

**MILITARY CONSTRUCTION, VETERANS AFFAIRS,
AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026**

HEARINGS

BEFORE A

SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

ON

H.R. 3944

MAKING APPROPRIATIONS FOR MILITARY CONSTRUCTION, THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND RELATED AGENCIES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING SEPTEMBER 30, 2026, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

**Department of Defense
Department of Veterans Affairs**

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**MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VETERANS
AFFAIRS, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026**

TUESDAY, JUNE 17, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met at 10:31 a.m. in Room SD-124, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John Boozman (chairman) presiding.
Present: Senators Boozman, Murkowski, Hoeven, Hyde-Smith, Ossoff, Baldwin, and Gillibrand.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND FAMILY HOUSING

STATEMENT OF HON. DALE MARKS, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR ENERGY, INSTALLATIONS, AND ENVIRONMENT

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN BOOZMAN

Senator BOOZMAN. Good morning. And the subcommittee will come to order.

First, I would like to welcome Ranking Member Ossoff, and congratulate him on the birth of his second daughter, Lila. I have got three daughters, lots of drama at my house.

[Laughter.]

Senator BOOZMAN. I look forward to working with you on the subcommittee. And again, we just want to welcome you.

We meet today to discuss the President's fiscal year 2026 Budget Request for Military Construction and Family Housing for the Department of Defense.

I would like to begin by recognizing today's panel. Today, we will hear from representatives of the Military Services as well as the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Joining us are: The Honorable Dale Marks, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment; Lieutenant General David Wilson, Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-9; Vice Admiral Jeffrey Jablon, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Installations and Logistics; Lieutenant General Stephen [Sel-en-ka]—Sklenka—I am sorry—Deputy Commandant for Installations and Logistics; Lieutenant General Tom Miller, Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, Engineering, and Force Protection, who is approaching retirement after 34 years of service. General, thank you so much for your many years of service, and we certainly wish you

well in your retirement. I am sure we will be hearing more from you someplace, but again, we do appreciate you very, very much. Brigadier General Zachary Warakowski, Space Force Assistant Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Operations, Cyber, and Nuclear.

This year's MILCON request is \$18.9 billion, a figure we only recently received due to significant delays in the delivery of the budget to Congress. We, on the subcommittee, look forward to receiving the justification books and related exhibits, which still have not been delivered but are expected later this month.

From the data currently available, we know this request is an increase of \$1.4 billion over the fiscal year 2025 enacted levels. While I am encouraged to see another year of growth in the MILCON request, I remain concerned that we are not necessarily buying more, we are simply paying more.

Some of these budget numbers are staggering. Not that long ago, hitting the \$100 million mark on a single project was significant. Now, it has become routine. Increments, once the exception, are increasingly the norm, accounting for nearly \$6 billion in this year's request. That is more than 40 projects so costly they require incremental funding over multiple years.

That may seem normal now, but this was not always the case. Multi-billion-dollar recapitalization efforts, combined with the increasing complexity of facilities needed to support today's weapon systems, are resulting in larger and more complex projects. At the same time, inflation and other economic pressures continue to escalate costs. This trajectory is not sustainable, and future budget requests can't continue absorbing these rising costs.

To that end, I am encouraged by the conversations taking place within the Department that are examining the full range of factors, policies, procedures, regulations, and laws that affect MILCON and its associated costs. Some of these are established by Congress, others stem from DOD policy, and some may be self-imposed. As such, the effort required to drive meaningful changes will vary, but I am hopeful these discussions will lead to thoughtful analysis, honest dialogue, and ultimately, real improvements in the efficiency of the MILCON process.

Some of this will require close collaboration between Congress and the Department, and I am committed to being a partner in that effort. There will always be factors beyond your control, which makes managing the areas you control all the more critical.

The recent injunction reinstating Project Labor Agreement requirements is a clear example of how external influences can introduce uncertainty and added cost into the MILCON process, costs that are especially difficult to anticipate given how long the current planning, programming, and budgeting cycles take. I hope one outcome of the ongoing review directed by the Deputy Secretary of Defense is a faster time line from project inception to final delivery.

As a critical Force enabler, MILCON supports everything from infrastructure tied to new weapons platforms to quality-of-life facilities like hospitals, schools, and housing. We owe it to the service members and the taxpayer to deliver timely, high-quality facilities, on schedule, and within budget, and I hope that future budget requests reflect efficiencies that lower the cost of individual projects.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and continuing the dialogue and work needed for a successful MILCON program.

Before we turn to our witnesses, I would like to recognize my colleague, Senator Ossoff, for his opening remarks.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JON OSSOFF

Senator OSSOFF. Good morning, and thank you very much, Chairman Boozman. Thank you for your partnership. I look forward to the important bipartisan work we will do together leading this subcommittee. I also want to thank you for your kind words celebrating Lila's arrival. And I am pleased to report, Mr. Chairman, that baby and mother are both healthy. So thank you for the well wishes.

To our witnesses, thank you for being here. Thank you for your service to the Nation. I do want to note that, General Sklenka, and General Warakomski, we have two Georgians on the panel, from Marietta and Snellville. So we are proud of you and your work, and it is great to be here at my first MILCON-VA hearing as the subcommittee's ranking member to review the fiscal year 2026 budget request for Military Construction and Family Housing.

The Military Construction budget is essential to our national security, to the capabilities and resilience of military installations across the country and around the world, and to the quality of life for service members and military families.

Georgia, of course, is home to 13 defense installations vital to our national security and home to some of the Nation's most important missions and capabilities, including key Air Force missions at Robins Air Force Base in Warner Robins, and Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta; the Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, outside of Columbus; Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, on Georgia's coast; Fort Stewart, home of the 3rd ID; Fort Gordon, home of the Army Signal Corps and the Cyber Center of Excellence, where they also host a vital NSA facility; Hunter Army Airfield, which hosts elite U.S. Army Ranger and aviation elements; the Marine Corps Logistics Base in Albany; Combat Readiness Training Center in Savannah; and more.

And through this subcommittee, I will continue my work alongside Chairman Boozman, and members on both sides of the aisle to ensure that installations in Georgia, across the Continental United States, and around the world are resourced to defend our Nation, and to deliver the safety, security, health, and quality of life deserved by our service members and their families.

For too long, Congress and the Department have under-resourced facilities like child development centers, Department of Defense schools, family housing, and barracks, plundering the accounts that support military quality of life in order to fund other priorities, and this persistent neglect of Military quality of life does a disservice to those who serve, and to their families, it is also a national security issue.

If service members can't live, eat, train, and work in safe, healthy, world-class facilities, our readiness is undermined, and so is morale. And the Department's failure to provide military families, especially junior enlisted personnel, with the health, safety,

and quality of life they deserve undermines recruiting and retention of talented young people to defend the United States.

I am pleased that this year's Military Construction Budget Request includes nearly \$500 million for five important Georgia projects in fiscal year 2026. These are projects I have championed for years, from a new elementary school at Fort Benning to the Trident facility at Kings Bay, and their inclusion in this request demonstrates the critical contributions of Georgia's installations, missions, and units to America's national defense. I will continue working through this subcommittee to see them through.

In total, this year's budget requests \$18.9 billion for MILCON, a \$1.4 billion increase over the current year-long CR. We know that MILCON has historically acted as a bill payer for other efforts within the Department and that the services have extensive unmet needs. As I noted earlier, deferred MILCON has contributed to service members living in dilapidated barracks, training in insufficient facilities, and working in deficient spaces for their missions.

I want to note a few concerns. First of all, I note with concern that the White House has decided to circumvent the budget process and push \$900 million of MILCON funding into the partisan reconciliation measure. Let me be clear, MILCON in a reconciliation bill is not MILCON Appropriations, it is a slush fund. The nature of reconciliation is such that neither this subcommittee nor the whole Senate will have control or meaningful oversight of those funds.

And it is my belief that if Congress makes the mistake of accommodating this request, to fund Military Construction via reconciliation rather than through the appropriations process, we bow to executive overreach, degrade our own constitutional authority, and drastically diminish our ability to oversee the use of these funds.

I am concerned that the administration intends to use those funds, \$900 million of Military Construction, through the reconciliation process, not to upgrade defense facilities at home and abroad, but instead to build a migrant detention complex across Department of Defense facilities, nationwide, and around the world, and in so doing, divert the Department's mission from fighting and winning wars to domestic immigration enforcement.

Our soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and guardians are warfighters, not jailers of migrants. I look forward to engaging with the administration, Mr. Marks, to get greater clarity on the intended purposes of those \$900 million, because if the administration does intend to fund the construction of migrant detention facilities at Military bases using Military Construction funds, it should include those specific plans in its budget request.

At minimum, the administration must provide this subcommittee with a detailed accounting of how it intends to use the \$900 million requested for Military Construction in reconciliation.

A few additional concerns I would like to note. First of all, the use and invocation of emergency authorities to justify reprogramming of Military Construction dollars, there is a place for the use of emergency authorities to support reprogramming. If it becomes a habit, it can circumvent the appropriations process.

I will also note concern that there is a substantial defunding of family housing accounts for the Army and the Navy, including for

programs that provide essential maintenance of and oversight of privatized family housing. I think we all know that privatized family housing at DOD installations is a mess. I have spent years investigating it, heard testimony from folks like Captain Samuel Cho in Georgia, who experienced firsthand the effects on his daughter's health of mold and contamination in privatized family housing at Fort Gordon.

His eight-year-old daughter, as he testified before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations here in the Senate, developed a rash so severe that, as Captain Cho testified, quote, "Her skin became hardened and rough and reptilian in nature, and when she would scratch it, it would bleed profusely."

This was the eight-year-old daughter of a U.S. Army Captain, who, because of the poor condition of housing in this Balfour Beatty Homes development at Fort Gordon, was bleeding when she scratched her own skin. So I am concerned that the reduction in funds for these family housing programs could reduce our ability to hold those contractors to a high standard and to look out for those personnel and their families.

I echo the Chairman in noting that we have yet to receive the budget justifications required for us to do our jobs with all the information that is necessary. We still do not have the unfunded priorities lists that will allow members of Congress to highlight projects critical to their home states that may have been left out of the request.

Mr. Chairman, I am looking forward to working with you on those issues and throughout this process.

I want to thank again, the witnesses here, for your service to the Nation, and for being here to brief us and to answer members' questions. I think this subcommittee is known for rising above the fray and working in a constructive, civil, and bipartisan manner. It is simply too important for us not to do that.

And I thank you again, Mr. Chairman. And look forward to the conversation. Thank you.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Assistant Secretary Marks, you are recognized.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF HON. DALE MARKS

Mr. MARKS. Thank you. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, as the newly confirmed, on day seven, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the President's Proposed fiscal year 2026 Budget for the Department of Defense Energy, Installations, and Environment portfolio.

The President and Secretary of Defense have laid out a clear objective for the Department: Achieve peace through strength. As the Secretary has said, the threats we face are serious. Our investments to counter them must also be, and that is what this budget does. I firmly believe that the strength and lethality of our Military is built both on the weapon systems that defend us and on the readiness of our service members and their families to accomplish this mission.

And make no mistake, our installations are weapon systems, just like our ships, tanks, and planes. We must ensure that they are postured in terms of quality, condition, and laydown to carry out the entire spectrum of Military operations.

But at the same time, we know that America is a target our installations are under threat, not just from our adversaries, but from aging infrastructure, extreme weather, and increasingly complex operational demands. To address these challenges, we are focusing on an installation resilience approach that focuses squarely on military readiness and operational capability.

This ensures our resources directly support what matters most, maintaining ready forces and resilient installations that can operate effectively under any conditions. In particular, we are focusing on infrastructure modernization and energy resilience, operational energy security, and investing in our innovation and research programs.

At the same time, we recognize the resilience of our installations is enhanced by partnering with our defense communities, and we are making a concerted effort to work with them on mutually beneficial initiatives that enhance resilience, and prevent risks to national security.

We also recognize that our service members' readiness starts at home. We want to ensure our warfighters are able to deliver 100 percent of their effort to their missions without having to worry about issues with their housing or the health and safety of their family members back home.

