational worldwide. This office will professionalize prosecution of special victim offenses and strengthen victims' confidence in the military justice system by enabling independent special trial counsel to assume prosecutorial discretion over sexual assault, domestic violence, and other covered offenses. Beyond our accountability efforts, we have implemented a modernized and targeted training approach, particularly at entry-level training, to ensure all marines are educated on standards of respect and care for their fellow marines.

Suicide Prevention

The loss of a marine to suicide hurts deeply. The Marine Corps continues efforts to reduce suicides through recent Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC) recommendations, implementation of Marine Corps Total Fitness concept, and with our integrated and comprehensive efforts across four prevention lines of effort.

Prevention & Skill-building. Unit Marine Awareness and Prevention Integrated Training (UMAPIT) and Operational Stress Control and Readiness training focus on primary prevention and early intervention basics. The Prevention in Action training for leaders and stakeholders provides a comprehensive approach to prevention. We seek enhanced coping and resiliency skills through stress identification and mitigation, positive psychology informed approaches to relationships and parenting, and peer-to-peer mentorship.

Application of Data & Research. An internal review board continues to identify key themes and provide actionable information. The data indicates that age, relationship distress, substance misuse, and access to lethal means are the most frequently observed factors among marines. Based on these findings, the Marine Corps has worked to amplify marines' knowledge and skills that sustain healthy relationships. It is also essential to help marines struggling with substance misuse as early as possible to get them the help needed.

Communication. The Marine Corps continues to develop tools and refine communication approaches to provide more resources in the hands of leaders and marines at all levels. We are actively implementing Brandon Act features, which ensure marines are educated on all options to seek care, including the option to voluntarily seek help through an officer or staff NCO supervisor and initiate a referral for a mental health evaluation. In alignment with national strategies, messaging promotes and reinforces help-seeking and self-improvement, while reducing stigma. Our focus is on exposing marines and families to available services to help navigate the stressors of life, supporting command and leadership, and encouraging positive resolution of conflict—both internal and external. An integrated prevention approach is our vision—newly released policy, resources, and new Suicide Prevention Program Coordinators are streamlining communication and outreach.

Collaboration. The Marine Corps synchronizes with Navy mental health services regularly to improve access to care and seamless transitions between services. Building on lessons learned through our implementation of IRC-SAM recommendations as approved by the Secretary of Defense, we are implementing Prevention Plan of Action 2.0, which integrates prevention of harmful behaviors linked to suicide risk, sexual assault, and other harmful behaviors. The holistic approach of Prevent Plan of

Action 2.0 will allow an overall wellness strategy that will measurably improve outcomes in concert with Marine Corps Total Fitness.

As we strive to reduce suicides, it is important to acknowledge that even with full access to help decided not to pursue it. Part of our effort will always be to get every marine to use the care and services offered—and we need to make sure that mental health care is easily accessible. Compounding issues like nation-wide shortages of healthcare personnel and providers have created a significant problem for accessing healthcare, especially in more remote locations like Okinawa or Twenty nine Palms, which impacts operational readiness. We recognize this as a problem that needs constant attention, assessment, and action.

CONCLUSION

Our highest priority and primary objective remain recruiting, developing, and retaining elite warriors in the highest State of combat readiness to support and defend this great nation. Every recruiting, retention, and talent management initiative that we undertake must demonstrably and logically contribute to readiness and lethality.

The challenges to accomplishing recruiting, retention, and talent management goals are known. We continue to recruit the best of our Nation's youth to serve and incentivize the call to service to sustain our warfighting ethos and excellence, culture of performance and belonging. We must do so in an environment that has shown declining propensity and eligibility to serve. Our measure of success is a Marine Corps with improved performance and lethality in combat which enables us to fulfill your congressional mandate to be 'most ready when the Nation is least ready,' today and on the battlefields of the future. Today, we stand ready to do exactly that.

Semper Fidelis.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Lieutenant General Glynn. I appreciate those comments. Lieutenant General Miller.

STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL CAROLINE M. MILLER, USAF, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF FOR MANPOWER, PERSONNEL, AND SERVICES, A1, UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

Lieutenant General MILLER. Yes, Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. I am honored to have the opportunity to appear before you with my fellow service personnel colleagues.

The Department of the Air Force is committed to ensuring we are postured to deter, and if necessary, prevail in an era of great power competition against two sophisticated peer competitors, the People's Republic of China and Russia. To maintain our competitive advantage it is imperative we continue to grow and sustain the force we need today and in the future. We are dedicated to developing airmen with specialized skills for strategic solutions and creating alternative career paths focused on technical expertise, to in-

clude reestablishing warrant officers and develop specialized technical tracks.

We have established human capital management guiding principles for our civilian workforce to focus on our priorities in talent acquisitions and foster agility and innovation. These efforts enable our forces to better adapt to an evolving and uncertain future.

To assist in identifying and retaining our talented performers, we continue to transform our legacy human resource information technology systems. For the first time in Department history, we administered the Weighted Airman Promotion System electronically in February, and successfully implemented a complete overhaul of our officer and enlisted performance evaluation systems to ensure we capture performance characteristics critically important to define, develop, and incentivize our airmen.

We continue to focus on retaining our rated force and have two Active Duty aviation bonus programs implemented in fiscal year 2023, the Expedited Aviator Retention Incentive and the Demonstration Bonus, the Demo. Although implemented late in the year, both programs proved to be highly effective, retaining an additional 380 pilots compared to the previous years.

While those numbers are encouraging, the Air Force has experienced a slight decrease in retention rate, which we are countering with increasing recruiting effort and quality-of-life initiatives. The regular Air Force remains on track to meet our fiscal year 2024 recruiting goal of 27.2 thousand personnel, but we will be short slightly of our end strength.

Our force management programs have increased our recruiting pool and positively impacted our overall recruiting numbers. Our commitment to quality-of-life initiatives for military members, their spouses, and families remains strong. Available, affordable, and quality childcare remains a critical readiness factor, as does spouse employment. I am looking forward to sharing our many successes in these and other quality-of-life efforts with you today.

We have also focused significant efforts to build resilience within the force. Across the Department, we initiated the Wingman Guardian Connect Instruction Program, targeting first-term enlisted airmen and guardians. The initial pilot showed a significant increase in social connections, a decrease in causes of depression and suicide risks.

As the Department of the Air Force looks to the future to maintain our competitive advantage and reoptimize for the great power competition, we remain committed to recruit, retain, and develop our most critical weapons system, our airmen. I am excited to share our successes with you today, and look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Lieutenant General Caroline M. Miller follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT BY LIEUTENANT GENERAL CAROLINE M. MILLER

INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and for your continued support. I am honored to share the United States Air Force's continuing

efforts to build and maintain critical airmen readiness across the human resources portfolio.

As the Department of the Air Force (DAF) looks to the future, readiness stands as the cornerstone of our mission. In today's dynamic landscape, readiness goes beyond our platforms, lethality of our pilots and the number of weapons in our inventory; arguably, the most important critical factor to readiness is our human weapon system: our airmen.

Cultivating the next generation of airmen through enhanced talent management initiatives is our top priority. Through innovative programs such as the Pathfinder Program, technical tracks and the civilian program STELLAR FORCE 2030, the USAF will foster specialized expertise and promote a culture of continuous learning. We must maintain optimal end strength, aligning manpower to future force structures and modernization efforts. Additionally, we continue to analyze and refine recruitment & retention strategies and accession standards, adapting to evolving demographic and societal trends while maintaining our commitment to excellence across all facets of our force structure.

The DAF also continues to strengthen a resilient and adaptable force. Our comprehensive approach reflects our unwavering dedication to care and support for airmen, guardians and their families, ensuring they are equipped to thrive in an ever-changing landscape while upholding mission readiness and success.

Our Force Now and for the Future: To ensure readiness, we must have a robust, dynamic, well-developed and technically proficient Total Force encompassing Active Duty, Reservists, Air National Guardsmen and civilians prepared for any peer adversary.

GROW THE FUTURE AIRMAN

It is imperative that we continue to grow the future force we need to prevail against our peer competitors, China and Russia. We are dedicated to developing airmen with specialized skills for strategic solutions and creating alternate career paths focused on technical expertise.

The Pathfinder Program, initiated by the Secretary of the Air Force and propelled by General Allvin during his tenure as the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, cultivates airmen with distinctive expertise, able to devise transformative solutions to enhance the Air Force's competitive edge. This initiative is designed to find and cultivate talent among our officer, enlisted and civilian corps, unbound by traditional career paths. These uniquely skilled and innovative airmen will focus on strategic Air Force priorities while maintaining current functional expertise. We selected the first cohort in 2023 to work on complex problems throughout the enterprise.

We implemented the officer technical track this year: a small cohort of Cyberspace Operations officers focused on strengthening specialized expertise in emerging technology. The first cohort all have assignments for summer of 2024 at which time they will hone their technical expertise, focusing on mission accomplishment and leading operational-level technical missions. In addition to this small cohort, we are expanding officer technical tracks in other critical areas to support the re-optimization for Great Power Competition efforts and analyzing data to determine feasibility of enlisted technical tracks.

The DAF is also applying principles of learning engineering to optimize force development. We continue to capitalize on technological advances to make training more effective and efficient. The Air Education and Training Command is using the Maintenance Operations Training Augmented Reality (MOTAR) program to bring virtual reality "game-like" training solutions to Ready Airmen Training. Virtual Reality environments complement and supplement limited hands-on equipment, such as aircraft engines, allowing airmen to gain increased touch time when the physical engine is occupied by other students.

Furthermore, our leader development courses are using Leading Inclusively Virtual Experience (LIVE) to provide a virtual simulated experience, including scenarios for leaders to train and practice human interactions. We continue to explore Artificial Intelligence tools in the Human Capital domain to augment data-driven decisions and enhance—not replace—military judgment to develop our airmen.

DELIBERATELY MANAGE AIR FORCE TALENT

Talent management is the cornerstone to develop the force we need. We have successfully implemented a complete overhaul of our Officer and Enlisted Performance Evaluation Systems. We aligned our evaluations with Airman Leadership Qualities, representing performance characteristics critically important to define, develop, incentivize and measure our airmen. Our goal is to develop mission-focused airmen

and reinforce the behaviors valued by the Air Force across all enlisted and officer ranks. We have already realized positive results of these changes across the force.

In the fall, we conducted a beta test to standardize qualitative feedback for airmen meeting their Squadron Command board. This initiative, recommended by the Independent Review Commission, was directed to better assess airmen into Command positions. The hiring authorities were required to review qualitative data and conduct interviews prior to selection for key leadership positions. The success of the test also provided information to identify developmental opportunities. The new process was approved for implementation starting in September 2024.

We continue to focus on Coaching and Mentoring, recognizing the importance of creating an enterprise in which a coaching culture is the norm. To increase internal DAF coaches, we have extended our contracts with reputable private-sector coaching entities and through International Coaching Federation-accredited coach training. Our desired end State is to have airmen who understand, value and use formal and/or informal coaching to enhance the development of DAF professionals in support of our mission.

CIVILIAN TALENT MANAGEMENT

To maintain our competitive advantage, we must acquire and retain civilian talent. This year, the DAF established Human Capital Management Guiding Principles to focus on our priorities in talent acquisitions and foster agility and innovation. The principles are: Recognize the Civilian Force as Integral to the Total Force, Prioritize Capability, Relentless Pursuit of Competitive Advantage, Enable DAF Leadership Vision, Embrace IT Modernization, Collaborate Across Services, Uphold Professional Standards, Prioritize airmen and families' well-being and promote diversity. These guiding principles will bolster the strength of our civilian workforce to enhance DAF readiness and competitiveness.

The guiding principles are the foundation for the DAF STELLAR FORCE 2030 initiative. This initiative aims to revolutionize civilian talent management practices by harnessing collective knowledge and expertise to drive meaningful improvements in talent acquisition, development and retention. STELLAR FORCE 2030 is a call to innovate across the DAF, encouraging the human resource community and functional communities to submit proposals and ideas to enhance civilian talent management. We are collaborating with the Department of Defense and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to develop new policies to enable more effective civilian talent management.

We continue to focus our attention in the air operations community to pursue enhanced mission responsiveness. Our efforts include working with OPM to revise classification and qualification standards for pilot and simulator instructor trainees, seeking to improve the recruitment of new pilots. This will enhance competitiveness and remove outdated criteria that hinder our ability to attract and retain personnel.

END STRENGTH

The Air Force end-strength strategy must address crucial gaps in our warfighting capabilities, thereby enhancing our ability to meet the strategic challenges in a time of Great Power Competition (GPC). We actively seek opportunities to divest capabilities not aligned with this challenge, focusing instead on bolstering capabilities crucial for executing the National Defense Strategy and GPC optimization. Moreover, our end-strength strategy emphasizes that we have the optimal mix of skilled personnel in the appropriate roles and at the right time, thus enhancing our readiness and agility in this dynamic strategic landscape.

Our fiscal year 2025 Total Force end strength facilitates the human capital strategy to support future force structure including modernization in programs such as the B-21 Raider, KC-46A, F-35 and Electronic Warfare Integrated program. We continue to strategically divest legacy platforms to redirect manpower to critical modern aircraft and platforms required to win in the new competitive environment. Taking near-term measured risks allows us to ensure critical operations capabilities and future functions to support GPC.

The 494,700 Total Force end strength represents the airmen we need right now to continue to execute current missions, while we also plan for and begin to transition to the force of the future.

RECRUITING

Fiscal year 2023 was a challenging recruiting year; for the first time in 24 years, we did not meet recruiting goals in the Active Duty, Guard and Reserve. We examined our internal accession requirement policies: tattoos, body composition, drug testing, etc., to determine opportunities to reach the current population. Propensity

to serve remains historically low, hovering between 9 and 12 percent. Additionally, those who have a parent who served are more likely to join and this number has declined from 40 percent in 1995 to just 12 percent in 2022. To ensure policies keep pace with the changing generation, DAF initiated a Barriers to Service working group to holistically review our policies. The group identified 19 accession policies that we have updated, providing approximately 6,800 people the opportunity to serve their country as airmen. The quality of recruits has remained unchanged with 80 percent of recruits in the 1–3A Category (scoring 50 or above on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB)) and our Active component has accepted no recruits in Category 4 (scoring 30 or lower on the ASVAB).

With these policy modifications, we are cautiously optimistic we will meet fiscal year 2024 recruiting goals. We established the fiscal year 2024 Active Duty enlisted recruiting goal at 26,000; the ANG goal at 8,494; and the AFR goal at 5,700. For Active Duty, in response to observed declines in current year retention averages and to help offset potential future retention trend declines, we recently increased the recruiting goal by 1,200 (from 26,000 to 27,200). The change is part of a larger force management strategy that involves additional retention programs designed to deliver the right number of airmen to match future force structure within authorized end strength throughout the FYDP.

Additionally, our goal is to add a total of 3,534 new officers from all accession sources across the Total Force. Five months into the fiscal year, we are experiencing positive trends. The Active Duty Air Force continues to meet its monthly enlisted and officer accession goals and is over 12 percent higher than the same time last year. The Reserve component is also meeting its enlisted accession goal, a full 36 percent higher than last year. Reserve officer accession is currently below its year-to-date goal; however, it is 6.3 percent higher than last year. Finally, while the ANG is not currently meeting its year-to-date enlisted and officer recruitment goals, they are seeing approximately 15 percent gains over last year.

Overall, the Air Force recruiting program is healthy, measured by how far in the future we are filling and the size of our Delayed Entry Program (DEP). We are currently filling slots 2 to 2.5 months in the future and rebuilding our DEP from 4,600 in the beginning of fiscal year 2023 to current rate of 8,900. Overall, we see no reason why the positive recruiting trends will not continue throughout the rest of the year.

RETENTION

As the US Air Force shifts toward a more modernized model of warfighting, retaining our talented airmen is a priority. Officer and enlisted personnel retention rates continue to decline—less than a percentage point per year—however, this is not unexpected, as they normalize to pre-COVID historical average rates. We are actively implementing programs to manage the force to our desired retention levels and remain committed to an optimal balance of officers and enlisted personnel across a range of functions in response to the demands of a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

The Air Force continues to offer targeted monetary incentives to address retention challenges. This year, we are expanding our Selective Retention Bonus (SRB) program for an additional 19 jobs in fiscal year 2024. SRB targets capabilities in the enlisted Air Force Specialty Codes with low manning percentages and high training costs such as special warfare, aircraft maintenance, cyber and intelligence, surveillance & reconnaissance. For fiscal year 2024, we programed \$172 million to incentivize retention and are planning on maintaining the \$172 million amount for fiscal year 2025.

Additionally, we are continuing our two Active-Duty Aviation Bonus (AVB) programs: the fiscal year 2024 Experienced Aviator Retention Incentive (EARI) and the fiscal year 2024 Demonstration Bonus (Demo). The two AVB programs have been highly effective; in fiscal year 2023 we retained an additional 380 pilots compared to previous years when only the legacy bonus program was offered. The financial analysis of the fiscal year 2023 Demo program indicates a positive return on investment. The Air Force spends \$40 million per pilot in training and retention costs to develop 10-year experienced pilots while the cost of the fiscal year 2023 Demo program was an additional \$52.3 million to retain the additional pilots.

FORCE RESILIENCE

The DAF places a high priority on the well-being of its airmen, guardians, and families as they are our most significant competitive advantage. We continually assess our family programs to modernize existing services, introduce new solutions and innovate to address evolving priorities. The DAF ensures individuals seeking

assistance for financial, transitional or health issues are viewed as a positive sign of resilience. The Air Force is dedicated to supporting families by providing tailored support and resources, including economic security, childcare and spouse employment. Additionally, we are dedicated to the prevention of harmful behaviors including sexual assault, harassment, retaliation, domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect, and suicide through addressing risk and protective factors that influence the likelihood of those behaviors. Through these multifaceted efforts, the DAF seeks to cultivate a supportive environment where airmen, guardians and their families can thrive, ensuring mission readiness and success.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

We appreciate your support through the fiscal year 2024 NDAA Basic Pay, Basic Allowance for Housing and Subsistence increases. The Basic Allowance for Housing increase provides much needed relief in these challenging economic times.

We believe we have a competitively compensated force; however, our increasingly educated and skilled enlisted corps demands we continue to evaluate their compensation structure. We look forward to the 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC) results, due to be completed by January 2025. As we are awaiting results, the DAF finalized several initiatives which helped off-set the additional costs associated with military life. In fiscal year 2023, we restored Special Duty Assignment Pay, funding it at \$93.4 million in fiscal year 2023, \$95.2 million in fiscal year 2024 and an estimated \$91.3 million for fiscal year 2025. We increased the temporary lodging expense reimbursement from 10 to 14 days for CONUS Permanent Change of Station (PCS) and from 5 to 7 days for OCONUS PCS and increased Dislocation Allowance for E-1 through E-6. While this added an additional \$18.3 million to our fiscal year 2025 budget request, it is necessary to ensure the financial security of our servicemembers during PCS moves.

The DAF was the first Service to implement the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) in January 2023 to address the needs of our most at-risk airmen. Paid to airmen with a gross total household income of 150 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines (FPG) or less, the typical BNA recipient is a married E-4 with six or more dependents receiving an average \$1,687 per month. Currently, 37 airmen are receiving BNA; with 44 airmen receiving the allowance since its inception. The DAF requested \$40.3 million in the fiscal year 2025 President's Budget, attributed to the anticipated increase in potentially eligible servicemembers when the fiscal year 2025 legislative proposal proposed by the Administration is enacted to include servicemembers below 200 percent of FPG. The DAF identified approximately 1,400 servicemembers potentially eligible based on their military compensation alone. We anticipate the final figures will be lower once total family household income is determined.

The DAF diligently continues to address the financial requirements of our servicemembers. The Air Force's Military and Family Readiness Centers (M&FRC) are the on-base servicemember and family touchpoint providing education, counseling and referral services to families with economic and food security concerns. We started enterprise-level tracking in August 2021—M&FRCs received 345 visits for food insecurity, 50 percent of which occurred in fiscal year 2023. In addition to our M&FRCs, our command teams and First Sergeants network continue to be incredibly valuable resources for our struggling families. They assist in locating available sources to include the Air Force Aid Society, which provided \$279,346 in food assistance to 1,347 servicemembers.

CHILD AND YOUTH PROGRAMS

In addition to economic security, childcare is one of the most critical issues for servicemembers and their families. Available, affordable, quality child care programs are critical to support families, enable our servicemembers to focus on the mission, and have direct readiness and retention impacts. Child care is a critical strategic priority for the Department and our PB25 submission focuses on the recruitment and retention of the child care workforce through efforts targeting compensation and structure of the workforce.

In 2023, the DAF Child and Youth Programs (CYP) provided care or support to 52,061 children. These programs include DAF-operated Child Development Centers (CDC), DAF-certified Family Childcare (FCC) providers, Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) community-based fee assistance and several DAF/DoD pilot programs.

The DAF addresses the availability and delivery of CYPs with targeted efforts to maximize available childcare options, expand childcare capacity, increase DAF

childcare program awareness and leverage customer feedback to determine needs as outlined in the DAF 2021 Childcare Strategic Plan.

The unmet child care needs waitlist is trending favorably down, decreasing between 25 and 33 percent, back to pre-COVID levels. The unmet needs waitlist consists of children who were not placed in care the day after care was needed, with approximately 3,700 children on that list currently awaiting placement at a DAF CDC or FCC program. The average wait across all priority categories is 137 days, with single/dual military families waiting an average of 62 days for placement.

The DAF experienced post-pandemic childcare staffing shortages as did the entire childcare industry. Direct care staffing rates at DAF CDCs fell to 65 percent in July 2022, resulting in critical room closures, increased wait times and families struggling to secure care. During fiscal year 2023, the DAF continued offering monetary and non-monetary incentives to attract and retain direct care staff—the most popular being the 100 percent child care fee discount for the first child of direct-care staff. Additional children of direct-care staff and non-direct-care staff receive a 25 percent tuition discount. Additional staff incentives included retention bonuses, employee referral bonuses and tuition assistance. The DAF has experienced steady growth in CDC staffing rates since July 2022, from 65 percent in July 2022 to 80 percent by October 2023. Our staffing levels remain robust, ranging from 79 percent to 81 percent, reflecting our collective efforts and commitment to ensure the highest quality of care is provided. Approximately 3 percent (\$15M) of the Child and Youth Program fiscal year 2025 budget request is earmarked for staffing initiatives to continue providing the highest quality of care.

We are also focused on our FCC provider program. The FCC caregivers are the primary delivery system for expanded care needs for members whose child care needs are outside of the traditional model such as 24/7 duty, shift work, part-time/hourly and specialized care options. We used targeted FCC recruitment and retention incentives, resulting in an increase of our program to 435 homes at 61 installations, up 14 percent from fiscal year 2022.

Another program is the MCCYN program. This provides fee assistance to servicemembers who are not located near base-care options or where base space is unavailable. In fiscal year 2023, \$28.1 million supported 6,700 DAF children at community-based child care centers across the country. For fiscal year 2024, we requested \$30.4 million; in fiscal year 2025, we increased our request to \$31.5M. Continued investment in our providers, facilities and programs is essential to grow the availability of quality and affordable childcare services for our families and ensure the health of the CYP.

Dedicated Military Construction (MILCON) projects and Facility Sustainment, Restoration & Modernization (FSRM) funds are as critical as staffing initiatives and fee assistance. We are grateful for the fiscal year 2022 and fiscal year 2023 appropriations for nine MILCON projects at JBASA-Lackland, Sheppard AFB, JBASA-Fort Sam Houston, RAF Lakenheath, Osan AB (Host-Nation funded), JBASA-Randolph, Scott AFB and two projects at Wright-Patterson AFB, as well as additional Planning & Design funding and additional funding for four Cost to Completes. The fiscal year 2024 NDAA-authorized amounts included a Cost-to-Complete request (\$20M) for the CDC at JBASA-Lackland, authorized and appropriated in fiscal year 2022, and a net-zero facility CDC at Hanscom AFB (\$37M). In the June 2023 update to the Child and Youth Facility Master Plan, the DAF identified 35 CDC requirements, including 11 MILCON projects totaling \$367.4M, which are authorized and appropriated. Currently, an additional 11 projects are in the design phase and a final 12 projects are in the planning phase.

The DAF is addressing child care facility condition concerns with FSRM funding. In fiscal year 2024, we set aside \$46 million in focused FSRM funding for 11 CDC projects. In fiscal year 2025, we are targeting to increase to \$50 million for focused investment in CDCs. Additionally, installations receive discretionary sustainment funding for routine preventative maintenance and repair for facility projects with costs below the thresholds for centralized funding. Finally, there are additional projects executed under a Non-Appropriated Funds memorandum of agreement totaling \$27.85M, including CDCs at Grand Forks AFB (\$8.1M), Hurlburt Field (\$3.41M), McConnell AFB (\$8.5M) and Altus AFB (\$7.85M).

SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT

Spouse employment is a critical element to family resilience, financial readiness, quality of life, retention and mission success. Military spouse unemployment rate remains at 21 percent—significantly higher than the 3.9 percent country-wide unemployment rate published by the Bureau of Labor and Statistics. The unemployment rate for spouses of enlisted airmen is 4 percent higher than spouses of officers

with the highest unemployment rate among spouses of airmen in the ranks of E-1 to E-4 (26 percent). There are multiple factors impacting spouse employment to include local CONUS job markets, transferring State licensures/certifications, overseas employment & telework restrictions for spouses overseas and the cost & availability of childcare.

The DAF relies on a variety of initiatives to counter spouse employment issues and contribute to our families' economic security. The M&FRC serves as a connector to extensive DAF and DOD resources to assist with spouse employment and has been instrumental to assist 43 DAF spouse education/career courses. Additionally, in fiscal year 2022, the Military Licensure Reimbursement program was initiated, followed by the Spouse Small Business Reimbursement Program in 2023, in which relocation costs up to \$1000 are reimbursed. In the fiscal year 2025 budget request, the DAF has set aside \$2 million for both programs to offset the cost of PCS moves on spouses and encourage continued spouse employment. Other initiatives include the Military Spouse Employment Partnership and My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA), which assist Active-Duty military spouses in obtaining a license, certification or associate degree necessary to gain employment in an occupational career. The Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP), launched in December 2022, provides Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve spouses with a 12-week paid fellowship program with industry, blending professional development, networking and hands-on experience. The pilot lasts for 3 years; to date, 425 spouses have been placed into fellowships with 85 percent of fellows offered follow-on employment with an average starting salary of \$67,000.

COMBATting SEXUAL ASSAULT & SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The DAF strategy to address sexual assault and harassment is a multidisciplinary approach focusing on prevention, response and accountability. We focus on the entire continuum of harm—addressing reports of sexual assault and harassment and associated experiences of retaliation to maintain the ready, diverse and lethal force required to defend our Nation. This approach includes a wide range of policies, programs and training reinforcing the DAF commitment to counter sexual assault, thereby enhancing accountability, prevention, climate & culture, and victim care & support. The DAF recognizes we have more work to accomplish to detect changes in climate and educate commanders on the impact of harmful behaviors on victims and how a holistic climate & culture is critical to mission readiness. We must identify individual and environmental factors responsible for creating toxic conditions that degrade our culture of care. We continue to address training efficacy to equip leaders at all levels to promote a positive unit climate and cultivate environments that protect airmen and guardians from sexual assault, sexual harassment and retaliation.

The DAF continues to work on implementing the DOD's four-tiered roadmap for the approved recommendations of the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC-SAM). On 27 December 2023, we reached full operational capability of our Office of Special Trial Counsel (OSTC) to oversee the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault and other covered offenses. The DAF published updated Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) policy with changes for best practices regarding: Restricted (confidential) and Unrestricted Reporting options; SAPR victim advocacy services for DAF servicemembers experiencing military sexual harassment; Installation Commander roles and responsibilities related to SAPR program location and office requirements; convalescent leave options for victims of sexual assault; and Safe-to-Report policy changes. By integrating IRC-SAM recommendations, as approved by the Secretary of Defense, we are reaffirming to all airmen and guardians that we are striving to counter sexual assault by fostering an equitable culture of dignity and mutual respect.

The IRC-SAM recommendations, as approved by the Secretary of Defense, also led to the co-location of support agencies, coined the "connect to care" collaborative approach. Centralizing the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator, SAPR Victim Advocate supporting sexual harassment advocacy, Domestic Abuse Victim Advocate, Victim's Counsel and Religious Support Teams improves the ease of access when coordinating victim support. The pilot program launched by the DAF at six installations between August 2022 and January 2023 reported a 22 percent increase in collaboration, coordination, consistency, awareness and access since the start of the pilot. The success was codified into policy and is being implemented DAF-wide. Another training effort is the launch of the Integrated Prevention Course at Air University and the development of annual SAPR training targeted for General Officers and Senior Executive Service civilians which was developed and deployed DAF-wide in fiscal year 2023.

The DAF is committed to filling the 769 additional support billets authorized by the Secretary of Defense. As of February 2024, we have filled 457 positions. The DAF is committed to strengthening the full-time response workforce structure to ensure critical support and experienced advocates are available to provide continuity of care. We continuously seek to promote understanding that prevention and response to sexual assault require leadership focus and are a vital command responsibility. Through engaged and equipped servicemembers and leaders at all levels, we are committed to preventing and reducing sexual assault while ensuring that victims receive care and perpetrators are held appropriately accountable.