The Department remains committed to ensuring that the DOD's housing portfolio meets appropriate life, health, and safety requirements and provides a positive living experience for military personnel and their families. And we are continuing to address risks to human health and the environment through our environmental cleanup programs.

To accomplish these goals, the Department must ensure that we make the most efficient use of our resources and manpower. And as such, the Secretary of Defense has issued a clear directive to focus on eliminating waste and duplication to enable the Department to focus on its core mission of defending the Nation.

EI&E is coordinating several efforts to review current processes and regulations to create efficiencies, and reduce costs, including a review of our MILCON and FSRM investment portfolios, real property efficiencies, and review of our implementation of environmental laws and regulations.

And finally, as part of this administration's efforts to counter China's malign actions, we continue to work with key stakeholders across DOD's use of lands and natural resources in Hawaii through the Hawaii Coordination Cell.

Going forward, we have some big issues to tackle, such as meeting Congress' directive to significantly increase our SRM investments to at least 4 percent of plant replacement value. And I look forward to working with the committee to address these challenges head on, and fulfill our commitment to our soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and guardians.

Thank you. And I look forward to your questions.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. DALE MARKS

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished members of the subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide a program update for the Department of Defense's (DoD) energy, installations, and environment portfolio. As the newly confirmed Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations & Environment, I am grateful for this opportunity to continue serving this Nation and its men and women in uniform. I am committed to providing our Armed Forces with the capabilities needed to defend and protect our Homeland and I look forward to working with this Committee in the coming months to ensure our installations are postured to support the President's and Secretary of Defense's focus on ensuring the U.S. military remains the most lethal and effective fighting force in the world.

OVERARCHING OBJECTIVES

The President and Secretary of Defense have laid out a clear objective for the Department: restore peace through strength by reviving the warrior ethos and restoring trust in our military, rebuilding our military by matching threats to capabilities, and reestablishing deterrence by defending our homeland. To achieve these objectives, we must ensure our power projection platforms are postured to maximize our Service members' lethality and defend the homeland while remaining secure against a wide range of threats. We must be singularly focused on developing the readiness of our forces.

At the same time, we know that America is a target. Our adversaries are targeting our critical defense, government, and economic infrastructure, both inside and outside our fencelines. Every domain is contested—air, land, sea, space, and cyber.

Our approach to installation resilience focuses squarely on military readiness and operational capability. When we evaluate infrastructure improvements or assess environmental impacts, we apply one clear standard: how does this strengthen our warfighting capability? This mission-focused strategy ensures our resources directly support what matters most—maintaining ready forces and resilient installations that can operate effectively under any conditions. We will continue to assess weather-related impacts on our operations, mitigate weather-related risks, conduct environmental assessments as appropriate, and improve the resilience of our installations, but always through the lens of enhancing military effectiveness and operational resilience.

SUPPORTING LETHALITY

Our installations are a critical force enabler, providing our warfighters with a distinct advantage over our adversaries. They serve as initial maneuver platforms from where the Department deploys troops around the globe, and where it coordinates and controls various mission-related functions for units once deployed. As such, we must ensure that the supporting infrastructure is postured—in terms of quality, condition, and laydown—to support the entire spectrum of military operations.

The hard truth is that our installations are under threat, not just from our adversaries, but from aging infrastructure, extreme weather, and increasingly complex operational demands. In the past decade alone, weather-related damages have cost the Department over \$15 billion. Just last year, Hurricane Helene shut down one of our major installations for 11 days—no power, no water, no mission capability.

Our adversaries understand these vulnerabilities. They actively seek to exploit our dependencies on energy and water infrastructure, attempting to degrade our ability to deploy forces and undermine our deterrent capabilities.

These disruptions directly impact service member health and safety, training, testing, equipment reliability and performance, critical infrastructure functionality and overall force readiness and lethality. To address these challenges, the Department is focusing on three interconnected priorities: energy resilience and infrastructure modernization, operational energy security, and investing in our innovation and research programs.

To enhance energy resilience and modernize energy infrastructure, the Department is prioritizing investments in multiple and diverse sources of energy for on-site generation, microgrids, energy storage, energy efficiency upgrades, and the pursuit of innovative and resilient technologies like small modular nuclear reactors. Continued investments in energy efficiency through Energy Saving Performance Contracts (ESPCs) and Utility Energy Services Contracts (UESCs) with DoD's industry partners bolsters installation energy resilience by reducing the installation energy demand and need for backup resources during commercial grid disruptions.

One of the Department's most significant energy infrastructure investment initiatives is the Energy Resilience and Conservation Investment Program (ERCIP). Through ERCIP, we are deploying cutting-edge technologies, including advanced energy storage systems, next-generation geothermal and nuclear capabilities, and sophisticated microgrid networks—all essential to maintaining the military's operational readiness.

The Department must also improve its operational energy security. In FY24 alone, the Department consumed 68 million barrels of fuel, with a total cost of \$10.7 billion and nearly half of that fuel coming from foreign sources. The Department also invested over \$3.7 billion in FY24 to enhance Operational Energy resilience, focusing on three critical areas: modernizing our aircraft, fleets, and weapons systems for better fuel efficiency, strengthening energy resilience at our forward operating bases, and running sophisticated wargames to identify and fix vulnerabilities in energy logistics and sustainment.

The Department is revolutionizing how we plan for energy needs in combat. Our new Resilient Logistics Operations & Analytics Demonstrator (RELOAD) project, developed in partnership with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and other defense partners, is a data analysis tool helping us understand exactly how energy constraints could impact operations in contested environments. RELOAD will deliver two products to DoD leadership: FY27 technology investment recommendations that help mitigate operational risks in contested environments and a transition decision for development of the demonstrator prototype into an enterprise utility.

We are also transforming our acquisition process and equipment requirements. Every new weapon system must now meet strict energy efficiency standards, while U.S. Transportation Command has taken charge as our single manager for worldwide fuel distribution. These are not just administrative changes—reducing fuel consumption extends operational reach, and every improvement in how we use and manage operational energy translates directly to increased combat capability.

These efforts are underpinned by several critical innovation programs which set the technical direction for the DoD by funding the development and demonstration of mission-critical energy and environment capabilities and helping them through the acquisition process. These include the Strategic Environmental Research and Development Program (SERDP) and the Environmental Security Technology Certification Program (ESTCP), which function as the Department's installation innovation programs that develop, demonstrate, and validate technologies to enhance military readiness and strengthen defense infrastructure. These programs address critical resilience challenges, including energy security, water resource management, extreme weather vulnerabilities, and environmental cleanup. SERDP and ESTCP investments include cybersecure microgrids, decision support tools, cost-effective remediation technologies, and alternatives that reduce regulatory burdens of defense-critical chemicals. These investments protect DoD's operational capabilities while reducing costs across installations. Through collaboration with industry and academia, SERDP and ESTCP ensure rapid transition of innovations from laboratories to military installations to address both immediate threats and long-term resilience needs for servicemembers and their families.

On the operational energy front, the Operational Energy Capability Improvement Fund and the Operational Energy Prototype Fund deliver game-changing technologies focusing on Energy Dominance (through advanced command and control), Energy and Power Projection (through revolutionary endurance and propulsion systems) and Energy Surety (through next-generation storage solutions). These programs have delivered remarkable successes, including advances in nuclear fuel technology, wireless power transmission, and unmanned aircraft endurance.

Looking ahead, the Department is focusing on critical capabilities like airborne energy delivery in contested environments, improved power managements and enhancing energy storage.

As the Nation's largest energy consumer, the DoD plays a unique and critical role in our Nation's energy landscape. While our military operations depend heavily on energy infrastructure, much of that infrastructure lies outside our fence lines. The most powerful military in the world relies on civilian infrastructure to train our forces, power our bases and project power globally.

With this vulnerability in mind, we are conducting comprehensive assessments of our Nation's power and fuel infrastructure, focusing particularly on coastal vulnerabilities, while simultaneously evaluating strategic projects like the Alaska natural gas pipeline and partnerships in artificial intelligence and data center development. These initiatives not only align with the President's vision of American energy dominance but ensure our military maintains the power it needs to defend our Nation's interests at home and abroad.

SUPPORTING DEFENSE COMMUNITIES AND PROMOTING COMPATIBLE DEVELOPMENT

The Department recognizes that the resilience of our installations is enhanced by partnering with, not competing against, our defense communities. Our defense communities are critical enablers that support our defense installations and ensure our Service members have the resources they need to carry out their missions. At the same time, they face many of the same threats our installations face. We know our adversaries are targeting supporting infrastructure like electrical grids and water systems, and our communities are just as, if not more, exposed to natural hazards than our installations. As such, we are making a concerted effort to work with our defense communities on mutually beneficial initiatives via direct support or planning while also ensuring military operations, mission support, and warfighter capabilities remain unimpeded and to prevent risk to national security by incompatible development.

Key to these efforts is the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation (OLDCC). OLDCC provides technical and financial assistance to States, counties, municipalities, regions, and other communities to foster cooperation with military installations to enhance the military mission; achieve facility and infrastructure savings and reduced operating costs; address encroachment and compatible land use issues; increase military, civilian, and industrial readiness; and support military families. OLDCC works with defense communities to further the Secretary's priorities, ensuring their efforts help to enhance the readiness and lethality of military installations, ranges, and test facilities.

To date, OLDCC has awarded 11 grants in FY25, to include:

- A grant to the University of Alaska Fairbanks to work with Eielson Air Force Base, Fort Wainwright, the State of Alaska, and local utility on permitting for a natural gas pipeline, respond to other energy requirements, and address housing affordability issues.
- A grant to County of McMullen, Texas to design a single access road to the ROTHRTX (Relocatable Over the Horizon Radar) location and to obtain funding to carry out improvements. These efforts will enhance the readiness of the McMullen Range, the only United States-based radar system in USSOUTHCOM's surveillance architecture, including enhancing detection and surveillance capabilities along the southern border, and strengthen mission readiness and lethality at Naval Air Station Kingsville.
- A grant to the City of Virginia Beach Department of Public Utilities to plan and design.
- 1.5 miles of a new 30-inch diameter water transmission main to support potable water and water suppression needs at Naval Air Station Oceana and Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story, ensuring the installations' readiness and lethality.
- A grant to Belle Chasse Academy, Inc., a charter school in Louisiana, to design, renovate, and expand current facilities. This project provides expanded capacity for 30-year student use and supports learning for the more than 650 military-connected students (90% of the enrollment), military families and warfighters, enhancing lethality and readiness by improving recruitment and retention.

OLDCC recently posted a notice forecasting its upcoming competition for the FY25 Defense Community Infrastructure Program and looks forward to reviewing applications from interested defense communities.

In addition to directly supporting our defense communities, the Department recognizes that the condition of the lands and waters on- and off-installation affects our ability to conduct weapons system testing, realistic live-fire training, and essential operations that are vital to preparing a more lethal and resilient combat force. Ensuring that the land and waters surrounding our installations are compatible with military mission requirements is critical to ensuring unencumbered warfighter access to lands and ranges that replicate the operational environment in which they fight. The Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program provides this assurance. REPI funds cost-sharing agreements between the Military Services, other Federal agencies, State and local governments, and private partners to avoid or remove land use conflicts near military installations, minimize environmental restrictions that limit military activities, and improve the resilience of military installations, while addressing mission-essential considerations, including flight hazards, wildland fire resilience, drought resilience, flooding, and water quality and quantity.

DoD manages and maintains nearly 27 million acres of land, water, and airspace across the United States and its territories that have the principal purpose of sup-

porting mission-related activities and furthering the National defense strategy. Realistic environments are essential to field testing new technologies and for the military to train, which requires access to deserts, grasslands, rainforests, tundra permafrost, coastlines, and other ecosystems. Training and testing in varied ecosystems prepare our warfighters for any of the challenges they may face while conducting global operations. These lands also contain significant resources supporting our nation's natural and cultural heritage, including resources important to American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian Organizations, and other Indigenous Peoples. DoD lands provide habitats for over 550 plant and animal species that are federally protected under the Endangered Species Act, contain over 130,000 recorded archaeological sites, and 41 National Historic Landmarks. Without sustained strategic investment and management, DoD lands can be degraded or eliminated, resulting in a net loss in the ability of these military installation lands and waters to sustain a combat-ready and lethal military force. Through programs such as REPI, the Military Aviation and Installation Assurance Siting Clearinghouse, and DoD Legacy Resource Management Program, the Department can stimulate mutually beneficial and cost-effective partnerships between local communities, Federal and State agencies, and non-governmental organizations to support DoD's ability to operate seamlessly across domains and maintain its strong record as a steward of our Nation's natural, cultural, and historical heritage.