SUICIDE PREVENTION

According to the DOD Annual Report on Suicide in the Military Calendar Year (CY) 2022 released on 30 October 2023, suicide rates in the Air Force declined from a rate of 25.1 per 100K Active Component servicemembers in CY19 to 24.3 in CY20 and 15.3 in CY21. In CY22, this number saw a slight increase to 19.7 per 100K, consistent with the Air Force average rate over the past 5 years. In comparison, the Active Component suicide rate across the DOD for 2022 was 25.1 per 100K. After controlling for differences in age and sex, the Active Duty, Reserve and Guard suicide rates are comparable to US population suicide rates. Use of a firearm was the most common method of suicide, which is consistent with previous years. The largest demographic of suicides continues to be single, enlisted men, under the age of 30, in the rank of E-1 through E-4, which is consistent with previous years and to the overall demographic profile of the DOD Total Force.

One of the Air Force's initiatives started in March 2022, Time-Based Prevention (TBP), focuses on promoting safe storage of personal firearms to put time and space between an airman or guardian who is at risk for suicide and has access to lethal means. With the establishment of a centralized contract to facilitate the purchase and distribution of cable-style gun locks, more than 280K have been distributed across the DAF to date. Continued implementation, expansion and leadership support will build a culture in which safe storage is commonplace, which will accelerate efforts to save lives by reducing immediate access to firearms for those in distress and helping to prevent accidental injuries and deaths among DAF members and their families.

The first standardized, unified, scientific and public health-driven methodology for suicide death reviews in the DAF was completed for calendar year 2020. In partnership with suicide researchers at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), the DAF systematically analyzed factors to identify aggregated findings & lessons and deliver generalizable & actionable recommendations to reduce suicide. Researchers drew information from four sources, including personnel records, investigation reports, medical records and DOD Suicide Event Reports (DoDSER), collecting over 1,000 data points for each suicide decedent. USUHS researchers piloted the Suicide Analysis Board (SAB) process this past year on 117 suicide deaths from 2020. The final report was released in March 2024 with 68 recommendations; future studies will look at deaths from calendar years 2018, 2019, 2021 and beyond to provide additional data and recommendations as we strive toward zero deaths by suicide. The DAF is focused on implementing those recommendations, many of which are already underway, to include conducting a lethal means safety campaign, continuing to promote lethal means safety practices and focusing on programs that build connections. The Wingman Guardian Connect Program is one effective program already established that helps airmen and guardians build the skills to form connections. An additional training effort includes the launch of the Integrated Prevention Course at Air University and the development of annual suicide prevention training targeted for General Officers and Senior Executive Service civilians which was developed and deployed DAF-wide in fiscal year 2023.

CONCLUSION

Chairwoman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of this Committee, thank you again for this opportunity to represent our distinguished servicemembers and their families. We remain committed to recruiting, retaining, developing and employing the force needed to complete our mission in service of our country. I am honored for this opportunity to provide insight into the quality of service and quality of life of our servicemembers, which directly impacts the mission readiness of our force. We look forward to our continued partnership and appreciate your advocacy of the US Air Force—those in uniform, our civilian professionals and the families, caregivers and survivors who support them.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Lieutenant General Miller. Ms. Kelley.

STATEMENT OF KATHARINE KELLEY, DEPUTY CHIEF OF SPACE OPERATIONS FOR HUMAN CAPITAL, UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE

Ms. KELLEY. Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today representing the over 14,000 uniformed and civilian guardians of your Space Force.

Our military and our Nation's modern way of life depends on your Space Force successfully securing our Nation's interest in, from, and to space. While advanced technology is a vital component of our capabilities, our guardians are the foundation of our ability to maintain freedom of action in space.

Building and maintaining this force starts with winning the fight for talent. In an era where opportunities to work in the growing space economy are expanding at an unprecedented pace, the Space Force must be seen as an employer of choice, and we continue to focus on that.

To continue attracting the talent we need we must offer a robust and competitive compensation package, compelling and rewarding career opportunities that speak to today's youth and strong support for spouses and their families. The Space Force recognizes that quality-of-life issues like pay and compensation, spouse employment, and available childcare are significant factors in the family decision to enter and continue in a Military Service and a military way of life. We are focused on initiatives to ensure all guardians are appropriately compensated for their service and are prioritizing childcare and spouse employment in our efforts to sustain quality of life for all.

Ultimately, we must implement strong branding and talent acquisition efforts to ensure our target recruitment populations understand the value proposition as our Nation's newest Military Service.

Our work does not stop with attracting talent. We must continue to focus on keeping the highly trained and experienced guardians we have invested in. Thanks to your strong partnership we continue to make progress serving as a pathfinder in modernizing the Department's approach to talent management, starting with enhanced space-focused education. We have established a refreshed Officer Training Course, which will expose new officers to the full spectrum of mission sets before they arrive at their first duty station. We have also partnered with some of our Nation's top universities to provide new models of intermediate and advanced professional military education. This is for both uniformed and civilian guardians.

We are revamping our performance assessment and leadership selection processes, drawing on best practices from inside and outside the Department, to build high-performing teams and strong leaders. But perhaps most importantly, with the tremendous support of this subcommittee, we are working to build a first-of-its-kind, flexible Military Service model as envisioned in the recently passed Space Force Personnel Management Act.

We are doing these things, and much more, not just to take care of guardians and their families, because it is the right thing to do it and it certainly is, but because taking care of guardians is what is required to win.

Warfighting success in space starts not with the technology on orbit but with the people who develop the technology, who launch it, operate it, and exploit it in defense of our Nation. Your support enables our guardians to stand ready to face any challenge in the space domain.

Thank you for the privilege of representing them today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Katharine Kelley follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT BY MS. KATHARINE KELLEY

INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and represent your United States Space Force. I am excited to share with you the progress of the Space Force, building and managing a force capable of securing the Nation's interest in, from and to space. Winning in space requires equipping our guardians with the tools, talents, and experiences necessary for space superiority, and the protection of the joint force, our allies, and our partners.

THE FORCE WE NEED

The United States Space Force (USSF) operates in a unique and dynamic personnel environment. We must be able to successfully build and develop a highly skilled, inclusive, ready, resilient, and combat-credible force.

We have engaged in a modern approach to talent management incorporating education, training, and individualized development in addition to supporting a healthy work-life balance, holistic health, and family programs. In 2023, Congress passed the Space Force Personnel Management Act. Thank you for your support with this legislation. This will enable the Space Force to build a modern personnel management system that will better allow the Space Force to develop and retain the force it needs to be competitive and successful. The permeability between full-time and part-time Military Service within a single component will allow guardians the flexibility to manage their careers and better meet personal and professional goals while meeting Space Force operational needs.

To ensure our force readiness, the Space Force is making a concerted effort to increase representation on the Joint Staff and within the combatant commands. This heightened presence enables dynamic responsiveness to the growing demand for space capabilities. Talented guardians, well-versed in space equities, will play pivotal roles in shaping the future of Space Force leadership.

The needs of the Nation require we be operationally capable of deterring conflict and defending our Nation's interests immediately and boldly. To this end, we continue developing the training, systems, and experiences necessary to be the digital force required in any potential fight.

At the same time, we are enhancing our end strength through the investment in K-12 Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM), and higher education to increase our pipeline of talent, along with maximizing civilian personnel authorities. Our guardians, both military and civilian, are our greatest strength.

END STRENGTH

The Space Force has requested 9,800 military end strength from Congress for fiscal year 2025. This is an increase of 400 from fiscal year 2024 enacted levels. We estimate that this is achievable given our understanding of today's recruiting and retention landscape for Space professionals. Also, with the enactment of the Personnel Management Act, approximately 1600 full-and part-time Air Force Reserve billets will transfer to the Space Force over the FYDP, the exact end strength for each fiscal year will depend on execution plan time-phasing. This summer we anticipate opening Tranche 1 for Air Force Reservists in Space-focused specialties who wish to transfer to a full-time USSF position.

As a result of this first window, any transfers in fiscal year 2025 will be year of execution transfer. The Space Force will continue to manage military personnel inventory in support of new and evolving mission requirements to deter and defeat our adversaries in a contested space environment.

RECRUITING

The competitive market for STEM talent creates significant competition for those unique and essential capabilities necessary for the Space Force. Despite the environment, the Space Force, with the help of the Air Force Recruiting Service, exceeded our enlisted fiscal year 2023 recruiting requirements by nearly 10 percent and are on track to meet our fiscal year 2024 recruiting goals. As a Service, we have recruited exceptional talent in support of STEM and cyber-related disciplines needed to meet our complex mission set, with 99.5 percent of entries scoring in the upper half of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery and 97 percent graduating from Basic Military Training and Tech School. While we have been successful to date, the recruiting landscape is dynamic; there is a high demand for talent in these technical communities, across the Department of Defense, the U.S. Government, and industry. This year, the Department of Defense's Joint Advertising Market Research Studies program indicated that the Space Force brand recognition among our target audience is at 4 percent. The general lack of awareness concerning the Space Force "brand," requires uniquely innovative outreach and incentive methods to attract and retain highly qualified talent in a challenging marketplace. To establish the Space Force as a known, credible, and critical military entity, we are investing \$18 million in fiscal year 2024 to develop unique Space Force marketing efforts.

Our focus today is on expanding our reach to parents, coaches, friends, and prospective guardians in order to ensure our talent pipeline remains robust. We are focusing investments to ensure that our Nation understands what the Space Force contributes to our national security and how a guardian career offers opportunity to serve, educate, contribute, and defend our national interests.

TAKING CARE OF GUARDIANS

Managing Talent

The Space Force continues to shape the guardian experience and foster an organizational culture that empowers exercising mission command to secure American interests in space and contributing our unique space domain expertise in joint operations. In addition to the recently passed Space Force Personnel Management Act, which will provide flexible full-and part-time work roles to capitalize on the best and brightest, connect with industry and academia, and recruit the next generation, we are redesigning career paths to provide skills, knowledge, and experience to meet the high tech demands of our operations. Additionally, while we continue to develop a new performance appraisal system focused on contributions to team and mission, we are implementing a guardian-centric bridging strategy for evaluations tying our values to mission accomplishment. The Space Force is setting the foundation so ALL guardians will be better prepared to meet the high-tech, data-centric, network-intensive joint operations need for success in future campaigns.

Training and Development

The Space Force is redesigning our Officer Training Course. Under this program, all newly accessed officers will attend the same initial skills training course to learn the fundamentals of cyber operations, intelligence, and space operations. This combined initial skills training will ensure all officers have a comprehensive operational background prior to pursuing more specialized duties like acquisition. The Space Force has also worked to establish clear delineation of the roles, responsibilities, duties, and career paths for our officer, enlisted, and civilian guardians to optimize our force. In the next phase we will revise guardian career paths consistent with our distinct roles of Officers, Enlisted, and civilian guardians. Within our noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps, we are creating enhanced leadership training at future professional military education courses that will take place at each NCO rank to set our guardians up for success at all command and staff levels.

In June 2023, the USSF established intermediate-level education and senior-level education programs in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University's (JHU) School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), culminating in a Master of International Public Policy degree. The programs are offered to officers and civilians in the Space Force and other services, as well as international and interagency partners and meet service and joint professional military education requirements. This approach will allow the Space Force to tailor its education for leaders for unique space related issues and establish a mechanism whereby guardians can earn a degree from a rec-

ognized private university. Approximately fifty students are currently enrolled in their second semester of their first year at SAIS.

Promotion and Evaluation

It is crucial that the Space Force selects the best and the brightest to help shape the space domain for the Joint fight. The Space Force promotion system is regulated by law, Department of Defense and Department of the Air Force policy. Our promotion program fulfills the requirements of section 619 of Title 10, United States Code and Secretarial policy by promoting the “best qualified” officers to positions of increased responsibility and authority. The Space Force promotion system selects the best qualified commissioned and noncommissioned officers with regard to their record, their education, their contributions and demonstrated potential. Promotion boards convened to consider officers for promotion are charged with recommending the best fully qualified officers based on this ‘whole-person’ concept. We leverage the Air Force Personnel Center to help the Space Force execute its statutory requirements for promotion of officer, enlisted and General Officers.

Holistic Health Approach

The Space Force has implemented a Holistic Health Approach (HHA) to deliver a ready, fit, professional force supporting the wellness of each guardian. This is an innovative, science-based approach to health, emphasizing total fitness, preventive medicine, and education. In an effort to operationalize HHA, the Space Force has established Guardian Resilience Teams (GRTs) embedded with guardians where they work. The GRTs consist of multidisciplinary subject matter experts, health integrator and physical, mental, and spiritual health providers. Over the past year, the Space Force has stood-up nine GRTs located at every Space Force Base, the National Capital Region, Joint Base San Antonio/Basic Military Training, and a remote GRT for geographically separated units and remote guardians.

In support of HHA, the Space Force, in partnership with the Air Force Research Lab, began a 2-year study of our service’s Continuous Fitness Assessment, to assess the effectiveness of continuous fitness in meeting HHA goals and physical fitness requirements. Over 7,000 of our uniformed guardians, representing 85 percent of our Total Force, registered to participate in the study.

PAY AND COMPENSATION

The Space Force is dedicated to ensuring all guardians are appropriately compensated for their service. Military compensation must be designed to recruit and retain talent. The Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation scheduled to conclude at the end of the calendar year, will be a critical forum to explore and develop innovative pay structures that make sense for today’s military and the Space Force.

Total compensation—including basic pay, the basic allowance for housing, the basic allowance for subsistence, health care benefits, retirement benefits, the tax advantage of entitlements, special and incentive pay and bonuses—has greatly helped the Space Force manage existing talent. This network of pay, allowances, and other benefits is designed to compare favorably with private industry and civilian employment; however, given the highly technical workforce that makes up our guardians, we must ensure salaries are competitive with commensurate civilian positions.

There remains an extremely high demand for talent in information and cyber warfare communities across the Department of Defense, the U.S. Government, and the commercial and private sectors. To support guardian retention, the Space Force is offering Selective Retention Bonuses, Special Duty Assignment Pays, and Assignment Incentive Pays, to attract, compensate, and retain our highly skilled workforce. The use of these incentives in critical Space Force specialties and locations assists in the ability to counter retention challenges at a relatively low cost when compared to the cost of replacing guardians lost to other organizations, industry, or the private sector.

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE SUPPORT

The Space Force was established to be a mission-focused, agile force. As such, we continue to receive support from the Department of the Air Force in a wide range of activities and programs to include family care, well-being, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Additionally, the six Space Force bases have approximately 8,000 airmen providing base operating support to include finance, contracting, education and training, child and youth services, dining, fitness, logistics, communications, medical services, emergency services, and base security. We are a one team-one fight organization and are grateful for the continued efforts of all members of our team.

Quality of Life

Force readiness requires the recruitment and retention of superior personnel who are continuously able to perform their responsibilities. By empowering guardians to maintain focus on the mission while enabling guardians and their families, caregivers, and survivors to thrive, we believe our force is stronger. The Space Force is prioritizing child care and spouse employment in its efforts to improve and sustain quality of life for all.