IMPROVING EFFICIENCY

The Secretary of Defense has issued a clear directive to focus on eliminating waste and duplication to enable the Department to focus on its core mission of defending the Nation. In support of this directive, EI&E is coordinating several efforts to review current processes and regulations to create efficiencies and reduce costs.

MILCON AND FSRM REVIEW

Given the size and scope of the Department's infrastructure footprint, the Military Construction (MILCON) and Facilities Sustainment, Restoration & Modernization (FSRM) investment portfolios represent a significant opportunity to maximize the effectiveness of the taxpayer dollars while improving the readiness and lethality of our warfighters.

Under current processes, a military construction or large-scale FSRM project can take 5 years to be incorporated in a budget request to Congress and once funded, can take potentially another 4 years to obtain beneficial use. The Department must develop more timely and flexible processes and organizational structures to enable more agile delivery of infrastructure needs.

As such, the Deputy Secretary of Defense has directed a 60-day review of the Department's MILCON and FSRM portfolios. My office is coordinating with Military Departments and Office of General Counsel to conduct this review and develop recommendations for proposed regulatory or statutory changes, updates to DoD policy, and process improvements that improve cost structure, efficiency of execution, and lifecycle sustainment.

The Department appreciates the authorities Congress has provided in recent National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) to make our processes more efficient, including increases to the unspecified minor military construction (UMMC) threshold in the FY23 NDAA, the pilot program permitting replacement of failing barracks in the FY24 NDAA, and the increase in the threshold for acquisition of low cost interests in land and a pilot program to optimize our footprint using UMMC in the FY25 NDAA. We look forward to working with Congress at all levels to further our common goal of making efficient and effective investments in DoD infrastructure.

The Department also shares Congress' interest in ensuring that the current DoD construction agent model maximizes efficiency, is responsive to the needs of the Department, and minimizes redundancy and unnecessary costs. Consistent with Section 2877 of the FY25 NDAA, my office has entered into a contract with the RAND Corporation to review the roles and responsibilities for executing construction projects. We will work closely with the Military Departments to ensure the Department collectively provides a timely objective report on this critical issue.

REAL PROPERTY EFFICIENCIES

As part of EO 14222, Implementing the President's "Department of Government Efficiency" Cost Efficiency Initiative, and as required in Section 2850 of the FY25 NDAA, the Department is working to reduce its leased space inventory. The Secretary of Defense has directed us to reduce our leased costs by 30 percent within the next 18 months. To achieve this reduction, we have implemented regular building occupancy reporting that enables us to identify existing spaces with capacity and

focus our personnel laydown within our installations. The reduction is a critical step in enabling the Department to focus on its core mission of defending the Nation by eliminating waste and duplication to maximize the value of our real estate portfolio.

REVIEWING PROCESSES FOR COMPLYING WITH ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS

Another area of opportunity to improve efficiency and improve our delivery of capability to our warfighters is to eliminate delays within the environmental permitting process. As part of its response to Executive Order 14154, Unleashing American Energy, the Department is working with other key stakeholders in the Administration to streamline how DoD implements the National Environmental Policy Act. The Department recognizes that we have an immense responsibility to the natural resources entrusted to us and we are working to ensure we are maximizing our readiness and resilience while also fulfilling our environmental stewardship obligations.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Our Service members' readiness starts at home. They should be able focus on their missions without having to worry about issues with their housing or about the health and safety of their family members back home. The Department remains committed to ensuring that these issues are addressed so that our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Guardians can bring 100% of themselves to their missions.

HOUSING

Our Service members' housing is both a crucial quality of life issue and a critical mission-enabling asset. They and their families expect and deserve safe and secure places to live in return for the sacrifices they make for our Nation. The Department remains committed to ensuring that all Service member housing—whether it is government-owned, government-controlled, or privatized—meets appropriate life, health, and safety requirements and provides a positive living experience for military personnel and their families.

Over the past year, the Department has made significant strides in reforming its oversight of its Unaccompanied Housing (UH) portfolio and implementing the FY24 NDAA requirements. The Department published UH guidance on civilian oversight, issuances of waivers for privacy and configuration standards, updated design standards, and standardized requirements and procedures for maintenance work orders. The Department also engaged quickly with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to resolve open recommendations under their review of Military Barracks; as of today, the GAO closed 8 of the 31 recommendations for the Department and is considering the Department's requests to close 5 additional recommendations.

Resident feedback is a key indicator of the Department's progress in providing safe and secure housing to all Service members and as such, updated its housing tenant satisfaction survey to be applicable to all housing, including unaccompanied. Most of the military services are executing their housing satisfaction survey now and we look forward to sharing the results with Congress later this year.

The Department also continues to explore leveraging privatization as a tool to improve UH by evaluating the results of the Services' pilot projects and incorporating the lessons learned from the broader Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI). The Department currently has eight existing UH privatization agreements—six within the Department of the Army portfolio and two within the Department of the Navy.

These privatized UH projects offer apartment-style accommodations rather than the dormitory-style accommodations of traditional government-owned UH and provide authorized Service members with high-quality, cost-effective options for on-installation residences in high-cost or challenged housing markets, to include remote and isolated installations. While these residences are generally reserved for more senior enlisted personnel who have already lived in traditional UH, the Navy's pilot authority under 10 USC §2881a allows them to issue a higher rate of partial basic allowance for housing to enlisted Service members, ship or shore based, in the ranks of E4 and below who may otherwise be mandatorily assigned to permanent party UH. The Department will continue to seek innovative ways to provide high-quality UH to Service members required to live on-base at cost-savings to the government.

MILITARY HOUSING PRIVATIZATION INITIATIVE

The Department continues to enhance the MHPI program and improve our oversight of the private sector MHPI companies that own and operate MHPI housing projects. As a result of our collaboration with the MHPI companies, all 18 rights set out in the MHPI Tenant Bill of Rights (TBoR) are fully available at all but one

of the nearly 200 installations with privatized housing, representing approximately 99 percent of military families residing in MHPI housing. We will continue our efforts to educate and engage Service Members and their families to ensure they are aware of and take full advantage of the TBoR.

The Department continues to work on full implementation of other MHPI reforms. In August 2024, the Department deployed the housing complaints database and has received 38 responses, 32 of which are available to the public while the remaining six are being processed for publication. In addition, the Department is over 85% complete on its mandatory, one-time inspections of government-owned and controlled family and privatized housing. The Departments of the Navy and Air Force are both 100% complete and we will be submitting an interim report on their behalf to annotating their closure and reporting their findings.

The Department is committed to working closely with you and the committee staff to ensure the long-term success of the MHPI program and we will remain diligent in our oversight to ensure DoD's privatized housing projects deliver quality housing and a positive living experience for military personnel and their families.

DEFENSE ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION

The Department must take deliberate and sustained action to address risks to human health and the environment resulting from past DoD activities and enhance mission readiness by completing cleanups and restoring DoD lands for effective use. Our environmental cleanup program includes the Installation Restoration Program (IRP) and Military Munitions Response Program (MMRP). The IRP is focused on cleanup of hazardous substances, pollutants, and contaminants, while the MMRP is focused on responding to unexploded ordnance and munition constituents at former military ranges. These programs encompass active installations, Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS—sites that DoD transferred to other Federal agencies, States, local governments, or private landowners before October 17, 1986), and sites DoD transferred to other entities as part of its Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) activities.

To date, the Department, in cooperation with State agencies and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has completed cleanup activities at 86 percent of Active and BRAC IRP and MMRP sites, and FUDS IRP sites, and is now monitoring the results. During FY 2024 alone, the Department completed cleanup at 121 sites. Of the roughly 40,900 restoration sites, 34,379 are now in monitoring status or have completed cleanup.

Our focus remains on continuous improvement initiatives in the restoration program: minimizing overhead, adopting new technologies to reduce cost and accelerate cleanup, updating criteria used to prioritize sites for cleanup, and improving our relationships with state regulators and affected communities through increased dialogue and public engagement. These initiatives help ensure that we maximize our available resources to complete cleanups.

While the Department continues to make progress on completing cleanups, the remaining sites are some of the most complex cleanup sites. Chemicals of Emerging Concern and others like per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) continue to pose challenges for DoD's cleanup programs as new science requires reconsideration of previous decisions and more expensive solutions to protect our Service members, their families, communities, and the environment.

Additionally, some complex sites have either no feasible or only inefficient solutions for cleanup and, as a result, the Department is making significant investments in environmental technology to identify new potential remediation methods.

In particular, the recent EPA drinking water standards for certain PFAS are extremely low and present a significant challenge for the Department. DoD is committed to prioritizing and responding to locations where known levels of PFAS in private drinking water wells are the highest, while also focusing on installing sustainable treatment solutions, but this effort will take time and substantial future resources.

In addition to our cleanup activities, the Department continues to prioritize efforts to eliminate the use of Aqueous Film Forming Foam (AFFF) at military installations. Over the past few years, the Department has undertaken an aggressive initiative to develop and demonstrate fluorine-free alternatives to AFFF. As of April 2025, five products have passed the DoD qualification process. These products are now available for purchase, and the Military Departments have used them to make significant progress in their efforts to transition away from AFFF use in more than 6,000 mobile assets and approximately 1,000 facilities.

INDO-PACIFIC PRIORITIES

HAWAII

The relationship between the U.S. Military and Hawai'i has been a critical piece of U.S. military and diplomatic strategy for over 125 years. Hawaii's strategic location in the Pacific, unique training and port areas, and support for critical defense missions make it a cornerstone of our posture in the Indo-Pacific region. In support of this indispensable defense mission, the Military Departments have jurisdiction over approximately 222,000 acres of land in Hawai'i, roughly four percent of Hawai'i's land base. This includes approximately 45,300 in lands leases from the State of Hawaii which are going to expire between 2029–2032. These lands provide ideal locations for specialized defense capabilities, multi-domain operating areas to generate future force readiness, and training ranges that our Joint Force leverages with allies and partners.

Retaining these mission critical training lands is a top priority to support the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) warfighter.

The Department recognizes that past incidents, particularly the fuel and concentrated AFFF spills at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility and the diesel spill at the Maui Space Surveillance Complex, have resulted in a loss of public trust between the DoD and Hawai'i residents. The situation has underscored the importance of working collaboratively with stakeholders to address DoD's use of lands and natural resources in Hawaii. Military personnel in Hawaii are working to engage consistently, respectfully, and transparently to strengthen relationships in support of the shared goals of national security, economic prosperity, and a healthy environment. The Hawaii Coordination Cell (HCC), established last year within EI&E, is working closely with the Military Departments, USINDOPACOM, and OSD counterparts to support a comprehensive and coordinated approach to support these efforts. The HCC serves as a primary point of contact for State and local officials, businesses, community organizations, and interested stakeholders to connect with military personnel, engage in dialogue about key issues of concern and create opportunities for collaboration. These activities are essential to enable the continuation of the critical military missions in Hawai'i.

CONSTRUCTION ON GUAM

The Department is preparing to execute several critical posture initiatives in Guam that will help to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. These initiatives will require unprecedented levels of military construction to ensure our forces have the right infrastructure to organize, train, equip and, if necessary, deliver lethal combat power. These efforts include the relocation of Marines from Okinawa, the deployment of the Integrated Air and Missile Defense of Guam capability, and Polaris Point expansion. Additionally, this surge in military construction activity will address damages caused by Typhoon Mawar. The increasing demand for military construction, compounded by labor and material shortages posed by Guam's remote location, prompted the Department to pursue a comprehensive approach to supporting delivering the right capabilities to USINDOPACOM and the warfighter.

To address these challenges, the Department is undertaking a holistic master planning effort to effectively sequence development, prioritize infrastructure needs, and align support functions with mission growth. This plan will consolidate all construction activities across Guam, offering a cohesive and forward-looking vision for the island's development. Furthermore, the Department is working to integrate and synchronize military construction efforts the Military Departments, Defense Agencies, and DoD Field Activities. This approach is designed to ensure the timely delivery of critical capabilities and quality-of-life improvements for warfighters. The master planning initiative will serve as a dynamic tool, accounting for mission timelines, dependencies, programming and design needs, environmental factors, extreme weather considerations, and other essential requirements to guide future infrastructure investments.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this energy, installations, and environment program update. We appreciate Congress' continued support for our enterprise and look forward to working with you.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. General Wilson.

**STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL DAVID WILSON, DEPUTY
CHIEF OF STAFF, G-9, UNITED STATES ARMY**

General WILSON. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to appear before you today.

Our installations are the bedrock of Army readiness, lethality, and warfighting capability. They are where our soldiers train, live, work, and prepare to defend our nation. My testimony today highlights the Army's unwavering commitment to transforming our installations into agile and adaptable platforms that can meet evolving missions and counter emerging threats. From cyberattacks, to natural disasters, our investments in the right locations and facilities, guarantees that our warfighters will have the operational and support infrastructure they need to succeed in their mission.

Our facility investment plan prioritizes Military Construction and infrastructure projects based on the direct input from the commanders in the field and a careful assessment of the strategic needs. In fiscal year 2024, we awarded significant funding for MILCON projects, and we are allocating more in fiscal year 2025, representing an increase in investment and a commitment to improving our infrastructure.

Beyond MILCON, we are investing heavily in facility sustainment, restoration, and modernization, or FSRM, in the future. And we appreciate Congress recognizing the vital need by establishing the minimum Facilities Sustainment, Restoration, and Modernization (FRSM) requirements in the 2025 NDAA, and we look forward to continuing our collaboration.

Taking care of our soldiers and their families remains our number one priority, and their well-being is directly linked to the readiness and the ability of the Army to accomplish its mission. We are also deeply focused on improving the quality of Army family housing, both government-owned and privatized. Tenant satisfaction is improving; however, we recognize that there is always more work to be done.

We are also actively exploring innovative energy solutions, including tactical microgrids and the potential for nuclear energy on our installations. The Army continues to leverage public-private partnerships to drive broader innovation and reduce our reliance on traditional funding sources. For example, we are actively using energy saving performance contracts, utility energy saving contracts, and intergovernmental support agreements to improve our installations' efficiency, lower operational costs, and promote sustainability.

Predictable resourcing is absolutely essential to modernize our Army installations, maintain our warfighting edge, and ensure the safety and well-being of our soldiers, their families, and our defense communities.

Thank you for your continued support and your commitment to our Military, and the dedication to ensuring that the readiness of our Army is first and foremost at the forefront.

I look forward to your questions.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LTG DAVID WILSON

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Army's priorities for installations, military construction, and family housing. Our installations are the nexus of the Army's lethality, readiness, and warfighting. The ability to protect and project combat power from installations around the world is no longer guaranteed or routine. We must ensure our installations and infrastructure transform into agile and adaptable platforms that will support evolving mission requirements and meet emergent strategic threats.

Over the last year, the Army has made meaningful progress to increase the adaptability, resiliency, and quality of our installations, but more needs to be done to fulfill our commitment to our Soldiers, their families, and the American people. Working with Congress, we will continue to build on our efforts in 2026 and beyond.

We must guarantee predictable resourcing to enable our installations to modernize at pace with our Army's transformation efforts. We need to apply our investments in the right locations and in the right types of facilities. These investments will help to ensure our warfighters have sufficient operational and support infrastructure to accomplish their missions. Second, we must transform our installations and services to ensure they are not only reliable, but also resilient-able to adapt to new missions while quickly recovering from disruptions and overcoming new and emerging threats. Our installations must stand ready to support not only the Army, but the entire Department of Defense, no matter the mission. Finally, our installations must be efficient and effective to ensure our investments, funded by the taxpayers, are returning value in building and sustaining warfighter readiness.

FACILITY INVESTMENTS

The Army uses a deliberate process to prioritize military construction and other facility investments, which are used to produce an annual Facility Investment Plan (FIP)-a prioritized list of projects, by component, under consideration from which the Army develops infrastructure requirements. This prioritization considers several factors from our commanders and senior leaders, including the relative importance of various facility types, the installation's location, and the installation's primary mission. The FIP is used to inform the Army's annual budget request.

The Army's commitment to modernizing facilities and infrastructure is evident in our FY24 and FY25 MILCON programs. In FY24, we awarded \$2 billion for 48 MILCON projects, significantly improving Soldier quality of life and enhancing mission readiness. These projects include vital upgrades to barracks, construction of childcare centers, and modernization of armories for our Reserve and National Guard. Building on this momentum, the Army is initiating 43 MILCON projects in FY25, representing an even larger investment and further demonstrating our dedication to infrastructure improvements.

To further enhance our infrastructure, we also utilize Facilities Sustainment, Restoration, and Modernization (FSRM) funding. A significant portion of this FSRM funding is directed towards modernizing Regular Army facilities to ensure they can support operational deployments and training requirements. We also dedicate substantial resources to Army National Guard facilities, recognizing their critical role in national defense and homeland security, as well as to Army Reserve facilities, which are vital for maintaining the readiness of our reserve component. These FSRM investments are essential for transforming our facilities to meet evolving mission requirements and for delivering modern, critical infrastructure to support and house our warfighters.

However, unforeseen circumstances sometimes require us to adjust our funding priorities. As we have communicated to the HASC and SASC, the proposed \$1.1 billion FSRM reprogramming is a necessary decision to address the urgent and evolving needs of the Southern Border mission, ensuring the Army can rapidly provide critical enabling support to DHS. This reprogramming, while impacting some planned FSRM projects, is carefully structured to minimize disruption to overall Army readiness. The Army remains committed to both modernizing its facilities and fulfilling its national security obligations.

We are grateful to Congress for recognizing the Army's need for additional investment in our facilities by establishing minimum FSRM requirements for the coming years in the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The Army looks forward to working with Congress to develop a strategy to resource this requirement.

UNACCOMPANIED HOUSING—BARRACKS

Our first and highest priority is to take care of our warfighters and ensure they have proper facilities to live, work, and conduct training. The challenge we face is a substantial backlog of deferred maintenance that built up over many years. The Army, with the help of Congress, has significantly increased annual investment over the last few years to address this backlog, but these investments will take several years to realize their effect. In the spirit of continual improvement, the Army expanded the annual Tenant Satisfaction Survey to include Soldiers living in barracks which helps assess whether investments in our barracks are improving Soldiers' quality of life. In addition to making long-term investments, the Army is also taking immediate action, such as, having barracks monitors and Department of Public Works (DPW) staff from the installations improving the maintenance tempo and facility management of the places Soldiers live and work.

The Army continues to look for new and innovative ways to maximize our facility investments to improve our barracks quality and reduce the costs to taxpayers. Last year, the Army initiated a privatized barracks project at Fort Irwin, California, where an initial life-cycle cost analysis shows the potential for it to be cost-effective to have a private company build and manage these barracks than to build and sustain the full requirement of government-owned barracks. The Army currently has unaccompanied apartment projects at six locations, four target E6 and above unaccompanied Soldiers and two target lower enlisted Soldiers. Three new privatized barracks projects are being considered at four locations that currently host successful UH apartment projects. We also thank Congress for the pilot program in the FY 2024 NDAA allowing replacement of significantly degraded barracks rather than continuing to invest in marginal repairs. This authority can be used when the estimated cost for repairing a barracks is equal or greater than 75% of the estimated cost to construct a new barracks. The Army is using this authority at Fort Cavazos, where combining two older barracks buildings into one single new construction building will significantly decrease the long-term costs of continuing to repair failing buildings.

ARMY FAMILY HOUSING

Taking care of our warfighters is also taking care of their families. The Army takes care of our families whether their warfighter is at home or not. The Army continues to make significant progress to provide high-quality family housing-both government-owned and privatized.

We thank Congress for supporting the Army's request to extend certain authorizations in the FY 2025 NDAA-these extensions are critical as the overseas coordination required for some of the projects takes longer than domestic projects.

In addition to ensuring high-quality government-controlled housing, the Army has made significant progress in improving the quality of privatized housing domestically. Over the last 2 years, the Army has implemented several oversight reforms to better hold privatized housing providers accountable for maintaining the high-quality privatized housing our Soldiers deserve. These efforts have included strengthening and clarifying enforcement language in ground leases, conducting house-by-house inspections, implementing quality assurance of construction and renovations, and developing a standardized quality assurance maintenance program that is applicable to all privatized housing companies doing business with the Army.

By the end of CY 2026, the Army will complete third-party inspections of all our family housing inventory. When our inspections reveal deficiencies in work performed, the Army privatized housing provider or installation DPW reacts quickly to rectify the situation via the housing provider. The Army also conducts the annual Tenant Satisfaction Survey to assess the quality of our homes and keep housing providers accountable for maintaining those homes. I am pleased to report that last year's survey results showed steady increases of 1%, 2.5%, and 1.5% in tenant satisfaction from prior years in Army Family Housing, Privatized Housing, and the Privatized Unaccompanied Apartments, respectively. Our increased investments, improved maintenance response and customer service, and increased Army oversight all contributed to these higher scores. These increases also indicate the Army's housing providers are doing a better job servicing our homes, but also highlighted areas where the Army and providers can improve.

INSTALLATION RESILIENCE

Modernized installations, which include ensuring access to reliable power and water, are vital to assuring mission success. Given our installations primarily rely on commercial utilities for energy and water, we must ensure they are protected

from external disruptions and can quickly recover. Vulnerabilities, both natural and man-made, associated with interdependent electric power grids, natural gas pipelines, and water resources and systems can jeopardize installation security and mission capabilities.

To assess these potential risks to our water and energy systems, 98% of our installations have completed Installation Energy and Water Plans (IEWPs) to identify requirements and risks, and to develop mitigation techniques that decrease operating costs. For example, the Army is deploying microgrids on installations, conducting Black Start Exercises (BSEs), and testing the cyber domain through the Cyber Readiness Resilience Exercises (CRRE).

In addition to decreasing operating costs, efforts to reduce energy and water consumption allow us to invest in modernization and innovation of installation energy. Two such examples are tactical microgrid systems and nuclear energy on installations. The Tactical Microgrid Standard (TMS) was released in January 2023. It establishes standards for communications and controls, safety, and cyber security for tactical power grids, and defines the tactical grid architecture using an open standard to support various systems and capabilities. The Army continues to develop technologies designed to add energy storage to tactical power systems, enable vehicle-exported power, improve capabilities like extended silent watch, and hybridize existing ground generator systems to reduce generator runtime, improve reliability, and enable mobile, distributed operations.

The Army is carrying out the President's Executive Order on Deploying Advanced Nuclear Reactor Technologies for National Security, including establishing a program of record for the utilization of nuclear energy for both installation and operation energy. This includes quickly working to deliver on the President's direction to begin operations of an advanced nuclear reactor on an installation no later than the end of FY 2028. The Army expects to have additional details at a later date.

To test our energy resiliency, BSEs allow installations to experience the impact of a power outage from a service disruption. The Army has completed 20 BSEs, including, seven exercises in FY 2024, and is planning six more in FY 2025, and five in FY 2026. In FY 2024, the Army conducted our first cyber resilience readiness exercise at Fort Carson, Colorado and is planning an additional exercise this fiscal year.