The Space Force is working directly with the Air Force to maximize available, affordable, and quality child care options that allow guardians to remain mission-focused, while also allowing spouses to pursue career opportunities. We are working to improve access to child care, increasing staffing incentives, adding family child care providers, developing education and marketing materials, increasing community-based fee assistance, and targeted construction investments. Recently, Buckley Space Force Base hosted a hiring event that resulted in a child care vacancy reduction of 25 percent, with 15 new hires, and reduced the days to hire from forty-four days to 15 days. This aims to reduce the child care waitlist significantly, with initial projections anticipating a significant increase in direct care staffing from 49 percent to 73 percent within 1 month, the largest gain in 3 years. Patrick Space Force Base, the Child Development Center increased capacity for children ages 6–12 years old, but continues to seek qualified individuals to fill 10 staff vacancies to improve availability for younger children. Additionally, the Space Force has established a quarterly “Child Care Community Forum,” opened to every guardian: leader, parent, and member (military, civilian, household) to educate and engage with guardians on child care programs, services and information. The Space Force is focused on continuing to characterize the unique aspects of guardians’ child care needs to develop future child care support strategies.

The Space Force recognizes that spouse employment is a significant factor in the family decision to continue Military Service. The Space Force has established the Guardian Family Career Program, which offers spouses the opportunity to support fellow guardians while advancing their careers with pre-identified remote or portable positions from one Space Force installation to the next. Opportunities are available at all levels and meet the spouse where they are in terms of experience and professional interest. As a part of this program, we recently released a new policy authorizing up to 5 days of PCS-related administrative leave for civilian guardians listed as dependents on their military or civilian spouse’s PCS orders in an effort to support families as they navigate career related moves.

CONCLUSION

Your guardians, both military and civilian members, are preserving U.S. freedom of action in an increasingly contested space domain. This requires a military force specifically trained and equipped for the purpose. U.S. projection for space supremacy demands space capabilities our guardians provide to this Nation. Developing our force, both military and civilian, is a national imperative and a once in a lifetime opportunity. guardian talent and expertise is our most important operational advantage. Additionally, amplifying the guardian spirit starts with taking care of our personnel and shaping their experiences. Doing so unleashes the creativity, innovation, determination, and patriotism of our force. We thank you for your continued support for our Space Force, its uniformed and civilian guardians, and their families, caregivers, and survivors.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Ms. Kelley.

Senator King.

Senator KING. Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate it. If any of you have a really good software scheduling package let us know. I am scheduled in four subcommittee meetings right now, and in fact in 10 minutes, when I have to chair. So I apologize for not being able to stay with you because what you are doing is incredibly important.

Here is an issue that I am really focused on that I hope you will think about and take back, and that is the transition between Active Duty and veteran status. I talk to veterans all the time in Maine, talk to Active Duty members. Everybody identifies this as a problem. The most dangerous moment for veterans—and we are

all concerned about veteran suicide—is in the transition, is in the 2 or 3 years during the period that that takes place.

So part of it is renewed emphasis within the officer corps on the TAP program, the Transition Assistance Program, and I am afraid sometimes it is an afterthought. The rule is it is supposed to be done a year before the military member leaves, and the statistics are pretty dire. I cannot remember, but it is like 20 percent actually meet that deadline.

But here is a specific question, and I am going to pursue this with Mr. Vazirani. On the form—well, let me back up. One of the ways to make that transition better is to supply the outgoing military personnel's contact information to the State Veterans Affairs Office where they are going, so they can be met at the airport, so they can be put in connection with all the benefits that are available to them, so they can meet somebody. Ideally, in my case, in my suggestion, to have a buddy who will meet them and help guide them through the maze of programs and benefit that are available to them.

The problem is under the law the Defense Department cannot forward the contact information to the State Veterans Office without the servicemember checking a box that says yes, go and do so. The problem is only 18 percent check that box, and my belief is that they do not really realize what the implications are.

We have tried to get the Defense Department to change it to an opt-in rather than an opt-in. They tell us they cannot do that, under the law. We are talking about an amendment in the Defense Bill to make it an opt-out instead of an opt-in.

But here is one thing I hope you will discuss, and that is I want to know what the question is next to the box. Does it say, "Shall we submit your personal information to the State Veterans Office?" That is sort of scary. Or maybe it ought to say, "Shall we submit your contact information so that the State Veterans Office where you are bound can assist you in accessing all the benefits that you have obtained?" Do you see what I mean? How the question is asked is important.

So I am trying to determine exactly what it says on that form. I would really appreciate it if you all would give some thought to this, A, to beefing up the TAP program, and, B, to think about how to change the form in such a way that it still comports with the law but allows the military personnel to have a better sense that there is nothing back-handed about this. This is for their benefit.

I hope you will all take some cognizance of this. Admiral, you were nodding. I take it you think that this is important, as well.

Vice Admiral CHEESEMEN. Sir, it sounds like a very good idea and I am very willing to work with Secretary Vazirani and others to enable your vision, sir.

Senator KING. Thank you. I am going to pursue this with the Secretary, and I will also be pursuing it with the committee as we take up the Defense Bill this year.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and I apologize for my absence, but the other hearing will not even happen unless I get there.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Senator King, and I appreciate you being here, and good luck on making it to your other meeting.

Senator Scott.

Senator SCOTT. So let me completely agree with Senator King. This does not make any sense. We had the same issue when I was Governor, and I think we have about 1.5 million veterans, and they just would not give us any information. We had a whole veterans group that are trying to do everything they can to provide.

Senator KING. [Inaudible.]

Senator SCOTT. Absolutely. I agree with what you are talking about.

Okay. So all of you guys are working on recruitment, so thank you for what you are doing. What if you each had \$4 billion? By the way, General Stitt, congratulations on your service. Thank you for all of it. I hope you enjoy your retirement, and I hope you move to Florida, like everybody else does. It is cold in Massachusetts, just so you know, just in case you are thinking about it.

If each of you had \$4 billion to improve recruitment, how would you spend it? Would you spend on wages? How would you do it? General Stitt, do you want to start?

Lieutenant General STITT. Senator Scott, it is a rare question that we are often proffered \$4 billion, so thank you for setting the conditions with \$4 billion. Looking at recruiting, how do we look at marketing, and the success that we are seeing with the Be All You Can Be campaign, the recent advertisements that we saw during the men's and women's Final Four with the addition of the Coach Krzyzewski ad as a small reflection of what we are seeing for continued research, that brought us to the unveiling of the Be All You Can Be campaign, the data that we are collecting from it, and the further refinement.

Certainly investing across the totality of human capital and understanding that it is an individual that provides the United States Army their competitive advantage, be that a soldier or a civilian. So working with our counterparts in DOD, assessing the totality of compensation with the Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, and looking at that and providing our input I think provides us another means, potentially, to examine where we could put resources coming forward.

Senator SCOTT. Admiral, Go Navy.

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. Senator, Go Navy, and thank you for the time in your office last week. I enjoyed our conversation.

Sir, any last dollar that the United States Navy could get in this area would go toward marketing and advertising and other activities that would increase the propensity to serve in the United States Navy and in the Military Services. We know through our data analytic efforts that every 1 percent increase in propensity equals about 1,400 additional contracts, and in previous years when propensity was around 14 percent, we generally had no issues making our recruiting goals.

Propensity right now is about 9 percent, but that is not enabled by influencer that could help those young folks, those young future sailors, join the Navy. I get plenty of young sailors in the target demographic between 18 and 24, filling out forms, showing initial interest. It is whether their interest wanes once they leave the initial contact with their recruiter or whether it is enabled by a mentor that understands what Military Service is all about.

So my answer, in short, is anything that would increase propensity in this country, and not necessarily with the 18-to 24-year-olds but among the influencers, you know, coaches, guidance counselors, student administrators, clergy. Somebody that could offer a conversation about what the military has to offer, that is what I would do with that money, sir. Thank you for your time.

Senator SCOTT. General Glynn?

Lieutenant General GLYNN. Senator, thank you, and anticipating that my colleagues would go right after the recruiting thing I tried to shape it. First and foremost, any investment in young folks and their influencers is valuable, regardless of if it is \$1 or \$4 billion, any investment. Because in my opening comments I suggested that we increasingly find—and you and I discussed previously, that young folks are not even aware of the opportunities so they are not even being considered as often as they might have been in the past. That is number one.

But I would not put all my money there. I would put a good chunk of it—and I might be biased by our Executive Safety Council that we held last night—I would put a lot of it into our training and simulation, because that can be an attraction to young folks. The folks that are going to leave the service after one stint in uniform can go out and tell folks about the high quality and the investment that they made in their life and their livelihood going forward. So I think I would put a significant amount into training and simulation.

Last, to your earlier panel, we cannot invest enough in the quality of life that is an expectation, not just for our servicemembers but for our families. We hear about it all the time. It is the tipping point in their decision to stay or go, a perception that things might be better, different somewhere else than in the military. Oftentimes we know it is not. I think earlier you rightfully focused on an area where I would invest in military health care. It is an expectation of our families, and we hear about it.

Lieutenant General MILLER. Yes, Senator. Thank you for the question. I mean, we have all been thinking about it a lot over the last several years. But if there were \$4 billion, I mean, similar to my colleagues here, well, there are two things I think that I would do. I would bring individuals to the installations, from all over the country, however we are going to do that. Charter aircrafts. Get them onto the installation, show them what we can do. A lot of the discussion is the fact that they are not exposed because there are decreasing military veterans in our country. But when you actually bring them—and you need to bring them younger, and bring them in and say any job that you want, or anything that you are passionate about, we have it in the military.

But I would bring them to the installations. We have to break down the barriers. Once we had 9/11 it was very difficult to get on and off the installations, so even if you in the neighborhood you have to bring them on there. So I would do that across the country.

The second thing I would do would be, well, there are two things. The infrastructure, absolutely we have got to invest in, I mean, because they come and you have got hangars falling down, and so we have taken risk over the multiple years on infrastructure so we can

go after the shiny platforms. But we have to demonstrate that we do care for the families—dorms, housing, childcare facilities.

Then finally, the medical system just has to be addressed. The medical system is a barrier to service because people hear about it, and I know that MHS GENESIS, we are working through that, the DHA. However, there are still multiple stories of families not able to get access to care. So we have got to increase our ability to provide access to care for military members, spouses, children.

Then, you know, CONUS is not as bad, but overseas, there are some countries that military families cannot get access to care.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you.

Ms. KELLEY. Senator, thank you for the question. I certainly agree with all of the comments my colleagues have made. I would offer a couple of thoughts from the Space Force perspective, which is a little bit unique, by some benchmarks.

First, the Space Force absolutely is very excited that we are making our recruiting numbers, but they are really small numbers. What we know, though, is we definitely have a brand awareness issue, and the National Call to Service campaign that was discussed a little bit on Panel 1 and kind of discussed here today is really important to the Space Force, as well.

We think that the data that we have received thus far, year over year, really bears out the fact that the American people really do not know about the Space Force writ large, and even if they do they might not understand what we do. So my first emphasis would be on making sure that the value proposition of the service is known to the potential group of young people who may join.

The second thing I would offer is that we really do have a unique opportunity with the Personnel Management Act to really re-characterize how people can serve inside of the Space Force in full- and part-time work roles, and allow for them to take advantage of things like academic time or working in a private company, without sacrificing the administrative barriers going between on Active Duty or into the Reserves or into the Guard. So there is something to be said there about reducing that barrier structure, which then, I believe, has the likelihood of allowing people to want to remain with the military instead of being forced to make a choice to leave.

The last point I would make on this is the quality of life and the care for families, to not make that a choice against remaining with the Military Service has got to be an emphasis. I know it is for all of us that are here today, at this panel.

Senator SCOTT. Thanks. Thanks, Chair.

Senator WARREN. Thank you. Thank you, Senator Scott.

So recruitment, we hear a lot about that. I want to focus in again on an issue we have talked about that is the retention issue.

Two-thirds of Active Duty military families have children living at home—two-thirds. The number one issue for many, many parents is, “Where will my children be? Who is taking care of them when I have to be at work?” Now, this is why the Department of Defense runs the largest employer-sponsored childcare program in the entire United States. Our childcare is affordable, it is high quality, so that our servicemembers can show up to work, protect our country, and know that their children are safe and well cared for.

Here is the good news. The DOD program is known for being one of the best childcare programs in the country. But here is the bad news. DOD cannot find enough workers. There were 12,000 children on DOD's waitlists as of last year, waiting for childcare. Think about what that means. That is more than 12,000 parents struggling to find out how to meet their military obligations when they have small children at home that need care.

So today we have the deputy chiefs, and I just want to get this on the record. I will start with you, Lieutenant General Miller.

Is childcare critical to the Air Force's readiness and retention, and therefore to national security? Or let me ask it another way. How important is childcare to being able to retain the military that you have invested in? You have paid for their training. These are the people who not only can do the job, the people who are doing the job. How much do you need childcare?

Lieutenant General MILLER. Oh, it is absolutely critical to readiness. The first thing you do when you get a PCS [Permanent Change of Station] assignment is you look at, if you have children, where are my children going to go? What is the access to the childcare? You know, what is available to me? How do I get on the list as soon as possible? So it is absolutely, it is a mission ready—I mean, it is mission readiness.

Senator WARREN. Mission readiness. Lieutenant General Glynn?

Lieutenant General GLYNN. Yes, I would, I would echo Lieutenant General Miller's comment. It continues to be a consideration for every family, and what families seek, we hear over and over again, is predictability. So can I predictably, in this instance, predictably, take care of my children? Do I know what school system? Are there after-school activities available? All the things related to. Yes, Senator, it is very important.

Senator WARREN. Okay. "Can I count on this," really important. Vice Admiral Cheeseman?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAM. Senator, same answer for the Navy. It is absolutely mission critical to be able to take care of our sailors' children. We are making every effort we can to increase capacity, all those childhood development centers that you are talking about.

Senator WARREN. Lieutenant General Stitt?

Lieutenant General STITT. Senator Warren, critical to the overall quality of life and therefore critical to the care of our soldiers and families. We want to make sure that when the soldier comes in to work they are focused on the mission, and that they know that their child is cared for appropriately.

Senator WARREN. Ms. Kelley?

Ms. KELLEY. Senator Warren, it is absolutely crucial in the Space Force, because of the uniqueness of some of the mission sets that we do and some of that focus around-the-clock type of scenario.

Senator WARREN. You know, that is the thing about it, too. It is the kind of work you do.

I do not know how to keep underscoring this. Twelve thousand children are on your waitlists right now, and I have to assume the demand would be even greater, except there are some people who just give up and do not even put a child on the waitlist. They just say "the list already is too hard."

Here is the problem. Since the start of the pandemic, recruiting and retention of DOD childcare workers has been a challenge. The shortages and the waitlist for military families are not getting better. You all are talking about your recruiting is getting better across the services. It is not getting better for your childcare workers.

In March, DOD reported it was still short 3,900 caregivers needed to match our existing childcare needs. In other words, the DOD centers are there. This is the part that is really shocking. We have got the physical facilities for it, but the staffing shortages right now are so bad that centers are accepting 30 percent fewer children than they could if they had full staffing.

I know there are a lot of ideas about how to improve childcare access for military families, but clearly staffing up has to be the number one focus. Hiring more people would let us increase the overall capacity, literally by tens of thousands of children, if we just hire up to all of the spots we have got.