To be more efficient with taxpayer investments in our installations, the Army's Office of Energy Initiatives (OEI) continues to explore public-private partnerships that reduce the need for appropriated funding and employ a wide array of energy technologies in support of installation mission operations. The OEI looks to leverage the value of underutilized installation land for the development of energy-generation facilities that will enhance energy resiliency. Rather than a monetary rent payment for leasing installation lands, the Army typically seeks in-kind consideration to satisfy the fair-market value requirement. For energy-generation facilities, this includes the ability to prioritize power from the project to support critical missions during grid disruption. The Army's collaboration with private industry (both public utility companies and independent power producers) has resulted in approximately \$677 million of private-sector investment and over \$764 million of avoided costs for the Army. For our active installations, the Army continues to use Energy Savings Performance Contracts (ESPCs), Utility Energy Savings Contracts (UESCs), and Intergovernmental Service Agreements (IGSAs) to improve installation efficiency and lower facility operational costs across all utilities and services. The Army is working to award nine ESPCs and UESCs totaling \$338 million in FY 2025. Resilience enhancements remain a focus for ESPCs and UESCs, including a planned natural gas pipeline providing 16 megawatts of power generation at Fort Irwin and numerous industrial equipment upgrades to improve operational efficiency at Anniston Army Depot. The Army's 185 IGSAs, saving \$120M, include agreements for environmental services, waste management, and dozens of other community partnerships. Going forward, we intend to increase our use of ESPCs, UESCs, and IGSAs to reduce the long-term costs of our installations.

The Army is doing comprehensive energy and water resilience planning at installations worldwide, including in the Middle East (CENTCOM), Europe (EUCOM), and Indo-Pacific region (INDOPACOM). These forward installations are critical to assuring the Army's readiness and maintaining warfighting skills, with special emphasis on the unique threat picture and host nation requirements in each area. In EUCOM and CENTCOM, energy risks include the reliability of host nation energy supplies. In these regions, we actively collaborate with partners to understand and mitigate risk. The Army is building energy resilience across INDOPACOM by developing microgrids, implementing energy and water efficiency measures, and ensuring adequate fuel reserves to support operations during potential disruptions.

CONCLUSION

In strategic competition, our adversaries are looking for ways to challenge us not just overseas, but right here at home. They will look for ways to eliminate our homefield advantage. Countering this requires predictable resourcing to enable our installations to modernize at pace of the Army's transformation efforts and remain the world's most powerful fighting force. Ensuring safe, reliable, and high-quality installations for Soldiers, Families, Civilians, and defense communities is critical to ensuring the Army can remain adaptable to mission requirements around the world.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Admiral Jablon.

**STATEMENT OF VICE ADMIRAL JEFFREY T. JABLON, DEPUTY CHIEF
OF NAVAL OPERATIONS FOR INSTALLATIONS AND LOGISTICS,
UNITED STATES NAVY**

General JABLON. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

I am looking forward to discussing the critical role of our installations and infrastructure that they play in effectively developing, generating, employing, and sustaining the Navy and Joint Force. It is an honor to appear before you today and a privilege to speak on behalf of the sailors and Navy civilians stationed at our 70 installations around the world.

The Navy's total MILCON and FSRM requirements far exceed the funds available, but with strong congressional support, we are focusing our infrastructure investments to maximize operational readiness and to improve the quality of life for our personnel and their families.

Your trust, confidence, and commitment are vital to ensuring the Navy's continued capability to maintain the peace, respond to crisis, and support critical Navy and Joint Force requirements to win decisively in war. The Secretary of Defense recently issued interim National Defense Strategic Guidance, which directs Department of Defense activities to restore peace through strength.

The Navy Logistics Enterprise, which includes our installations and infrastructure, is focused on carrying out the tenets of the Strategic Guidance through the implementation of the Navy's Maritime Sustainment Strategy.

The Navy understands that readiness starts from the shore, and effective infrastructure is the cornerstone of our Maritime Sustainment Strategy to not only support the quality of life for our sailors, but also sustain operations of the Navy and Joint Force around the globe. We are focusing our efforts to prioritize and program resources to repair, modernize, and replace critical infrastructure directly supporting operational readiness in the Indo-Pacific.

For example, the \$2.2 billion Congress provided in the fiscal year 2025 Disaster Supplemental provides critical resources for Typhoon Mawar recovery efforts in Guam, to include repairs to Apra Harbor, Glass Breakwater, HSC-25 Hangar MILCON, and hardening of our critical electrical feeders to the Navy base, and with congressional support, continued investment in our infrastructure will maintain our progress toward a modern, resilient, and ready network of installations that ensure fleet readiness, combat logistics capability across peacetime, competition, and contested environments to support both the Navy and Joint Force lethality.

Thank you. And I look forward to our discussion today.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF VADM JEFFREY T. JABLON

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am looking forward to discussing the critical role of our installations and infrastructure in effectively developing, generating, employing and sustaining the Navy and Joint Force. It is an honor to appear before you and a privilege to speak on behalf of the sailors and Navy civilians stationed at our 70 installations around the world. With strong Congressional support, we are improving our infrastructure to maximize operational readiness and improving the quality of life for our personnel and their families. Your trust, confidence, and commitment are vital to ensuring our Navy's capability to maintain the peace, respond to crises, and support critical Navy and Joint Force requirements to win decisively in war.

STRENGTHENING OUR FORCE FROM THE SHORE

The Secretary of Defense recently issued Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance, which directs Department of Defense activities to restore peace through strength. Through the framework of this new guidance, the Navy is standing ready if directed, to fight and win our Nation's wars. In demonstrating that ability, the Navy is integral to reestablishing deterrence, defending the American homeland, and preserving our way of life. Our Naval Logistics Enterprise (NLE), which includes our installations and infrastructure, is vital to addressing the strategic challenges outlined in the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance.

A fundamental aspect of ensuring lethality is the ability to effectively sustain military operations. To this end, the Navy is focused on the implementation of our recently published Maritime Sustainment Strategy to ensure the Navy can provide the right materiel and services, at the right place and right time, across the competition continuum, regardless of operational tempo and level of demand from distributed operational forces. The Navy understands that readiness starts from the shore, and effective infrastructure is the cornerstone of our Maritime Sustainment Strategy to sustain operations of the Navy and Joint Force around the globe.

Specifically, to ensure we are properly focusing our efforts and resources to deter aggression by Communist China in the Indo-Pacific region, we are assessing, prioritizing and programming resources to repair, modernize, or replace critical infrastructure directly supporting operational readiness in the Indo-Pacific. The scope of our actions is focused on infrastructure required to support combat against the pacing challenge of China. Investment in our infrastructure maintains our progress toward a sustainable, modern, resilient, and ready network of installations and contingency locations that ensure fleet readiness and combat logistics capability across peacetime, competition, and contested environments to support both Navy and Joint Force lethality.

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION

Investing in Navy installations is crucial for maintaining operational readiness and ensuring that our forces can respond immediately to emerging threats. The Navy's MILCON budget invests in the highest-priority projects that provide the necessary infrastructure to support advanced training, logistics, and mission-critical operations.

MILCON projects that support the Navy's nuclear deterrence mission, invest in INDOPACOM, support new platforms, advance Shipyard Infrastructure Optimization Program (SIOP) efforts, and enhance key facilities and infrastructure that contribute to warfighter lethality are critical. In addition, MILCON investment in quality of life (QoL) initiatives for our sailors and their families, including unaccompanied housing (UH), child development centers (CDCs). MILCON investment is also essential to sustaining fleet readiness. Prioritization of funds is based on guidance from Navy leadership, input from fleet and combatant commanders, and installation requirements.

BASE OPERATING SUPPORT AND FACILITIES SUSTAINMENT RESTORATION AND
MODERNIZATION

In addition to MILCON funding, our shore installations require FSRM funding to ensure the Navy is equipped with modern and well-maintained facilities to properly support warfighting capabilities around the globe. This funding provides the nec-

essary infrastructure enhancements to support advanced training, logistics, and mission-critical operations. Navy Base Operating Support (BOS) comprises fleet operations, safety and security, facility support, QoL, and mission support and management programs provided to 70 Navy installations worldwide.

The BOS program sustains mission capabilities, ensures regulatory compliance, and promotes QoL for sailors and their families. BOS funds personnel and infrastructure support, contributes to morale and retention, and enhances work force productivity.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Congress for providing \$2.2 billion in supplemental funding to address damage from Typhoon Mawar in Guam. This funding included \$900 million for FSRM, \$130 million for Family Housing and \$1.13 billion for MILCON. Damage from Typhoon Mawar impacted both civilian and military infrastructure, affecting mission support and QoL for both residents and service members.

Restoration and Modernization (RM) funding is essential for revitalizing critical infrastructure that has deteriorated over time and use. DON RM investment priorities are aligned strongly with the Department's focus on lethality. Increased funding for the utilities and fuels programs is critical to account for recent volatile global markets and to ensure "must pay" bills do not take funds at the expense of fleet modernization RM projects.

The FY 2025 NDAA directs the military departments to spend 4% of their real property plant replacement value (PRV) on FSRM by FY 2030. Once implemented, this represents a historically significant increase in shore infrastructure investment, will arrest future degradation, begin to recover the maintenance backlog, and increase average facility condition and remaining service life. We look forward to working with you on the best implementation of this requirement.

SHIPYARD INFRASTRUCTURE OPTIMIZATION PROGRAM

The Navy's SIOP is well underway, having completed 45 projects at our four public shipyards totaling over \$1 billion. These projects deliver facility and utility improvements, maintain dry dock certifications, ensure safe handling of nuclear material, correct facility safety deficiencies, and increase resilience. SIOP has an additional 49 projects (including four dry docks) costing \$6 billion under contract.

The Navy is focused on construction and recapitalization of dry docks (DD) and piers to support the class maintenance plans for our nuclear powered submarines and aircraft carriers. The FY2025 NDAA requires the SIOP to update cost and schedule management policy and guidance. The SIOP is required to brief Congress quarterly on dry-dock construction performance, and the Government Accountability Office's 2025 audit is focused on SIOP planning and contract management. We look forward to working with you to ensure visibility and transparency on our schedules and costs on this vitally important program.

UNACCOMPANIED HOUSING

The Navy is committed to delivering QoL commensurate with the sacrifices of our sailors. A key element to this is providing quality UH for eligible sailors. The Navy is committed to, and focused on, improving the current conditions of UH and addressing new concerns, while producing a sustainable inventory enterprise-wide.

The Navy has made meaningful progress to address UH conditions and occupant concerns, but there is more work to do. The Navy has taken significant actions in UH to improve the QoL of our sailors. We've increased RM funds by \$45 million to repair poor-condition UH facilities. We've also launched a free wi-fi pilot program at 12 UH locations in Hampton Roads, Virginia, and are currently confirming future funding availability for free high-speed wi-fi access for all UH residents. In addition, SECNAV signed out a Department of the Navy UH Bill of Rights and Responsibilities and Universal Lease with updated guidance, and we are continuing to streamline the maintenance reporting process.

Another significant action has been the Navy's "Forging Communities of Excellence" initiative to address the September 2023 GAO report findings and FY 2024 NDAA requirements. This initiative focuses improvements along three distinct Lines of Effort (LOE): Facilities Improvement, Management, and QoL. LOE 1 aims to improve the quality of the Navy's barracks through targeted investments in government-owned barracks and expansion of UH privatization where appropriate. The Navy has continued QoL enhancements in Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI) UH to expand projects for both Hampton Roads, Virginia, and San Diego, California. These expansions will privatize an additional 8,078 bedrooms in Hampton Roads and 3,435 bedrooms in San Diego. The Navy's pilot Higher Rate of Partial BAH authority for UH MHPI was carried out using 10 USC 2881(a) LOE 2 ensures

consistent service through a well-sourced, well-trained, and well-equipped workforce. LOE 3 continues to build trust and partnerships with residents by providing high-quality ancillary services, comfortable surroundings, and consistent, meaningful interaction. Under LOE 3, for example, the roll out of quick response (QR) maintenance codes at four pilot locations resulted in a 50% decrease in maintenance response times in 1 year. We are targeting rollout of this capability across the enterprise by the end of calendar 2025. Furthermore, the Navy is implementing the Navy Housing Accreditation Inspection Program in the 4th Quarter of FY2025 for all government-owned or -leased UH. This program will generate performance data to drive decision making and quality improvement initiatives. The Navy expects to identify best practices and performance gaps with this program in the coming fiscal year.