So there is good news again, and that is this year's DOD's budget request includes funding for proposals from a special task force to address the childcare staffing shortage. Number one on the list is reworking the pay scale for childcare workers. We will be doing this for the first time in 30 years. We need to give these caregivers the critical pay raises that they need.

DoD has asked for \$33.5 million to invest in childcare for military families. I would just like anybody who wants to, to make the case to get it on the record, why DOD should get its full \$33.5 million from this Senate, and we will fight for it over in the House, so that, at a minimum, we can start to staff up the facilities that we have got.

Anyone want to swing at that ball?

Lieutenant General MILLER. Senator, I will take that. We have got to get the additional funding to do this. Right now we have, in the Air Force we have initiated many things to increase that, and we have seen an increase, but we are still sitting at about 80 percent childcare providers. So we have a 20 percent deficit, and so anything we can do. I will tell you that we are also looking at modifying the PDs of the childcare, so it was more of an educational type thing, so we can pay them more.

But absolutely, we need that because it is a readiness issue, and right now we are facing peer competitors that we have not seen since probably World War II, and Russia, you know, during the cold war, so it is critical now.

Senator WARREN. Good. Anybody have anything they want to add on this?

Lieutenant General STITT. I look forward to working with the committee and the Department of Defense on a way forward. We need to find the right people and compensate them appropriately.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Lieutenant General Stitt.

Lieutenant General GLYNN. Senator?

Senator WARREN. Lieutenant General Glynn?

Lieutenant General GLYNN. Yes, just, one, I think, one positive note in all of what you just said, and then reinforcing it is, thanks to the support we have gotten in the past—the fee assistance program, right?—it gives me much more comfort about where and

what our children are up to, because we do not have a waiting list for fee assistance. The assistance is being fully utilized and maximized.

What it does speak to is what, I believe, you said earlier, which is the quality of the care and the confidence that families have in the on-installation childcare. So we have folks waiting for their opportunity to come out of, you know, something, not on an installation, onto it. I am optimistic, and we appreciate the continued support there.

But, you know, to your point, you know, the funding of it, there are many quality-of-life discussions and issues that many of them came up in Panel 1. We collectively talk about this all the time. There are not too many we would argue against. But we have to have the top-line funding to afford them. There are things in what you are suggesting here that we would all do right now.

We have different levels of assistance for folks, for their first child that enrolls between 50 and 100 percent. Talking between us, we would all have 100 percent if we could all afford 100 percent. So we have to have the top line to afford these programs.

Senator WARREN. Our job is to make sure you can afford 100 percent.

Did you want to add something, Vice Admiral Cheeseman?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. Senator, yes, ma'am. I cannot not go on record after all my colleagues did.

Senator WARREN. Absolutely.

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. So I appreciate the time. So to your point about childcare, in the Navy, and I imagine it is in the rest of the services as well, there are CDCs within the budget to be built. A lot of emphasis has been put there, in the Navy, to give it the foundational support that our sailors need. Any assistance we could have from Congress to accelerate that or to help us with the hiring, the future hiring that we anticipate, will be greatly appreciated.

Senator WARREN. Okay, I appreciate that. Miss Kelley, you do not want to be left behind here.

Ms. KELLEY. Not at all. Certainly not on this topic, ma'am. What I would add is also that there are other programs as well that we have to take advantage of that cover that round-the-clock care that we discussed—

Senator WARREN. Yes.

Ms. KELLY.—and also leveraging childcare in your home scenarios in the community partnerships that are so important. So clearly an additional top line to cover increased pay is crucial, as is taking advantage of some of the other options that are out there, because the situations are so unique for individual, at least in my case, guardians, that we want to make sure that we have got multiple options to try to combat this issue.

Senator WARREN. I am looking forward to the day when every single servicemember with a small child who is thinking about whether to sign up for another tour of duty is saying, "You know, if we don't though, we are going to lose this first-rate, top-notch, affordable, available child care. That is one more good reason to stay in the service." So that is the day we are looking forward to.

I want to thank you all. Do you have a closing statement, anything more you want to say?

I want to thank all of our witnesses for your testimony today. I also want to thank John Clark, Gary Leeling, Andy Scott, Noah Sisk, Katie Magnus, and Sean O’Keefe for their work in putting today’s hearing together.

Our people are our greatest strength as a Nation, and we need to do better for them. We have got a lot of people who are committed to doing well. We need to make sure you have got the resources to do even better. That is our job here.

I want to thank you all for being here. Senators have until Friday, May 9, to submit additional questions for the record.

With that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 5 p.m., the Subcommittee adjourned.]

[Questions for the record with answers supplied follow:]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MAZIE K. HIRONO

ACCESS TO CONTRACEPTIVES

1. Senator HIRONO. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, in October 2023, my colleagues and I led a letter regarding servicemember’s access and coverage to Opill, the first FDA-approved oral contraceptive available without a prescription. The Defense Health Agency’s Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee ruled that it would cover Opill in its uniform formulary if it was cost effective, which it since has. While we appreciate that TRICARE now covers Opill, does the Department require servicemembers to obtain a prescription? If so, why does it continue to maintain this unnecessary barrier?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. On March 13, 2024, Opill, an over-the-counter (OTC) contraceptive pill, was added to the TRICARE Uniform Formulary for TRICARE beneficiaries at all pharmacy points of service, based on its relative clinical and cost-effectiveness. In accordance with Federal law and regulation, TRICARE requires a prescription for Opill.

2. Senator HIRONO. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, will the Department of Defense direct the Military Service Exchanges to stock the over-the-counter contraceptives without burdensome restrictions or delays?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. The Exchanges are operated by the Military Services in accordance with their needs and requirements. I commit to working with the Military Services and providing them support as necessary on this matter.

COMPREHENSIVE CONTRACEPTIVE COUNSELING

3. Senator HIRONO. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, I applaud the Department of Defense’s development of walk-in contraceptive clinics and removal of contraceptive care co-pays. However, there was a provision in the 2016 NDAA that all Armed Service Members must receive comprehensive contraception counseling (CCC) at all military treatment facilities at least once every year. A 2022 RAND report found that 25 percent of Active Duty service women received counseling and only 18 percent of Active Duty service women received counseling from a Military Health System provider prior to deployment. Do you have any updates on the implementation for the congressional mandate in the 2016 NDAA for all servicemembers to receive comprehensive contraceptive counseling at least once a year and prior to deployments?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Defense Health Agency Procedural Instruction (DHA-PI) 6200.02, “Comprehensive Contraceptive Counseling and Access to the Full Range of Methods of Contraception,” May 13, 2019, establishes procedures for comprehensive standards on health care with respect to access to comprehensive contraceptive counseling. As outlined in the policy, counseling is to be provided at specific episodes of care, when feasible and medically appropriate, at a minimum annually, in at least one of the following settings: during annual well woman visits and reproductive health screenings; during military medical treatment facility (MTF) clinic visits following referral after the periodic health assessment; during physical exami-

nations; during pre-deployment related visits; and/or when requested by the beneficiary.

As Active Duty servicemember may simply choose not to receive contraceptive counseling, the Department believes it is fully meeting the needs of Active Duty servicemembers to provide comprehensive access to contraceptive counseling for those that desire it through a variety of different platforms, both in person and virtually, and is fully compliant with statutory requirements.

BUILDING THE FORCE

4. Senator HIRONO. Secretary Vazirani, Secretary Keohane, Secretary Martinez-Lopez, Ms. Foster, For the panel, in your written statement, you acknowledge that “there is a decreasing connection between Americans and the military.” What do you think is causing the disconnect between Americans and the military and what are tangible things that can be done to help bridge this gap going forward?

Secretary VAZIRANI, Secretary KEOHANE, Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ, and Ms. FOSTER. The decline of a military presence in many American communities has led to a lack of familiarity with the inherent benefits of Military Service, which directly contributes to the public being disconnected from its military.

- o The Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) efforts, a declining veteran population, and reduced military personnel end strength requirements have collectively diminished youths’ firsthand exposure to service and to those who serve within many communities.
- o The Department conducts a study to continuously track sources of military impressions. These data show that Military recruiters and advertising are usually the only presence from which the public can draw more favorable associations with Military Service¹. This results in service being generally “out of sight and out of mind” for most Americans.
- o For many, perceptions of Military Service are informed by popular media, which often depicts the riskier elements of service (i.e., combat, deployments) and the more negative potential outcomes of service (i.e., PTSD, physical injury, emotional issues).
- o In essence, stereotypes and misperceptions shape how youth and the adults who influence them consider Military Service as an undesirable option.
- o Top-of-mind associations of risk are the key barriers for youth when considering Military Service. The Department conducts several studies to understand youths’ perceptions of the Military and these data reveal that about 6 out of 10 youth believe that some form of psychological or emotional problem (59 percent) and difficulty adjusting to everyday life (56 percent)² are likely outcomes of their service. Today, with 52 percent of youth never having considered Military Service³ and only 10 percent reporting they are likely to serve in the next few years⁴, the Department has taken significant steps to reconnect with American communities.
- The Department, in collaboration with the Military Services, is developing a strategic campaign to better communicate the vast array of opportunities and advantages available through Military Service.
 - o We have made a significant investment of \$182 million for a joint service paid integrated media campaign spanning fiscal year 2024 to fiscal 2028⁵. This investment will significantly increase and sustain the presence of positive messaging for military recruiting among the youth population and their adult influencers.
- We have also been working to encourage the next generation of Americans to pursue military, national, and public service opportunities.
 - o The Department recently helped organize the “Service for America Summit” which brought together leaders from AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, the Selective Service System, and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management for the first time to collaboratively advance military, national, and public service.
- Additionally, efforts the Department are pursuing to expand and improve quality high school access for military recruiters will be critical to improving recruiting production.

¹ DOD Ad Tracking Reserve Study (2023)

² 2 DOD Ad Tracking Recruits Study (Oct-Dec 2023)

³ DOD Youth Poll, Ages 16–21 (Fall 2023)

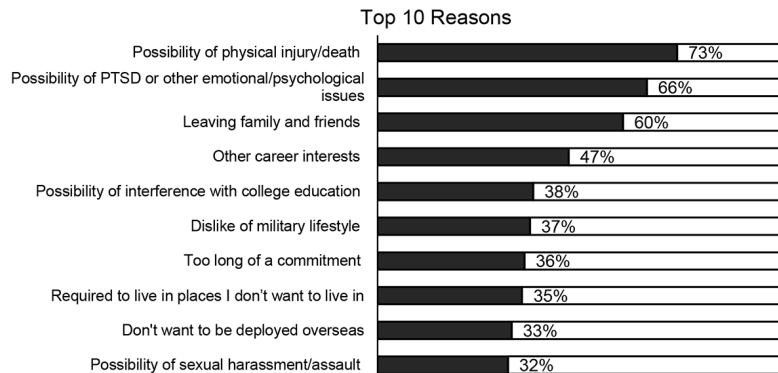
⁴ DOD Youth Poll, Ages 16–21 (Fall 2023)

⁵ FY24–FY28: \$182m (FY24: \$40m; FY25–FY28: \$35.5m/year)

- o Certain aspects of quality access, such as: recruiters' visits being announced to all students and staff ahead of time, interested students being provided an opportunity to meet with recruiters during these visits; recruiters being allowed to setup in an area that is conducive, both in time and location, to the exchange of information between students and the recruiter, and school officials promoting opportunities for recruiters to make formal presentations to students regarding military career opportunities and benefits can improve the quality of visits.
- To encourage the next generation of Americans to pursue military, national, and public service opportunities require a whole-of-government, and indeed, a whole-of-nation effort. We need leaders at every level in government and the private sector to make a call to service to build awareness of national service opportunities and to promote understanding of the value of service both to individuals themselves and the Nation.

Supporting Information

- Proportion of Youth with a Parent who Served [Youth Attitude Tracking Study (1995) & DOD Youth Poll (Fall 2023)]
 - o 1995: 40 percent
 - o 2023: 13 percent
- Proportion of U.S. Veterans [U.S. Census Bureau]
 - o 1980: 18 percent
 - o 2022: 6 percent
- Top 10 Reasons Not to Join the Military [DOD Youth Poll. Ages 16–21, (Fall 2023)]
 - o “What would be the main reason(s) why you would NOT consider joining the U.S. Military?” [Select all that apply]



5. Senator HIRONO, Secretary Vazirani, Secretary Keohane, Secretary Martinez-Lopez, and Ms. Foster, you also highlight the importance of the civilian workforce several times in your written statement. How are you specifically addressing the recruitment and retention of the civilian workforce that provide continuity and support cyber security, acquisitions, medical, personnel, and family support programs?

Secretary VAZIRANI, Secretary KEOHANE, Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ, and Ms. FOSTER. The Department of Defense (DOD) remains committed to improving recruiting and hiring strategies to efficiently locate the skilled talent necessary to support the DOD's global and emerging mission requirements. The use of Direct Hiring Authorities (DHA) has allowed the Department to recruit the human capital needed to meet the mission, while reducing time-to-hire (TTH) and maintaining veterans' representation.

Congress has granted DHA to target recruitment and expedite hiring for certain positions critical to the DOD mission, including depot-level maintenance; cyber; acquisition; medical; science, technology, and engineering; childcare; financial management; and military housing. Other DHAs target Defense Industrial Base and Major Range Test and Facilities Range operations and positions, and military spouses in overseas locations.

We are looking at ways to enhance pay for our DOD Health Care providers using title 38 provisions and have utilized Targeted Local Market Supplements and Special Salary Rates to address recruiting and retention for markets that are experiencing recruitment and retention hardships.

Ensuring we have the broad range of perspectives necessary to fuel innovation demands investment in attracting diverse talents to meet our critical operational mission needs, to include our most demanding science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) priorities. DOD will continue to expand partnerships with colleges and universities, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Minority Serving Institutions, and geographically diverse institutions across the U.S., focusing on entry-level hiring and internship opportunities for students and recent graduates.

DOD is also utilizing scholarship programs such as the Defense Civilian Training Corps (DCTC) to attract and develop the talent necessary to meet our critical and operational needs and expand awareness of DOD employment opportunities. DCTC, a prestigious ROTC-like scholarship and talent development program for civilians, will strengthen the talent pipeline and contribute to building the workforce of the future through educational opportunities targeted to DOD-critical skills vital to keeping pace in the great powers competition.

RECRUITING CHALLENGES

6. Senator HIRONO. Admiral Cheeseman, General Glynn, General Stitt, General Miller, and Ms. Kelley, military recruiting continues to be a challenge. The Pentagon recently completed a study that found 80 percent of new recruits have at least one family member or close friend that served in the Armed Forces. For the panel—given that tie, how are the Services leveraging the extensive veteran and retiree population to boost recruiting?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. The Navy leverages the extensive veteran and retiree population to boost recruiting through building relationships between our recruiting districts and local veteran organizations, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. We have also leveraged veteran groups in building community relationships during Fleet Week events and have hired extensively from veteran populations to support recruiting operations around the country. Finally, the Navy continuously coordinates with the Secretary of the Navy's Retiree Council to further support our recruiting efforts.