FAMILY HOUSING

The Navy continues to prioritize execution, long-term monitoring, and oversight of Navy Family Housing (FH) operations to enable safe and affordable housing for service members and their families. Congress has appropriated additional funding for FH, particularly at the Service oversight level. The additional funding enabled us to increase to nearly 200 new employees focused on oversight and/or inspections of public-private venture (PPV) MHPI Housing. The new staffing levels advanced the Navy's ability to better assess policies and processes, and respond to the needs of our sailors and their families.

Inspections have yielded additional insights on the overall conditions and quantity of available housing units. The Navy has completed 100% of the required FY 2020 and 2021 NDAA-required one-time inspections. We've also implemented processes to ensure inspections occur with each move-in and move-out, as well as lease pre-termination inspections upon request. The Navy provides inspection results to PPV partners for immediate remediation. We continually monitor health and safety conditions, as well as maintenance work orders and follow-ups with residents. PPV staff and partners have participated in 13 audits assigned from GAO, the Naval Audit Service and the DoD Office of Inspector General. The results of these audits have assisted the Navy in improving our standards, procedures, and guidelines.

The Navy has also launched the Department of Defense (DOD) Housing Feedback System (DHFS) to increase transparency and accountability of DOD PPV FH. DHFS provides sailors and their family members with the ability to publicly share feedback on housing conditions. In addition, Tenant Satisfaction Surveys are conducted annually, informing the PPV partners about resident concerns so they can take corrective actions. Installation commanders monitor the actions taken to address tenants' concerns.

NAVY CHILD AND YOUTH PROGRAMS

Navy Child and Youth Programs provide affordable, quality child and youth services to our sailors and their families and are a workforce enabler that directly enhances the readiness, efficiency, and retention of our Navy. The Navy continues to pursue military construction, facility sustainment (including equipment), and playground funding to improve or maintain the condition of our CDCs and School-Aged Care facilities.

The Navy is focused on expanding childcare capacity that involves staffing initiatives, construction of new Navy childcare facilities, and use of community resources. The quality of child youth programs is high, but the Navy continues to face capacity shortfalls, particularly in the fleet concentration areas of Norfolk, San Diego, Kitsap, Pearl Harbor, Jacksonville and the National Capital Region.

The current total unmet waitlist for Navy Child Development Centers is 2.5K, which is down from 5.3K at the start of FY 2023. The Navy is working to increase staffing levels, currently at 87%. Efforts include updating management staffing structure, enhancing training, recruitment incentives, and staff childcare discounts. Also, Military Childcare in Your Neighborhood fee assistance is available to families that are geographically dispersed or in locations with long waitlists for on-base care. The Navy has expanded fee assistance to over 9,000 spaces, which is up from 6,500 at the start of FY 2024.

CONCLUSION

To deter aggression by Communist China and others, we are assessing, prioritizing and programming resources to focus on infrastructure directly supporting the Navy and Joint Force in the Indo-Pacific, as well as providing quality of life around the globe to our vitally important sailors and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, and thank you for supporting our uniformed personnel, civilians, and their families around the world doing incredible work on behalf of the security of this country. As Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Installations and Logistics, I look forward to working with you in the continued pursuit of warfighting capability, readiness both afloat and ashore, and support for our sailors and their families.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. General Sklenka.

STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL STEPHEN D. SKLENKA, DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR INSTALLATIONS AND LOGISTICS, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

General SKLENKA. Chairman Boozman, and Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished Members of this Subcommittee. I really appreciate the opportunity to testify today regarding your Marine Corps' Military Construction and the quality of life initiatives that we have. On behalf of the Commandant, also, I want to make a special thanks to all of you for your continued support, to all of our Marines, the active duty, reserve component, civilian, retired, and of course to our families.

Now, the infrastructure and MILCON challenges confronting the Marine Corps today, these are decades in the making, and there are no quick-fix solutions. As repeatedly documented by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), our deferred maintenance and our MILCON needs, they are significant, and they go beyond our ability to self-fund.

The year-long Continuing Resolution has exacerbated these challenges. But what I am not going to do today is I am not going to state that the only solution to these issues is more money and greater resourcing. As we have previously testified, and as has been noted by the GAO, additional funding is indeed required, but so is leadership.

And to that end, the Commandant, his directive to us has been clear: it is a commitment to our Marines and their families, young people from your respective states. That commitment is unwavering. They are what we value the most, and that is why we will continue to accelerate the delivery of our Barracks 2030 Project as well as aggressively implement our Force Design and Marine Corps' modernization.

Now, regarding our bases and stations, the Commandant and I have long expressed the point that these are no longer administrative garrison sanctuaries. I think we should expect that the opening salvo in any conflict with a peer adversary is going to be aimed at our infrastructure, and our installations here in the homeland will not be exempt from such attacks. In fact, I think the case can easily be made that the first shots are already being fired, fired in the form of cyber attacks, UAS incursions, campaigns of subversion, as well as disruption.

Against a peer adversary, we are going to find ourselves not only fighting from our bases and installations, but in several cases, we will likely find ourselves fighting for those very bases and installations.

Now, with strong support from Congress, we are making progress, but it is going to require a sustained effort over a sustained period. No one budget year is going to provide enough resources to overcome our existing challenges, or to eliminate the

threats to our installations. However, the Marine Corps, as we always have, will continue to make every dollar count, and maximize the return on investment for the American people and the Marines that they have entrusted us to lead.

Now, we remain extremely grateful to the subcommittee for your partnership and your leadership, and together we are going to ensure that our installations are as resilient and as ready as the Marines that they support.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. And I look forward to your questions.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LT. GEN. STEPHEN D. SKLENKA

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished Members of this subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the status and priorities of the Marine Corps military construction (MILCON) program and quality-of-life initiatives. On behalf of the Commandant and all Marines, I thank the Committee for its continued support in providing the resources required to ensure your Marine Corps ready to be first-to-fight. As the subcommittee is well aware, the infrastructure and MILCON challenges confronting the Marine Corps, as identified by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), Government Accountability Office, and in service testimony, are significant and well beyond our ability to self-fund. As a consequence of the year-long continuing resolution and reduced funding levels, the Marine Corps has been forced to make some tough decisions. In FY 2025, the Marine Corps is deferring \$174 million in facilities sustainment, restoration, and modernization (FSRM) and cancelling \$4 million in order to account for these funding impacts. \$155 million of this deferral is tied to the Barracks 2030 investments. This has also prevented us from spending the mandatory minimums on FSRM, as established in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Remediating these systemic challenges across our installation enterprise will only be possible with your continued support.

CURRENT THREATS

The resiliency of our installations is critical to the Marine Corps' ability to sustain combat readiness and mission effectiveness in the face of a rapidly evolving global threat landscape. Our bases and stations are not simply fixed support structures but integrated nodes in our National defense architecture, which our adversaries will attack in all domains. Resilient infrastructure enables the Marine Corps to operate effectively under all conditions, in any threat environment, by maintaining a reliable power grid, ensuring the supply of potable water, and preserving communications that enable rapid mobilization, the deployment of forces, and the projection of credible combat power. This is why we are aggressively implementing the installation components of Force Design.

Our adversaries are working tirelessly to subvert the resiliency and daily operations of our bases and stations. China in particular is more comfortable using, combining, and coordinating all means- military and increasingly non-military- to achieve its operational and strategic ends than any other adversary we've encountered. Militarily, China's intent is to use air and sea attacks on our logistics networks to delay and deny sustainment of our forces. China's planned use of cyber attacks on our infrastructure will be designed to sow confusion and discord in our communities while denying us clean water, reliable power and electricity, effective sewage treatment, and other essential services. Such attacks will attempt to disrupt our command and control as well as our ability to project power from our installations.

Until recently, none of us currently in uniform have had to contend with a contested strategic or operational environment; we had unfettered access to and within the global commons for decades after the end of World War II. We could transport whatever we wanted wherever we wanted without fear of losing either that cargo or the platform transporting it. We could set up at a benign port or airfield and operate without any real threat to those operations. While we had the occasional rockets to contend with or even local attacks to repel, we never had to concern ourselves with existential threats to our global force posture.

Those days are effectively over, and our installations will undoubtedly be targets of adversarial intentions. In preparation for this contested environment, the Marine Corps is prioritizing investments and actions to improve the security of our facilities and harden them against modern threats.

BACKGROUND

Though the Indo-Pacific remains the priority theater, our adversaries will not confine their activities to one region. They will contest us everywhere—including in our homeland. The weapons engagement zone can no longer be viewed as something confined to the First Island Chain, or any other limited geographic space. We should all expect the proverbial first shots in any conflict with China to be aimed at our infrastructure—not our infantry or aviation units.

Those fires will be in the form of cyber attacks on critical infrastructure, unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) incursions, traditional electronic attack, and subversion or disruption via host-nationals or foreign nationals. Marine Corps networks have been attacked globally by China and other malicious actors, and they are under siege every day. In the last week of May, the Marine Corps confirmed hundreds of malicious attempts to access our information networks. The utility systems, communications networks, and other critical infrastructure supporting our installations remain under constant threat of adversary infiltration and exploitation due to obsolete cybersecurity infrastructure.

To succeed in such an environment, we will have to fight for our bases and stations, and not just from them. Simply stated, our installations are no longer administrative garrison sanctuaries, but rather critical terrain to be defended and contested as such.

To ensure we prevail in the next fight, wherever it may be, we must modernize and harden our installations—their physical infrastructure and especially their networks—against attacks on our ability to mobilize, project combat power, and sustain operational readiness. To support this, we are developing Force Design Optimization Plans (FDOPs) for our bases and stations, in addition to the Installation Master Plans being developed in accordance with requirements in a previous NDAA and title 10 U.S. Code § 2864. Each FDOP will address new facility requirements, identify future FSRM and MILCON projects required to create the resilience necessary in conflict, and provide all project documentation (via the DD1391 package). Once completed, these plans will be made available to the Committee and provided to each Member with a Marine Corps installation in their state, territory, district, or adjacent district.

BARRACKS 2030, SERVICE QUALITY OF LIFE, AND OPERATIONAL READINESS IMPERATIVES

Improving the readiness and quality of life of our Marines and sailors via the full implementation of our Barracks 2030 Plan remains a top priority for the Commandant, and this will not change. Barracks 2030 is our service's most consequential infrastructure investment plan in 50 years, and its execution is essential to generating and sustaining readiness. It is also essential to fulfilling our obligation, our compact with the Marines and sailors we lead, to provide them the facilities to support quality sleep, behavioral and mental health, physical health and nutrition, and everything else to prepare them for the challenges they face the next day. Ensuring better sleep, dietary, and fitness outcomes should further contribute to fewer lost days due to fatigue, injury, or illness, and will contribute to our overall efforts to improve our culture of safety.

At present, we are unable to meet this obligation to our own uncompromising level of satisfaction, but we are dedicated to this mission and to remediating the devastating effects of decades of deferred maintenance within our installation portfolio.

The Commandant and I are committed to providing Marines the barracks they deserve and can be proud of, yet the obstacles to overcome are significant—and they are decades in the making, as noted in the CBO's Report on Deferred Maintenance in October 2024. It notes the Marine Corps has a deferred maintenance bill in the billions of dollars. The deferred costs at Camp Pendleton, Camp Lejeune, and Marine Corps Base Hawaii total at least \$4 billion.

But as the Commandant says: We became Marines to do hard things, and remediating nearly two decades of underinvestment and deferred maintenance in our barracks in a fraction of the time is one of those hard things. At present, our Facilities Sustainment (FS) account is funded to 54% of the active component requirement of \$1.3 billion, and 77% of the reserve component requirement. In total, our FSRM accounts are approximately 12% of our total operation and maintenance funding.

Despite these funding challenges, we are slowly eating into our total shortfalls, and over the past 24 months we have initiated the renovation and repair of 23 barracks at a total cost of approximately \$300 million, which markedly improves the quality of life for 7,300 Marines. While this is a good start, it is the proverbial drop in the bucket for a portfolio with 108 barracks in need of renovation estimated to cost more than \$4 billion. The total estimated cost to fully implement Barracks 2030 is nearly \$30 billion over the next several years for barracks modernization, material, and management requirements.

In addition to renovations, we must accelerate demolitions to right-size our inventory. While it may sound counterintuitive to identify increased demolition (physical destruction) as a requirement for improved quality of life, it is necessary to generate resources and improve the living conditions of our Marines. Our current inventory of 658 barracks includes 69 that need to be demolished. Our plans include demolishing 37 barracks between FY 2026 and FY 2030, including seven at Camp Lejeune, six at Camp Pendleton, six at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Miramar, eight at MCAS Yuma, and the remaining 10 at various other installations. Doing so will free the service from the costs of heating, cooling, cleaning, and repairing old, largely empty facilities, resulting in cost savings and avoidances of approximately \$125 million per year.

During a previous hearing, my predecessor testified that many of our facilities lack air conditioning; this includes barracks at Camp Horno in Southern California. While no one thinks this is acceptable, few—if any—would think remediating this problem would require more resources than what the service has available in all FSRM accounts for the entire force—or in its warfighting readiness accounts for the operating forces.

FAMILY HOUSING

The Marine Corps remains focused on improving the Military Housing Privatization Initiative experience for Marines, sailors, and families. We have seen improvement in oversight, operation, maintenance, and customer service by our public-private venture (PPV) partners. We remain grateful for Congress' support for this additional oversight, and we hold property-management companies financially accountable for poor performance through incentive fee structures in our PPV business agreements.

Where there are issues with maintenance, work-order completions, and tenant satisfaction scores, the total incentive fee received by a property management company can be cut by tens of thousands of dollars, depending on the value of the property and the severity of performance shortfalls.

Aboard our two largest installations, Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton, we have reduced waiting times for housing. At present, the wait time for housing aboard Camp Lejeune is 1–9 months for junior Marines and 1–8 months for company-grade officers; for both groups, waiting times depend on the neighborhood and home size. At Camp Pendleton, the wait time for junior Marines is 1–4 months, with no wait in some neighborhoods. For company grade officers wait times range from a few weeks to 12 months depending on home size. While these wait times are improvements over previous years, we will strive to reduce them even further.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTERS

High-quality child care is a readiness priority for the Marine Corps, and we are matching that priority with investment in child care-related MILCON projects. A \$44.1 million Child Development Center (CDC) at Marine Corps Base (MCB) Camp Pendleton is currently under construction to add 250 childcare spaces, which will satisfy the existing demand for increased classroom capacity. In Guam, a \$105.2 million CDC was awarded in May 2024 to support 276 childcare spaces, which will support our growing posture on the island. These new CDCs will offer increased childcare capacity where it is needed the most, facilitating necessary changes in our force's footprint and providing long-term relief from extended wait times. However, while construction helps resolve long wait times related to overall capacity at an installation, it does not solve more pressing issues related to staffing at our CDCs.

Currently, 16 of our installations operate CDCs. However, five locations—MCB Quantico, MCB Camp Lejeune/MCAS New River, MCAS Beaufort/Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) Parris Island, MCB Camp Pendleton, and MCB Hawaii—account for 75 percent of the Marine Corps' childcare waitlist. Those same five installations are operating at 85 percent of their authorized staffing levels due to difficulties attracting and retaining childcare workers. To address these unacceptable wait times, the Marine Corps is taking active steps to ensure that staffing levels at our CDCs meet the needs of our Marines, sailors, and families. More than 40 percent of our

direct-care employees are Marine spouses, and PCS contributes to the annual turnover rate at our CDC facilities. To better support both our CDCs and Marine spouse employment, we have established a program that allows for non-competitive transfer of childcare employees, so they can transfer seamlessly to a new duty station. Through this program, the Marine Corps has retained more than 180 spouse employees in our CDC workforce. Also, in line with requirements laid out in Section 633 of the FY25 NDAA and in alignment with Department of Defense guidance, the Marine Corps has implemented a “no fee” first-child discount for all direct-care employees at our CDCs to attract qualified candidates and increase employee retention.

The Marine Corps also provides Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) fee assistance for families without access to on-base child care, whether due to wait lists or being stationed at a location without a nearby CDC. In FY24, more than 1,800 children were enrolled in the MCCYN program, with 733 community-based providers, ensuring greater childcare availability for Marine families while also supporting local businesses. These efforts directly support Marine families and enhance overall force readiness.

FY 2025 MILCON UPDATE

The Marine Corps is executing its fiscal year 2025 MILCON program with appropriations provided by the FY 2025 continuing resolution. To posture ourselves in the best manner to serve the Nation, we are investing in the following areas:

Pacific Posture:

- Marine Corps Base Hawaii: We are constructing a new aircraft hangar to support the home basing of KC-130J and MQ-9 aircraft. The KC-130J is the Marine Corps’ largest organic aviation platform, offering increased in-theater lift capability for troops and equipment. The MQ-9 is now the Marine Corps’ largest UAS, and offers persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities over extended ranges. Both of these aviation platforms will provide crucial support to the joint force in the Indo-Pacific.
- Guam: Guam is the only location west of the international dateline that we have guaranteed access to in a conflict. With this in mind, we are fully committed to ensuring our footprint in Guam can support the forces necessary to deter, and if necessary, prevail in conflict. We are building a new youth center to support Marine families stationed on the island. We are also constructing earth-covered magazines to store modern ordnance. These projects contribute to key components of force readiness, supporting the personal and operational requirements of Marines as we adjust our forward posture.
- Australia: We are making improvements to our posture at Australian Air Force Base Darwin, including the construction of an aircraft maintenance hangar and maintenance support facilities. These investments will provide increased maintenance and storage capacity in support of Marine Rotational Force-Darwin and theater security cooperation missions in the Indo-Pacific.

Modernization of Aviation Support Facilities:

- Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, North Carolina: We are constructing new maintenance facilities and hangar space at MCAS Cherry Point, NC. This includes a sustainment center to accommodate F-35 aircraft, maintenance and storage space, and secure data network areas. Additionally, a composite repair facility will provide a depot-level support for advanced composite materials and rotor-blade repair.

Marine Forces Reserve:

- Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington: We are investing in a new parachute survival training facility, for the maintenance, repair, and storage of parachutes, as well as storage and maintenance of arms for Marine Corps Reserve units in Washington.

This MILCON program is a balanced approach and reaffirms our enduring commitment to the Indo-Pacific, with five projects in the region. Ultimately, this program enables us to provide and sustain Marine forces that support our National security interests as identified by our civilian leaders. We remain grateful for your continued support in this continual endeavor.

ADVANCED MANUFACTURING AND THE ORGANIC INDUSTRIAL BASE

Across the Marine Corps, organizations face common operational readiness challenges such as equipment obsolescence, diminishing manufacturing sources, and materiel shortages. Meanwhile, persistent supply-chain issues cause long lead times for parts replacement.

To mitigate these challenges, the Marine Corps is improving and standardizing the implementation of advanced manufacturing practices at all levels of command across the enterprise. Advanced manufacturing creates opportunities to fully realize the value of distributed operations and shore up supply-chain gaps in real time and at the point of need. The technology for construction-scale additive manufacturing (AM) is rapidly maturing, and we seek to invest in capabilities such as concrete AM to address some immediate shortfalls in storage structures. With Congress' continued support of our AM innovations, we will rapidly deliver maintenance and storage facilities for newly developed weapons systems and munitions while reducing costs and timelines for design and construction. While such capability is particularly valuable in expeditionary environments, it offers similar value for more permanent installations as well.

The Marine Corps' Organic Industrial Base remains critical to both weapon system sustainment and Fleet Marine Force readiness. The Marine Corps' depot-level maintenance facilities repair 85 percent of the service's ground equipment and directly support overflow field-level maintenance for all three Marine Expeditionary Forces and Marine Forces Reserve. During conflict, the Marine Corps' depot level maintenance capability provides battle damage repair both forward and at the depots ensuring damaged weapons systems return to the fight as quickly as possible. Investments in AM technology will support this critical mission, and in any future conflict, positioning more capable machines as far forward as possible will reduce our reliance on overburdened supply chains in a contested environment.

CONCLUSION

The Marine Corps Installations and Logistics enterprise is aggressively pursuing modernization initiatives and improvements to our posture in the Indo-Pacific. As the Marine Corps continues its transformation to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving threat environment, it is abundantly clear our installations are no longer administrative garrison sanctuaries—they are warfighting enablers in their own right.

In the next fight, our installations will be as engaged and essential to success as any of our warfighting formations. Against a near-peer or peer adversary, we will certainly fight from our bases but may also be required to fight for our bases, to preserve access to the capabilities they provide our forces around the world. Our bases and stations, at home and abroad, will be on the front lines of logistics, command and control, cyber resilience, and force projection. Our installations will sustain Marines operating in contested, distributed, and degraded environments. They will serve as critical nodes in a network of stand-in forces and must be capable of enduring disruption, adapting to new threats, and sustaining lethality over time. We must plan, posture, and protect our installations accordingly.

Every dollar invested in MILCON and infrastructure readiness returns immense value to the Nation, supporting quality of life, enabling forward presence, accelerating modernization, and ensuring we can respond decisively to crises before they become conflicts. We will show up every day and prove ourselves worthy of the trust of our Marines, our partners, and the American people by demonstrating our stewardship, accountability, and readiness.

Thanks to the steadfast support of Congress, we are making real progress. From Barracks 2030 to cutting-edge logistics hubs and resilient infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific, we are preparing our installations to be mission-critical assets prepared to support our warfighters in any future campaign. But this is only the beginning. The pace of change demands we continue this momentum and accelerate it.

The Marine Corps remains the Nation's premier force in readiness, and we are grateful for your partnership. Together, we will ensure our installations are as resilient and ready as the Marines they support.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your enduring commitment to our mission, our infrastructure, and the Marines who stand ready to defend our Nation. Semper Fidelis.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. And General Miller.

STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL TOM D. MILLER, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF FOR LOGISTICS, ENGINEERING, AND FORCE PROTECTION, UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

General MILLER. Good morning, Chair Boozman and Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee.

I am honored to appear today to discuss the fiscal year 2026 Air Force Military Construction Program. I would like to begin by thanking the subcommittee for your steadfast support of our Nation's Air Force and the Military Construction funding that you have provided. Multiple projects, including an air traffic control tower, a childcare development center, and multiple Military Construction projects, benefited from the \$160 million in additional appropriations provided by Congress beyond the fiscal year 2025 President's Budget.

Importantly, \$487 million that Congress provided for the fiscal year 2025 Disaster Relief Supplemental provides much-needed resources to support Anderson Air Force Base's recovery from the devastation of Typhoon Mawar.

Our Nation continues to face a nexus of complex challenges: Defending the homeland, deterring the pacing threat of China in the Indo-Pacific, the increasing complexity of multi-domain threats, and the competition for resources, and the increasing rate of technological change.

The People's Liberation Army continues expanding, modernizing, and diversifying its entire Military, including its air, space, cyber, and nuclear forces. In the face of these challenges, this year's fiscal year 2026 budget reflects ongoing modernization efforts, including revolutionizing global strike capabilities built around the Sentinel and the B-21 Raider.

Sentinel is the largest, most complex weapon system acquisition program the Air Force has ever undertaken. We are working with the Office of the Secretary of Defense in seeking opportunities to reduce costs while revising the program's Milestone B recertification.

MILCON for Sentinel support facilities at Vandenberg Space Force Base, and Hill, F.E. Warren, and Malmstrom Air Force bases continue as the program restructures. The budget request includes funding for utility corridors and design for launch and control facilities, support to the B-21 program across Ellsworth, Dyess, Whiteman Air Force bases is also included in this year's submission.

Without question, our airmen are the foundation of the Air Force. This request preserves the well-being and quality of life for service members and their families through investment in much-needed housing and childcare development centers. Generous congressional support in fiscal years 2022 through 2025 funded most of our CDC projects that were currently executable design stage. The Air Force is actively working on design of 15 additional CDC projects totaling \$492 million for inclusion in future budget submissions.