Lieutenant General GLYNN. The Marine Corps fosters an environment that ensures the phrase "Once a Marine, Always a Marine" is a very real commitment to service. Advocacy and support from our marine veteran population in communities across the Nation is vital to success as marine recruiters are experiencing the most challenging recruiting environment since the establishment of the All-Volunteer Force. The Marine Corps has multiple entities engaging and re-connecting with our marine veteran population to revitalize the pride and purpose of being a marine and to support the recruiting force.

In 2021, Marine Corps Recruiting Command launched "Operation Semper Fi," an ongoing campaign designed to connect with marine veterans, gaining their assistance advocating for the Corps and influencing prospects. Efforts included providing a letter and decal from the Marine Corps Recruiting Command's commanding general, releasing a public service announcement (titled "Full Circle"), and hosting center of influence events at local recruiting stations with marine veterans in the community.

The Marine Corps works closely with veterans' service organizations (VSO) to create awareness and connect with marine veterans. During this year's Modern Day Marine Expo, the recruiting command's sergeant major and senior enlisted advisor for recruiting operations provided a status of recruiting brief to more than two dozen VSOs.

Lieutenant General STITT. The Army primarily communicates directly with its retired soldiers through Army Echoes, the quarterly newsletter that educates them about their retirement benefits and how to continue to serve as a soldier for Life. It's available through the Army Echoes phone app and the Soldier for Life website at <https://soldierforlife.army.mil/Retirement/army-echoes>. Retired soldiers receive direct email notification each quarter to read the newsletter in an email from DFAS.

The retired soldier mission, "Hire & Inspire," urges retired soldiers to tell their Army stories to inspire the next generation to serve in the military. Other means for communicating with retired soldiers include though annual Retiree Appreciation Days on Army installations and through installation retiree councils.

The Army also engages in outreach and engagement with Military/Veteran Support organizations to build partnerships that help raise awareness about Military

Service. At the installation level, we work directly with local VFW, American Legion, and other veteran organizations to encourage veterans to share their Army story and help raise awareness about the benefits of joining the Army.

Lieutenant General MILLER. The Air Force is implementing several programs to leverage our Veteran, retiree, and Active Duty populations to increase familiarity with Military Service and propensity to serve.

One program is the Advocates to Inspire Military Service (AIMS) initiative, which partners the Air Force Recruiting Service with military and veterans service organizations to collaborate and increase engagement in the local communities. This relationship also creates a more personal approach for the organization to refer potential recruits.

Moreover, the Air Force is also incentivizing airmen and guardians to inspire the next generation through its Stellar Talent Acquisition Recruiting Referral (STARR) program. Through this program enlisted members in the grades E-8 and below and officers in the grades O-5 and below can earn up to two Air and Space Achievement Medals for referring three recruits who enlist and ship to basic military training.

Ms. KELLEY. *Stellar Talent Acquisition Recruiting Referral (STARR)* aims to incentivize all airmen and guardians to inspire the next generation to serve in the Air Force and Space Force.

STARR authorizes enlisted service members (up to senior master sergeant) and officers (up to lieutenant colonel) to receive up to two Air and Space Achievement Medals for referring three enlisted accessions applicants who depart for basic military training.

DAF has also been working with Veteran organizations, such as the Air and Space Force's Association (AFA) with Advocates to Inspire Military Service (AIMS) initiatives and partnership with the Air Force Recruiting Service (AFRS) to assemble a high performing force. This program connects members with local recruiters to facilitate invaluable relationships and enable opportunities for recruiters to be invited to key community events and share contact information with potential recruits. AFRS is also expanding similar effort with the Space Force Association. As the Space Force builds out its Guardian Recruiting cadre, these members will be fully integrated into such outreach efforts.

RECRUITING, CITIZENSHIP FOR ENLISTEES

7. Senator HIRONO. Admiral Cheeseman, General Glynn, General Stitt, General Miller, and Ms. Kelley, despite recruiting shortfalls, many immigrants, including over half a million DACA recipients, are barred from joining the military. Our country has a proud tradition of immigrants serving in the military, which we should support. For all of the witnesses, do you think a change to title 10 to allow DACA recipients to enlist in the military would help recruiting?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. Allowing DACA recipients to join would expand the Navy's recruitable pool.

Lieutenant General GLYNN. The Marine Corps is always open to new ideas that will increase the eligible population of quality recruits. To this question, there are lengthy vetting and background checks as well as other challenges, that must be addressed; these involve other DOD and Federal Government stakeholders, to include State Department, Department of Homeland Security, and US Citizenship and Immigration Services. We are interested in working with Congress, the Department, and other stakeholders on a way forward.

Lieutenant General STITT. Expanding the possibilities for any otherwise qualified segment of the population to serve would increase the pool of eligible applicants for our recruiting agencies.

Lieutenant General MILLER. The Air Force recruits to the fullest extent authorized by 10 U.S.C. § 504. Through the Department's partnership with the U.S. Customs and Immigration Service, accelerated naturalization is offered at Basic Military Training to all who are eligible and has resulted in approximately 1,100 naturalized citizens over the past 18 months.

Ms. KELLEY. Due to the security clearance requirements for the Space Force, the service only accesses U.S. citizen (born or naturalized) who have no current foreign contacts in accordance with DODMAN5200.02—DAFMAN16-1405—DAFGM2023-01, Department of the Air Force Guidance Memorandum to DODM5200.02—DAFMAN 16-1405, Department of Air Force Personnel Security Program.

8. Senator HIRONO. Admiral Cheeseman, General Glynn, General Stitt, General Miller, and Ms. Kelley, how has the Biden Administration's Immigrant Military Members and Veterans Initiative program affected your ability to reach and recruit from immigrant communities?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. The Immigrant Military Members and Veterans Initiative (IMMVI) was established in response to E.O. 14012, Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans. IMMVI provides support to military families by considering on a case-by-case basis, parole requests from current and former military members and their immediate family members who are outside the United States so that they may seek to reenter the U.S. and have better access to Veteran Affairs offered benefits.

Additionally, Recruit Training Command (RTC), in conjunction with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), has established a streamlined process allowing eligible and interested recruits to naturalize at Basic Military Training (BMT).

Lieutenant General GLYNN. The Marine Corps continues to recruit from every ZIP code in the Nation. Recruiters have conversations with prospective applicants and inform them of their ability to earn their citizenship in accordance with current law.

Lieutenant General STITT. One of the Army success initiatives for serving members, including its non-citizens was implemented in December 2022, where Army authorized a soldier Referral Program (SRP). The SRP is pilot that allows soldiers of all grades and all components (Regular Army, U.S. Army Reserve, and Army National Guard) to share their Army story with potential applicants and refer them to a local recruiter for their potential enlistment. The program is reward to both the applicant and the serving soldier. The applicant is afforded the opportunity to join the biggest employer in the country while junior soldiers are eligible for advancement in rank for referrals that ship to training. As of May 2024, over 1400 individuals have enlisted under the SRP for the Regular Army and shipped to training.

Lieutenant General MILLER. The Immigrant Military Members and Veterans Initiative program has not affected the Air Force's ability to reach and recruit from immigrant communities.

Ms. KELLEY. Due to the security clearance requirements for the Space Force, the service only accesses U.S. citizen (born or naturalized) who have no current foreign contacts in accordance with DODMAN5200.02—DAFMAN16-1405—DAFGM2023-01, Department of the Air Force Guidance Memorandum to DODM5200.02—DAFMAN 16-1405, Department of Air Force Personnel Security Program.

9. Senator HIRONO. Admiral Cheeseman, General Glynn, General Stitt, General Miller, and Ms. Kelley, are there any other changes or updates that you think should be made to help expand the pool of eligible servicemembers?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. In addition to a national call to service, I suggest we look at methods to familiarize high school students with the military closer to the start of high school.

This would help to address modern trends where high school graduates have decided on a future career path earlier than ever. Recent polling of 16–24 year olds indicates nearly one third of students begin thinking about careers before entering high school, and nearly half of all high school students decide on a career path while in school.

Ensuring high school students are armed with accurate information about life in the military as they are considering career options could ensure those who might find a military career fulfilling do not foreclose the option because of a lack of knowledge, but instead act to keep themselves eligible through their conduct and their effort to stay in physical and academic standards to join the military.

One of the strongest factors influencing propensity to serve among recruitment age Americans is having an influencer in their lives who has served in uniform. A generation ago this was still true of most families, but now the percentage of youth with service-connected influencers has declined to the lowest level since inception of the All-Volunteer Force. At this point, nearly 30 percent of the college-bound population report having no knowledge of the military at all. Having a structured way to provide touchpoints with veterans, including support in legislation, could help to make up for this gap.

Lieutenant General GLYNN. The Marine Corps is always open to new ideas that will open the aperture for more quality recruits. Marine Corps Recruiting Command is working with recruiting and medical partners to review the current DOD Instruction on accession medical standards with an aim at modernization, improving opportunities for those who wish to serve their nation. We are also reviewing the policy waivers we receive most often to potentially broaden the pool of eligible applicants. In a broader sense, as a government, a comprehensive assessment of incentivized service to the Nation—in uniform and otherwise—could create a pool of candidates inclined to consider continued service.

Lieutenant General STITT. The Army continues to look for ways to enhance recruiting efforts. While Army doesn't currently have any new proposals under development, we ask that you continue to provide your support as we explore innovative ways to attract young Americans to join our ranks.

Lieutenant General MILLER. The Air Force is a leading member of Department's Barriers to Service Cross Functional Team which continues to assess and modernize its policies and processes while maintaining the quality force we need today and into the future. As a result, the Air Force has accessed approximately 6,100 quality recruits who would have otherwise been ineligible.

Ms. KELLEY. As part of a DAF effort in fiscal year 2023 and in partnership with the USAF, the USSF reviewed various "Barriers to Service." Policy changes included modernized hand and neck tattoo policies, body composition policies more aligned with DOD BFM standards, authorizing "Stripes for Referrals"-awarding rank advancement up to E-2 for recruits who refer applicants to DAF prior to Extended Active Duty (EAD), authorizing award of the Air and Space Achievement Medal (ASAM) for DAF members who refer applicants that ultimately enter the Service, and adjustments to the Department's Strength Aptitude Test. Changes in these areas have expanded the pool of eligible servicemembers.

NAVY RECRUITING PROGRAMS

10. Senator HIRONO. Admiral Cheeseman, as you note in your written statement, overcoming recruiting challenges requires support from the collective Navy team and the country and one of the recruiting initiatives is "Every Sailor is a Recruiter." The Navy has existing programs like the Hometown Area Recruiting Program (HARP), that allows sailors to go to their hometown areas to assist recruiters in locating individuals to enlist. Additionally, the Senior Minority Assistance to Recruiting Program, or SEMINAR, provides assistance to the Navy in its efforts to recruit more Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander applicants. These seem like win-win opportunities to promote recruiting while also allowing servicemembers to return to their home of record and have the opportunity to see family and friends. Admiral Cheeseman, is the Navy leveraging these existing programs to boost recruiting, especially for minorities?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. Yes, the Navy is leveraging both Hometown Area Recruiting Program (HARP) and Senior Minority Assistance to Recruiting Program (SEMINAR). Both programs have seen an increase in participation over past years. A few examples of how these programs are being employed include: A Naval Aviator from Saipan conducted a SEMINAR event there last week. He visited all 4 high schools and 2 colleges on the island, arranged for a static display of an HH-60 at the airport, and participated in civic engagements. The Navy is also integrating HARP into the Nuclear Enlisted Training Pipeline to capitalize on the enthusiasm and passion of the very best newly minted Nuclear Operators.

11. Senator HIRONO. Admiral Cheeseman, do you think there are challenges with current commands allowing their servicemembers to be gone for 14 to 90 days?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. It is certainly possible that a member's absence from the command would pose challenges, but it would be a challenge well within the ability of the command to address. When a sailor is assigned to a command (as opposed to transferring between commands), the Commanding Officer's approval is required to participate in hometown recruiting programs like Hometown Area Recruiting Program (HARP), Officer Hometown Area Recruiting Program (OHARP) or Senior Minority Assistance to Recruiting Program (SEMINAR). Unlike with a sailor's departure due to taking leave, the command is expected to ensure that only the most qualified sailors, with a strong endorsement by the CO, participate.

This gives the command opportunity to ensure that the requested timing is supportable, such as during periods of relative downtime between deployments or while on shore duty. These programs also offer commands additional flexibility in personnel management, along with the eventual recruiting benefit that accrues to all Navy commands. Especially today when there are fewer veterans in families to serve as military influencers, judicious use of hometown recruiting programs offers the Navy an effective way to market a Navy career in person, at a relatively minor investment on the part of the sailor's command.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ELIZABETH WARREN

MATERNAL HEALTH IN MILITARY FAMILIES

12. Senator WARREN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, maternal mental health conditions are the most common complication in pregnancy and the postpartum period. The Biden Administration Blueprint for Maternal Health includes the establishment of a pilot program to increase psychiatric consults within the Military Health System to better identify and treat maternal mental health conditions when a servicemember is struggling in the prenatal and postpartum period. What is the status of this pilot?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. The MHS Reproductive Behavioral Health Consultation pilot is currently scheduled to formally launch in September 2024 and run for 1 year. Launching the pilot in September will support personnel after servicemembers have relocated due to permanent change of station season. The DOD and Department of Veterans Affairs will evaluate the results from the pilot in the fall of 2025 and determine the feasibility and advisability of an enterprise-wide adoption, modification, or continuation of the pilot.

13. Senator WARREN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, where and when will the program's psychiatric consults and other services be available?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Consultation services provided by VA Reproductive Mental Health subject matter experts will be available in September 2024 through fall of 2025. The pilot will take place at two military medical treatment facilities: National Naval Medical Center San Diego and Naval Hospital Rota.

14. Senator WARREN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, what kind of training are Military Health System providers receiving to better identify and support servicemembers struggling with mental health in the prenatal and postpartum period?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. A variety of specialty trainings in perinatal health are available for medical providers and psychotherapists:

- The Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA)/DOD Women's Mental Health Mini-Residency has been ongoing since 2018; nearly 400 DOD health providers have participated in the last four trainings.
- The DHA Clinical Community Speaker Series Day, usually in the Spring, provides training on women's health. Spring 2024 offerings included the following: An Analysis of Cardiovascular and Hypertensive Disease in Pregnancy; Assessment of Ethical Issues Related to Health care of Women & Children; Implementation Journey of Postpartum Hemorrhage Bundle and Walk-In Contraceptive Services; Clinical Perspectives on the Complex Intersection of Pelvic floor Disorders and Mental Health; VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline (CPG) on Management of Pregnancy: Updates, Research, Interventions and Equitable Care Updates in Premenstrual and Perimenopausal Women.
- The Canadian Armed Forces Health Services and Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences held the International Military Women's Health Workshop in Spring 2022. Topics included reproductive health, women's mental health, and operational women's health.

15. Senator WARREN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, what is the DOD currently doing to help prevent maternal mental health conditions in servicemembers and military spouses, and to help reduce the stigma related to reporting and receiving treatment for these conditions?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. While the Department is unaware of the existence of specific evidence-based programs proven to prevent maternal/perinatal mental health conditions, all members of the Armed Forces and their dependents can receive standardized mental health screening at any MTF worldwide. Per the VA and DOD Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPG) on Management of Pregnancy, updated in July 2023, standardized mental health screening in the perinatal and postpartum period is conducted at specific intervals using evidence-based tools, either the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale or the Patient Health Questionnaire-9.

While these tools might not result in a specific mental health diagnosis, they can help provide early identification of those most at risk. Depending on the results of these standard screening tools, appropriate treatment, depending on patient presentation, is offered. For those who are identified as being at increased risk of depression, health care providers follow the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force guidelines, which recommend that clinicians provide or refer pregnant and postpartum persons to counseling interventions (Perinatal Depression: Preventive Interventions,

2019). Staff at MTFs can also provide a variety of other effective treatment modalities, such as individual or group interpersonal psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and/or medication as required by the condition and medical history. In addition, the DOD offers a variety of mental health support resources for beneficiaries.

In addition to standard screening, prenatal patients, their families, and other members of the patient's support system are proactively provided with education throughout the pregnancy and postpartum period, so they are aware of the signs and symptoms of perinatal mood and anxiety disorders. As physical, physiological, and psychosocial changes can occur anytime during the pregnancy and postpartum periods, ensuring these conversations occur early and often decreases stigma, normalizes screening and detection, and encourages patients and their families to discuss any mental health concerns.

SERVICEMEMBERS AND SCAMS

16. Senator WARREN. Secretary Vazirani, online scams are on the rise and are increasingly targeting service members. What methods are scammers using and what is the Department of Defense doing to inform, warn, protect against such scams?

Secretary VAZIRANI. Online scams are one way scammers attempt to target servicemembers, who have historically been vulnerable to a variety of illegal or unethical practices in the commercial marketplace. With support from Congress through legislation such as mandated financial readiness training, the Military Lending Act, and the Servicemembers' Civil Relief Act, the Department has developed a set of tools to help safeguard military families from predatory lenders, unfair debt collectors, and other bad actors to support the financial readiness of the Force.

DOD's foundational protection strategy focuses on training and educating the Force on military and general consumer protections, while ensuring and encouraging servicemembers know how to seek support should they become targets. This strategy also involves training DOD leaders and service providers to identify and report incidents. All servicemembers receive standardized training, either during initial entry training or at their first duty station, on the fundamentals of military consumer protection law, protection against deceptive consumer practices, and how to recognize and avoid identity theft. Additionally, military and general consumer protection content is provided as common military training at various stages throughout the military lifecycle. The standardized training content also includes guidance on how servicemembers can access and monitor their free annual credit reports.

To monitor and stay ahead of emerging scams, DOD collaborates with financial experts from other Federal agencies and leverages its longstanding partnerships with various not-for-profit non-Federal entities. The DOD regularly conducts cross-agency consumer protection advocacy campaigns that offer timely and relevant content to keep servicemembers and their families informed. For example, each July, the Department partners with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) for Military Consumer Month (MCM). MCM provides updated information and resources to help leaders and DOD service providers better educate servicemembers and their families about military consumer scams and protections.

DOD also takes action to respond to emerging threats. In January 2023, the Department became aware of an imposter scam targeting newly enlisted servicemembers where fraudsters posed as a trusted representatives from the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS). Through its well-developed partnerships, DOD collaborated with the FTC and the CFPB to educate servicemembers and DOD leaders across multiple channels (e.g., social media, eNewsletters, DFAS communication alerts, etc.) about this specific threat. By increasing servicemember and leadership understanding of the DFAS imposter scam at all levels, the DOD helped protect servicemembers from falling victim and suffering financial losses.

17. Senator WARREN. Secretary Vazirani, a 2020 report by the Federal Trade Commission found that Active Duty service members were 22 percent more likely than their civilian counterparts to report that an identity thief had used their stolen information to open a new credit card or other account, and a January 2023 Consumer Financial Protection Bureau report found that cases of military identity theft are increasing. What is the scope of this problem and how is it being addressed?

Secretary VAZIRANI. The Department takes seriously the threat of identity theft, like other military consumer protection threats, as it may threaten the financial well-being of servicemembers and their families, which ultimately impacts mission readiness. The Department has taken action to help members reduce their risk of identity theft and to provide support to those servicemembers who have fallen vic-

tim. Military and general consumer protection is a mandatory topic area in the DOD's required financial literacy training that is delivered at various touchpoints across the military lifecycle. Within those topics, servicemembers are trained on how to recognize and identify, and if necessary, encouraged to take steps, including reporting, to resolve identity theft.

Mandatory training is reinforced by DOD's outreach efforts on social media, DOD-owned websites, eNewsletters, and a mobile app called Sen\$e, alongside each Military Service's efforts to deliver micro-learning on the subject. DOD also provides a global network of nationally accredited financial counselors who are trained in military and general consumer protections and who, through agreements with its non-Federal partners, can access credit reports to review with servicemembers and spouses during face-to-face counseling sessions.

18. Senator WARREN. Secretary Vazirani, there has been a growth in digital payment apps in the servicemember community. What steps is DOD taking to protect servicemembers from the potential abuse of bad actors on online payment apps?

Secretary VAZIRANI. The Department keeps abreast of developments in financial technologies through regular interagency interactions enabled by its membership in the Financial Literacy Education Commission, which includes the membership of 24 Federal agencies, and through its longstanding partnerships with relevant not-for-profit non-Federal entities. DOD works with these partners to develop messaging to inform the military community about emerging financial threats. DOD both develops its own educational content for servicemembers, their families, leaders, and DOD service providers, and collaborates on products being developed by other Federal agencies to ensure effective outreach and messaging to the military audience.

To address the rapid proliferation of online payment applications, DOD worked with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in 2022 to educate DOD service providers at its annual training symposium on Consumer Credit and Buy Now Pay Later products. At the 2023 symposium, the Federal Trade Commission presented a session on Consumer Know-How: Rights, Rip-offs, and Resources and the Commodities Futures Trading Commission provided information on Digital Assets, scams, and protections. In 2024, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of the Comptroller of the Currency provided information on Banking and Financial Services. DOD will continue to seek out opportunities to train and educate its leaders, service providers, and members of the military community on the latest developments and what impact they might have on individual and military family financial readiness.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TAMMY DUCKWORTH

MEDICAL READINESS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

19. Senator DUCKWORTH. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, the DOD Inspector General published a report in 2023 highlighting capacity and capability challenges facing the Military Health System in the Indo-Pacific region, including staffing shortages and limited TRICARE network providers. This year, I'm developing a proposal for the Fiscal Year 2025 NDAA to create a medical readiness program in the Indo-Pacific region that would expand access to quality medical care for servicemembers and their families during peacetime and in the event of a contingency. The proposal would allow DOD to enter into agreements with foreign medical facilities and accredit these facilities to ensure they meet the same standard as DOD military treatment facilities. The DOD already has similar agreements with the Republic of Korea to help servicemembers and their families get access to Korean medical facilities. Can you speak to how working with our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to gain access to foreign medical facilities could provide lifesaving care during a conflict for servicemembers needing to be medically evacuated?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. We appreciate your ongoing support to help ensure the Military Health System is positioned to continue providing worldclass health care to our servicemembers and their families both in the U.S. and abroad. We agree that working with partner nations within the USINDOPACOM area of responsibility (AOR) to increase access to quality host-nation medical care has the potential to help address shortfalls in meeting Combatant Command operational and concept plan requirements in support of Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCOs). Facilities that meet our standards and are available during a mass casualty or LSCO event could aid in the provision of timely lifesaving care. There are a range of additional benefits of having partner nations prepared to support casualties during a LSCO with particular emphasis on trauma capabilities and experience with

similarities and differences in our respective medical systems. While the Department does support the concept of expanding the access to vetted civilian medical networks of allies and partners within the INDOPACOM AOR, for peacetime access to care, global health engagement, and in case of LSCO scenarios, the criteria differ for each of those three scenarios.

20. Senator DUCKWORTH. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, can you work with me and my staff to refine this proposal with a goal of potentially establishing this medical readiness program in the fiscal year 2025 NDAA?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Yes, we recognize the value of working with partner nations within the INDOPACOM AOR to increase access to quality host-nation medical care. My staff are prepared to work with your office to achieve this goal.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR DAN SULLIVAN

ENHANCED RECRUITING EFFORTS IN HIGH SCHOOLS

21. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, I understand that your office proposes increasing the number of minimum visits offered to high schools by service recruiters to a minimum of 4 per year. That proposal would enhance the quantity of visits, but does not address the quality of the visits. What statutory changes are needed to enhance the quality of the visit?

Secretary VAZIRANI. Optimal access would include unfettered access to students and access to student contact information in a complete and timely manner. Additionally, recruiters would have an opportunity to attend high school career fairs/sporting events free of cost and be allowed a minimum of two recruiter visits, per service, per month (quality visits). While this is optimal, striking a balance between what recruiters need and want, and what school officials are able and willing to provide, is challenging.

Optimal access would include the following elements:

- Schools would allow recruiters to visit at least once or twice a month.
- Visits would be announced to students and faculty.
- Students would be given passes to visit with recruiters when requested.
- The location for recruiters to set up should be in a student high-traffic area.
- Career days and classroom presentations should be allowed and encouraged.
- Complete contact/directory information would be provided within 60 days of request.

22. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, do high schools facilitate virtual recruiter visits upon request?

Secretary VAZIRANI. Recruiters interact best with students in face-to-face settings. Many schools provided a virtual means for recruiters to meet with students during the COVID-19 pandemic, but this was born out of necessity as opposed to more productive face-to-face meetings that have since resumed.

23. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, does DOD or DoEd provide guidance to high schools on what support the schools must provide to service recruiters?

Secretary VAZIRANI. Previously, we have worked with Department of Education officials to level set expectations. Department of Education officials reached out to State Chief School officials and shared that information. Beyond that, states and local school officials establish guidance (policy and State law) regarding the degree of support required to be provided to service recruiters by schools.

24. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, do State departments of education provide contact information for high school aged students who are choosing to home school?

Secretary VAZIRANI. No. There are no formal requirements for State departments of education to provide student listings for high school aged students attending a home school program. Individual states have differing reporting requirements for home-schooled students.

25. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, how do recruiters contact students who are attending school virtually or remotely?

Secretary VAZIRANI. Recruiters continue to employ the same methods to attempt to contact home schooled students as they do for traditional in-resident students. This includes the use of email, social media, and the telephone, as well as attempt-

ing to engage students in their local communities through attendance at career fairs and other activities.

WAIVERS FOR POTENTIAL RECRUITS

26. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, MHS Genesis provides an unprecedentedly high level of access to a potential recruit's medical history. In turn, conditions or diagnoses that otherwise may not have been known or mistakenly overlooked flag a potential recruit's record and can make him/her ineligible for a condition that is likely ultimately to be waived. Common examples include seeing a mental health counselor during a difficult time or even acne medication. What initiatives are being undertaken to make the waiver process more efficient?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. The Services have increased waiver authority resources, reorganized waiver offices to improve efficiency, and increased oversight of waiver authorities to streamline waiver processing timelines. MEPCOM's Innovation and Facilitation Team has conducted multiple training sessions with the Service waiver authorities on how to use MHS GENESIS to review applicant medical exam results and electronic health histories to increase the speed in which they process waivers. Prior to this initiative, the waiver authorities were using time intensive and redundant paper-based processes to adjudicate waiver packages.

27. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, are there any initiatives that DOD is exploring that would eliminate the need for waivers for low-level, past medical conditions that are highly unlikely to cause issues during the recruit's initial term of service?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. The Accession and Retention Medical Standards Working Group is currently reviewing the medical standards outlined in DODI 6130.03 Volume 1, which pertains to the Medical Standards for Military Service: Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction. Since the initiation of the Medical Accession Records Pilot (MARF) in June 2022, conditions have been periodically added, with the most recent update on June 5, 2024, bringing the total to 51 conditions. MARF directs the United States Military Entrance Processing Command to evaluate Military Service applicants using revised time limitations for these 51 disqualifying medical conditions as specified in DODI 6130.03, Volume 1. The most recent additions include time standard relaxation for ADHD, learning disorders, and restrictive airway conditions.

28. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, what percentage of recruits require a medical waiver?

Secretary VAZIRANI. In fiscal year 2023, 23.1 percent of non-prior service accessions that entered Active Duty entered with a medical waiver. Through the first half of fiscal year 2024 (October 2023 to March 2024), 29.2 percent of non-prior service accessions have received medical waivers.

29. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, what percentage of recruits follow through with pursuing waivers once notified that a condition requires a waiver?

Secretary VAZIRANI. We are unable to provide data for this question as currently phrased due to inability to collect data on total number of Service waivers requested. Upon disqualification by USMEPCOM providers, the MEPS are only aware that the Service pursued a medical waiver on a disqualified applicant when the applicant's waiver approval letter is returned to the MEPS for review and adjustment of the applicants file. This informs USMEPCOM that the Service concerned has waived the applicant's disqualifying condition(s). The below chart reflects the data we can provide.

Date Range	Medical Exams	Disqualified	% of DQ Applicants Enlisting w/Med Waiver
1MAR21 - 28FEB22	223,583	57,503	39.60%
MHS-G Goes Online			
1MAR22 - 28FEB23	221,943	81,696	45.40%
1MAR23 - 28FEB24	261,499	111,142	44.90%

30. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, and Secretary Martinez-Lopez, do you believe the waiver process for a medical condition is too burdensome on the recruit?

Secretary VAZIRANI and Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. The current waiver process provides the Services with key information on which to make an informed risk assessment. While there is always room for improvement, we believe the current process is the most efficient and effective and places the minimum amount of burden on the new recruits in order for the Services to make an informed quality assessment.

TRICARE PLAN ACCESS

31. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, how are TRICARE Prime Service areas determined?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. As outlined in Federal regulation, the primary purpose of TRICARE Prime is to support the effective operation of a military medical treatment facility (MTF), which exists to support the medical readiness of the Armed Forces and the readiness of medical personnel. Consequently, TRICARE Prime is offered in areas where the Director determines that it is appropriate to support the effective operation of one or more MTFs.

32. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, TRICARE plans for dependents of Active Duty service members (ADSM) are geographically dependent. When a servicemember is assigned to a remote location greater than 50 miles from a Military Treatment Facility (MTF), the dependents have the option of TRICARE Prime Remote or TRICARE Prime Select. It is not uncommon for dependents to temporarily relocate during an ADSM's deployment or extended temporary duty so they can be nearer to extended family for additional support while the ADSM is away. Is a statutory change required to allow the families of ADSM to be able to keep TRICARE Prime or TRICARE Prime Remote if they voluntarily move from the permanent duty station for additional family support?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Entitlement to TRICARE Prime Remote (TPR) is established by statute (10 U.S.C. 1079(p)), and a statutory change would be required to allow Active Duty Family Members (ADFMs) to enroll in and/or keep TPR if they elect not to reside with (or voluntarily move away from) the member when the member is assigned to a TPR permanent duty station. If an Active Duty Service Member (ADSM) receives a subsequent unaccompanied assignment after the TPR assignment, and the ADFMs are not authorized to accompany the member to the next duty assignment, and the ADFMs continue to reside at the same TPR address, they may remain in TPR for the duration of the subsequent assignment, so long as they do not move away from that location. If the ADFMs move into a Prime Service Area (PSA), they may enroll in TRICARE Prime. If the ADFMs move outside a PSA, TRICARE Select would be the only TRICARE option available to them.

33. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, is the Extended Care Health Option (ECHO) only available to members who have dependents enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. Generally, yes. By law, TRICARE beneficiaries must be "registered" to receive the benefits provided under the ECHO Program. This registration policy enhances the efforts to provide an integrated set of services and supplies to eligible TRICARE beneficiaries and ensures effective utilization of program resources. In order to register for the ECHO program, the Active Duty sponsor must submit the following documentation to the enrolling contractor responsible for administering the ECHO in the geographic area where the beneficiary resides: 1) evidence that the sponsor is a servicemember in one of the Uniformed Services; 2) medical records which demonstrate that the Active Duty Family Member has a qualifying condition in accordance with TRICARE policy and who otherwise meets all applicable ECHO requirements; and, 3) evidence, as provided by the sponsor's branch of service, that the family or family member seeking ECHO registration is enrolled in the EFMP. This last requirement is waived when the sponsor's branch of service does not provide the EFMP; or the beneficiary seeks ECHO eligibility based on the deceased sponsor provisions listed in TRICARE policy; or other circumstances exist that make enrollment in the EFMP unnecessary or inappropriate, such as when an individual resides with the custodial parent who is not the Active Duty sponsor. To avoid delaying receipt of ECHO services while awaiting completion of enrollment in the EFMP, beneficiaries may be granted provisional eligibility status for a period of not more than 90 days during which ECHO benefits will be authorized and payable.

34. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, is it true that if an ADSM is divorced and has a dependent child who was enrolled in ECHO because of their eligibility that the child loses ECHO eligibility if the child is primarily placed for custody with the non-ADSM parent, even if the child maintains dependent status?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. No, eligibility for the ECHO program is not based on the domiciliary of the dependent child. The ECHO enrolled dependent child will remain eligible as long as the dependent child otherwise meets eligibility requirements of the ECHO program (i.e., the sponsor continues to be an Active Duty member (unless deceased) and the dependent child continues to have a qualifying condition).

COMMUNITY SUPPORT PROGRAMS

35. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, does the Defense Community Infrastructure Program allow funding to be used for public school infrastructure that serves a significant portion of military families?

Secretary VAZIRANI. The Defense Community Infrastructure Program, administered by the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation, is a competitive grant program that can be used to support enhancements to public infrastructure, to include schools that support an installation.

36. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, how does Department determine how DOD Impact Aid is distributed?

Secretary VAZIRANI. The DOD Impact Aid Program is governed by 20 U.S.C. § 7703a and 7703b which prescribes how a Local Educational Agency (LEA) qualifies for funding. The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) administers the DOD Impact Aid Program. A breakdown of the process is provided below:

- DODEA requests data from the Department of Education annually.
- The data provides the basis for determining which LEAs are eligible to receive DOD Supplement to Impact Aid and which LEAs are eligible to apply for DOD Impact Aid for Children with Severe Disabilities (CWSA).
- The Department of Education's Office of Impact Aid provides DODEA with data on the LEAs that meet the following criteria based on data collected from the preceding school year. The data provided by ED includes:
 - o Students' residence (on or off Federal property)
 - o Average daily attendance figures for each LEA.
 - o The number of military dependent students with disabilities who attend each LEA, and data on State and national average per pupil costs.
 - o LEAs with at least 20 percent (20 percent) enrollment of military dependent students (as rounded to the nearest whole percent).
 - o Contact information for each LEA.

37. Senator SULLIVAN. Secretary Vazirani, once DOD Impact Aid is distributed to a state's education department, is there any way to guarantee it goes to the schools that have large proportions of military families?

Secretary VAZIRANI. DOD impact aid goes directly to the local education agency concerned based on the Department of Education formula and input from the local education agency, with one exception. Alaska is the only State where that considers DOD Impact Aid as "Alaskan revenue" so it is received by the State.

AT-SEA MANNING GAPS

38. Senator SULLIVAN. Admiral Cheeseman, in January, there were a reported 21,000 gaps for at-sea billets. Those gaps are often filled with sailors pulled from ships in maintenance periods or the basic phase of the Optimized Fleet Response Plan (OFRP). Can reservists be used to fill at-sea manning gaps?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. The Navy Reserve plays an integral role in providing operational support to the Fleet and has regularly been called upon to help fill at-sea manning gaps for specific skills. We utilize Selected Reserve Sailors performing Active Duty jobs on Active Duty for Operational Support (ADOS) or recall orders onboard surface ships, submarines, and aviation squadrons at sea. The Navy will continue to carefully balance employment of Reserve sailors to fill Active Component vacancies with the need to maintain warfighting and mobilization readiness of Reserve Component units for strategic depth.

39. Senator SULLIVAN. Admiral Cheeseman, given the immense numbers of at-sea gaps, has the Navy explored making certain ships, perhaps LCS, manned partially

by full-time reservists as was done with some Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigates in the 1980's?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. Navy has assessed partially manning ships with full-time reservists and found it is not an appropriate substitute for Active Duty sailors. However, we do intend to establish reserve billets at Surface Readiness Groups to support maintenance and other requirements.

SERVICEMEMBER INPUT ON PERMANENT DUTY STATION ORDERS

40. Senator SULLIVAN. General Stitt, the Army recently instituted two enlistment contract options that 11th Airborne soldiers in Alaska consistently mention to me and my staff. The first is option 20, which give recruits the option to pick their first duty station. The second is option 19, which provides geographic stability by allowing soldiers to remain at certain permanent duty stations. Do you have the official numbers for 2023 on how many soldiers chose Alaska as their first duty station?

Lieutenant General STITT. 572 soldiers chose Alaska as their first duty station in 2023.

41. Senator SULLIVAN. General Stitt, do you have numbers for how many soldiers chose to stay in AK?

Lieutenant General STITT. In fiscal year 2024, 198 soldiers have reenlisted to remain in Alaska.

42. Senator SULLIVAN. General Stitt, how effective have option 19 and option 20 been as recruiting and retention tools in Alaska?

Lieutenant General STITT. Approximately 25 percent of recruits select their first duty station which appears to be an effective incentive for enlistment.

43. Senator SULLIVAN. Admiral Cheeseman, General Glynn, General Miller, and Ms. Kelley, is your service considering similar programs to the Army's option 19 and option 20 to improve recruiting and retention?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. We are not actively considering a homesteading or guaranteed first location program at this point. Our recruiters provide feedback routinely to the chain of command based on their discussions with potential applicants, which we use to ensure we have the right set of recruiting programs to offer a compelling package to convert potential leads into future sailors. Up to this point, we have been able to meet this kind of request through other programs, such as offering guaranteed school programs with a known set of duty locations.

In addition, existing Navy policy that applies to all sailors such as marketplace detailing, operational deferments and a policy preference for geographic stability in assignments is another way we can encourage enlistments without the need to offer homesteading or a chosen first duty station as a specific recruiting program.

Lieutenant General GLYNN. Though the Marine Corps has the authority to guarantee applicants one of three geographic locations (east coast, west coast, and overseas) for their initial tour of duty—comparable to the Army's 'Option 19' enlistment program—the Geographic Option Program is not currently used as a recruiting tool due to challenges in the assignment process. Specifically, this program introduces rigidity into the assignment process hindering the Marine Corps' ability to assign marines according to Force Design objectives and Global Force Management requirements.

Lieutenant General MILLER. Currently, the Air Force's sole geographic stability program, the First Term Airman In-Place Base of Preference program, caters exclusively to airmen in their initial enlistment. The Air Force is considering reinstating the In-Place Base of Preference program for career airmen, as it offers a no-cost Permanent Change of Station and a retention incentive. Currently, there are no such programs available for officers.

Ms. KELLEY. Currently, the Space Force is not considering similar programs to the Army's Choice of Station Programs known as Option 19 and Option 20 to improve recruiting and retention. Most Guardians benefit from the probability of initial assignments in CO, FL, and CA along with the predictable, standardized battle rhythm of the employed in place model. USSFs employed in place model (Space Force Generation (SPAFORGEN)) brings an unmatched level of consistency in terms of deployment ops tempo for Guardians vice deployment models that exist elsewhere in the DOD. Space Force assignment policy and processes allow Guardians to provide inputs on assignment preferences and desirability, to include remaining at their permanent duty station.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TED BUDD

TRICARE PROGRAM

44. Senator BUDD. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, I am aware of the delay in TRICARE's access to new drugs compared to other health programs, partly due to strict step-therapy rules. In one such instance, TRICARE beneficiaries under 18 must use two stimulants and one non-stimulant before accessing a new non-stimulant ADHD treatment. Adults require three stimulants and one non-stimulant. Other government and commercial plans only require one step for similar treatments. Can you explain why TRICARE has different step-therapy rules than other government and commercial plans?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. According to Federal law and regulation, the DOD Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee (P&T) recommends pharmaceutical agent inclusion on the TRICARE Uniform Formulary based on a review of the relative clinical and cost-effectiveness of the pharmaceutical agent. DOD P&T membership includes practicing physicians and pharmacists from many specialties and Military Services who use their collective professional judgment based on evidence-based reviews to recommend step-therapy rules for specific pharmaceutical agents. Of note, some non-stimulant attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder treatments have black box warnings from the Food and Drug Administration regarding higher rates of suicidal thoughts and behavior when used. These types of warnings emphasize the precautionary value of strict step therapy protocols toward reducing risk to the patient.

45. Senator BUDD. Secretary Martinez-Lopez, will you commit to working with my staff and me on these care access protocols?

Secretary MARTINEZ-LOPEZ. DOD remains committed to its proven evidence-based process balancing risks and benefits for all TRICARE beneficiaries based on the Federal law and regulations that govern the TRICARE pharmacy benefit.

MARINE CORPS TOTAL FITNESS

46. Senator BUDD. General Glynn, can you please explain "Marine Corps Total Fitness" and describe ways Congress can help the Marine Corps develop this concept?

Lieutenant General GLYNN. Marine Corps Total Fitness (MCTF) delivers Warrior Readiness and Resilience (WARR) through an integrated system that invests in prevention and skill-building efforts to optimize warfighter performance, readiness, lethality, and resilience. Total Fitness optimizes service-wide force longevity and performance through holistic human performance programs designed to strengthen the force and family.

MCTF focuses on four interconnected domains that equip commanders with a seamless system to boost readiness:

- *Social*: Building and maintaining healthy, positive relationships with peers, unit leaders, friends, family members, and members of the community.
- *Spiritual*: Finding inner strength that comes from a higher purpose.
- *Mental*: Engaging in healthy thinking and behaviors builds strong intellectual and emotional habits.
- *Physical*: Building strength, flexibility, stamina, and a well-rounded fitness program by possessing the knowledge, skills, mindset, and tools to perform well, avoid injuries, and recover if injured.

MCTF enables marines, units, and families to strengthen core performance in any environment and recognize what supports—and hinders—their overall wellness and ability to perform. MCTF defines what it means to be healthy and can help strengthen the whole marine and the marine's family, a benefit throughout the career continuum. MCTF is integrated and embedded prevention. The Marine Corps will leverage the integrated primary prevention workforce that is being built and use the tenets of MCTF to foster the holistic wellness and personal growth of marines and families.

The Marine Corps is developing WARR centers to enhance access to integrated prevention and response services that can assist marines and families in building their total fitness. These centers consolidate wellness, prevention, and performance capabilities. WARR centers have opened at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms. The Marine Corps is looking into sustaining and further expanding the WARR model for holistic wellness, by focusing on Human Performance, Health Promotions, Aquatics, Fitness, Sports, and the Single Marine Program. MCTF is a top priority for the Marine

Corps, and efforts are underway to integrate key staff in facilities where marines and family members congregate.

MHS GENESIS

47. Senator BUDD. General Miller, MHS Genesis is uncovering more recruit medical information on prospective recruits. This is slowing down the recruiting process. The Air Force recruiting commander said 9,000 recruits walked away because of the delay. In response to this, the Army has mobilized reservists to augment the Military Entrance Processing Command and help review records more quickly. Why hasn't the Air Force done the same thing?

Lieutenant General MILLER. The Department recognizes the importance of surging capacity to help improve medical processing times and began augmenting USMEPCOM in April 2024 with Reserve medical administration staff support and medical officers. In fiscal year 2024, the Air Force provided 35 Medical Technicians and 28 Medical Providers to facilitate Active Duty processing requirements. This support will continue through at least fiscal year 2025.

NAVY RECRUITMENT INITIATIVE

48. Senator BUDD. Admiral Cheeseman, you touched on the Navy's progress in exceeding its recruited by 2,500 more individuals compared to the same time last year. You mentioned the Navy's initiative concerning the Future Sailor Preparatory Course program. Can you provide a more detailed explanation of this program and discuss its impact on improving the Navy's recruiting efforts?

Vice Admiral CHEESEMAN. The Future Sailor Preparatory Course (FSPC) mirrors an Army program. The Navy has established the FSPC with two tracks: Fitness and Academic. FSPC Physical (FSPC-P) first started in April 2023 and allows Navy Recruiting Command (NRC) to recruit applicants with an Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) of 31 and higher, and body compositions of 27–32 percent for males and 37–42 percent for females. These Future Sailors (FS) enter a 3-week physical fitness program for up to 90-days. Once the FS reaches the DOD body-fat standard, 26 percent (male) or 36 percent (female), they will graduate the course and enter basic military training at Recruit Training Command. As of 25 June 2024, FSPC-P has graduated 588 FS, with an overwhelming majority meeting standards in the first 3 weeks.

FSPC Academic (FSPC-A) first began in Fall 2023 and allows applicants with AFQT scores <30 to study, retake the Armed Forces Classification Test (AFCT), and reclassify into a new rating. This program utilizes a mixture of civilian instructors and Active Duty officers to teach fundamental math, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. After 3 weeks of classroom instruction, FS take the AFCT. The first pilot course convened January 2024, and has graduated over 1,400 FS, with over 29 percent moving into CAT III or higher, and 40 percent reclassifying into new rates. Those who do not improve enough after the first 3 weeks are offered an opportunity to retake the course once.

These programs make a positive impact on Navy recruiting. FSPC-P specifically improves recruitment into Navy's most technically challenging career fields such as cybersecurity and nuclear. Likewise, the 40 percent of FSPC-A graduates who reclassify go on to fill more complex career fields that expand job opportunities for recruits and ultimately reduce gaps at sea for critically undermanned ratings, including Master-at-Arms (MA), Hospital Corpsman (HM), Cryptologic Technician (CTM/CTT), and Submarine Electronics/Computer Field (SECF).