Additionally, in fiscal year 2026, the Air Force Military Family Housing and Construction program focuses on planning studies, designs for future construction, and two projects improving housing in Japan, one at Yokota and one at Kadena Air Base.

In closing, the Air Force's strong partnership with this subcommittee's members, the dedicated staff, are both essential to the modernization of our assets, the safety of our installations, and the welfare of our airmen and our families.

I look forward to continuing to support, and to this hearing today. Thank you.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LT. GEN. TOM D. MILLER AND BRIG. GEN. ZACHARY S. WARAKOMSKI

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of the Air Force (DAF) Fiscal Year 2026 Military Construction Program.

Our installations remain the platforms from which we enable and project combat power in and through the air, cyber, and space domains. DAF installations serve as key nodes in a global network of operating locations that enable Joint Force mission success around the world; making the readiness, resiliency, and sustainability of installations matters of strategic importance. Our installations are where we train and equip for joint operations, control, and sustain air and space weapon systems, test new weapon systems, generate readiness, and provide safe, healthy communities that many of our Airmen, Guardians, and their families call home.

Our nation continues to face the nexus of complex challenges: deterring the pacing threat of China in the Indo-Pacific region; the increasing complexity of multi-domain threats; the competition for access to resources; and the increasing rate of technological change. The People's Liberation Army is expanding, modernizing, and diversifying its entire military-including cyber, space, and nuclear forces-at a rapid pace to support revisionist goals and objectives. These developments pose unique and fundamentally new challenges for deterrence, and while conflict is certainly not inevitable, the risk of military confrontation is increased in this environment.

This new strategic environment demands that we reestablish the warrior ethos, and rebuild the lethal and ready force, to provide the warfighting capability our Nation needs to compete and win. A foundational element of our deterrence is our installation infrastructure. We must ensure our installations are resilient, optimized, and operationally efficient to successfully defend the homeland; prevail against the full range of threats; deter strategic attacks against the United States, our allies, and our partners; deter aggression and be prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary.

In the face of these challenges, this year's budget reflects continued modernization efforts revolutionizing global strike capabilities built around the B-21 Raider and Sentinel Ground Based Strategic Deterrent; developing and fielding the Next Generation Air Dominance family-of- systems; cost-effective, resilient forward basing; and an expeditious transition to a wartime posture. The DAF Military Construction (MILCON) program continues to prioritize nuclear enterprise modernization and combatant command (CCMD) infrastructure support with an emphasis on the Pacific and Europe. The Facilities Sustainment, Restoration and Modernization (FSRM) portfolio remains focused on sustaining our existing infrastructure. Furthermore, we preserve the well-being and quality of life of our servicemembers and their families through investments in housing, dormitories, and child development centers (CDCs). We remain committed to sustaining the DAF's power projection platforms. We appreciate the continued partnership with Congress to ensure the Air Force and Space Force are well-postured to defend the homeland, deter, and win.

INFRASTRUCTURE: LONG-TERM READINESS

The budget request includes infrastructure and other long-term readiness investments that we must fund now to create sustained readiness over time- to be prepared to fight well into the future. As the Air Force continues to focus balancing available resources against the current strategic environment and across the different time horizons, our infrastructure requires careful re- examination to ensure it is both resilient and efficient. Years of competing priorities have eroded the Air Force's ability to maintain its infrastructure across the globe. Simultaneously, air bases are threatened in ways not seen in modern history.

Installation resiliency has proven to be increasingly important as adversary long-range precision-attack capabilities have rapidly improved. Particularly in the Indo-Pacific, China has spent decades building a deep magazine of advanced cruise and ballistic missiles specifically to threaten U.S. force presence in the region. In response, the Air Force has spent considerable time, energy, and resources to develop an Agile Combat Employment (ACE) scheme of maneuver, emphasizing rapid mobility and force dispersal in the region. ACE complicates the adversary's wartime cal-

culus and denies them the lucrative targeting opportunities that known, fixed, and thinly protected locations provide. Air Force installation infrastructure provides the backbone enabling our long-term readiness.

INSTALLATIONS

The DAF relies on its MILCON and FSRM programs to provide ready and resilient installations. Yet, relying on direct investment at the historically budgeted levels is insufficient to reverse the longstanding trend of deteriorating facilities and failing infrastructure. Our portfolio of 177 installations, 69,000 facilities, and 183 million square yards of airfield pavement is not sized to optimize the vital infrastructure of the current force structure.

Two decades of assuming risk in infrastructure investment, coupled with the burden of excess infrastructure, has led to a backlog of maintenance and repair requirements and degraded infrastructure. The Department works to mitigate these challenges by setting clear objectives, goals, and key actions to align installations with critical mission capabilities; optimize vital infrastructure; and maximize mission assurance.

The Air Force currently carries significant excess infrastructure across the board, along with a \$49.5 billion maintenance backlog that continues to grow. Since 1990, the Air Force has reduced in size considerably, including a 35% reduction in end strength and a 60% reduction in fighter squadrons, but it has only reduced its CONUS footprint by 15%. Moreover, today, roughly half of all infrastructure across the Air Force is in a moderate or high-risk condition. While the Air Force has been able to prioritize its resources to keep critical mission generation infrastructure (e.g., runways) in good working order, such prioritization has come at the expense of our supporting infrastructure. For example, over 70% of utility infrastructure on Air Force bases in the Indo-Pacific are in a high-risk condition, a problem made acute by the highly corrosive tropical or arctic environments of many facilities and by limited skilled local labor. Additionally, our buying power has eroded, with construction costs rising roughly 50% in the last 10 years.

INSTALLATION RESILIENCE

Ruggedizing our installations against evolving natural and man-made threats to continually project power and compete in an era of pacing threats from the People's Liberation Army is paramount for overall installation resilience and Department of Air Force mission assurance.

The Air Force appreciates the approximately \$1.6 billion provided in the December 21, 2024, American Relief Act. The \$487.3 million MILCON funding is being used to design and construct the critical infrastructure projects necessary to address the destruction resulting from Typhoon Mawar on Andersen Air Force Base (AFB), Guam. Moreover, the flexibility provided in the Disaster Relief Supplemental language will allow us to construct facilities to be more resilient to future destructive weather events.

SPECIAL INTEREST ITEMS

NATURAL DISASTER RECOVERY EFFORTS

The Natural Disaster Recovery (NDR) program has greatly benefitted from Congressional support over the last several fiscal years and we are seeing the results of this sustained and significant investment. The program is substantially complete with only two projects remaining to be awarded at Tyndall AFB, Florida. To date, we've awarded 96% of the NDR program, totaling over \$4 billion of investments to improve mission readiness, resilience, and efficiency at Tyndall AFB, Florida, Offutt AFB, Nebraska, and Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia.

TAKING CARE OF PEOPLE: CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTERS AND DORMITORIES

We strive to provide a high quality of life for our members and their families. At the heart of that goal is affordable, accessible childcare for our Airmen and Guardians and safe, high-quality dorms for our unaccompanied members.

The inability to access affordable and quality childcare can impact a Servicemember's ability to report for duty and his or her decision to stay in the service. To this end, the DAF is using a two-prong programmatic approach to improve CDCs: targeted investments in FSRM to address facility condition concerns, and posturing MILCON projects to increase capacity. The DAF continues to invest in CDCs through our MILCON and FSRM, of the 138 CDCs in the DAF inventory, none are in poor or failing condition.

In FY 2025, we are spending \$224 million in FSRM funding on six CDC projects. Additionally, Congressional support in FY 2022 through FY 2025 funded most of the CDC MILCON projects currently at an executable design stage (information on specific projects included in the FY 2026 request will be provided once available). The Child and Youth Facility Master Plan facilitates project advocacy by identifying CDC MILCON and FSRM projects that address child and youth facility condition and capacity challenges. The FY 2025 Continuing Resolution (CR) Spend Plan includes \$59 million for the CDC at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, which will also serve as the Department's first use of mass timber construction, and a \$22.4 million addition and alteration of an existing CDC at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana.

Equally important to us is providing unaccompanied service members with high-quality housing on our dormitory campuses. We will meet the National Defense Authorization Act (FY22 NDAA) for FY 2022 Quality of-life requirements for permanent-party dorms by investing \$1.1 billion across FY 2022–2026 to address facility and living conditions. This is a nearly three-fold increase over the previous 5 years. The Government Accountability Office report on barracks identified many issues; however, problems with our dorms are limited, and we remain committed to providing safe and adequate living conditions.

The DAF investment strategy for unaccompanied housing remains focused on restoration and modernization of dorms using FSRM funds, which allows MILCON funds to address capacity shortfalls and facility recapitalization. Additionally, the DAF appreciates the pilot program authority provided in the FY24 NDAA allowing the replacement of dormitories using FSRM funds when needed repairs exceed 75% of the MILCON project to replace it. Though the DAF has few dormitories that meet the replacement criteria, we can certainly make great use in some high-need areas. The FY25 CR Spend Plan included two new dorm projects, one at Joint Base Langley Eustis, Virginia for \$106 million, and the first increment of a Medical Education and Training Campus dormitory at Joint Base San Antonio for \$77 million.

The DAF remains steadfast in our support to our Airmen, Guardians and their families. Reducing childcare waitlists by 45% (from October 2023 through October 2024) is a significant achievement, but sustaining this progress requires consistent funding for on-base childcare options, subsidies, and staffing. Since FY19, 13 funded CDC projects created 2,100 new childcare slots. Our commitment to family housing remains strong, with \$550 million allocated for FY 2024–FY2025 to sustain safe living facilities for our Airmen. The DAF will continue to enhance quality of life for our service members and their families through construction of quality housing and childcare facilities.

FISCAL YEAR 2025 AIR FORCE MILCON CR SPEND PLAN

In FY 2025, the active-Duty Air Force and Space Force MILCON program is \$3.35 billion. This funding supports the DAF's commitment to fulfilling our strategic requirements, postures us for the future high-end fight, and ensures we continue taking care of our Airmen, Guardians, and their families. The program supports Combatant Commanders with a focus on the Pacific and European theaters and modernizing the nuclear enterprise. Additionally, the MILCON program continues efforts to bed down new weapons systems and seeks to recapitalize facilities that have outlived their usable life or no longer meet mission requirements. Our request also focused on Design to reinforce the Air Force's MILCON program stability and consistency. Program stability continues to be a major focus, ensuring mature projects are included in the budget and improving confidence they will award within the programmed amount in the year of appropriation.

COMBATANT COMMANDER INFRASTRUCTURE

The FY25 MILCON CR Spend Plan prioritized CCMD requirements with a particular emphasis on the Indo-Pacific and European theaters. Direct support to the CCMDs accounts for 17% of the FY25 MILCON program and aligns with the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance to Build a More Lethal Force, while directly Prioritizing Preparedness for War. Our FY25 program addresses some of the urgent U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), and U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) facility priorities.

Support to USINDOPACOM will enhance the United States' defensive posture in the region, reassure allies and partners, and increase readiness capabilities. The investment of resources to improve infrastructure and facilities throughout the Indo-Pacific Theater provides our allies, partners, and potential competitors a clear indication of the United States' long-term commitment to the region. Three projects in the FY25 CR Spend Plan support the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) totaling \$187.4 million: a runway extension at Yap International Airport (\$96 million), Fed-

erated States of Micronesia; a Theatre Corrosion Control Hangar, Kadena AB, Japan (\$66.4 million); and the Tactical Multi-Mission Over-the-Horizon Radar project in Palau (\$25 million).

The Air Force remains committed to USEUCOM priorities and its European partners for collective security and territorial integrity. In FY25, the Air Force CR Spend Plan included \$106 million for the European theater to support the repositioning of equipment in Denmark. This project will further improve deterrence efforts in the theater and enable joint and coalition forces to quickly respond to aggressive regional actors. The Air Force CR Spend Plan also supported Combatant Commands within the United States to include a continued focus on Weapons Generation Facilities directly supporting USSTRATCOM at Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota and Malmstrom AFB, Montana.

NEW MISSION BED DOWNS

Approximately 41% of the program, \$1.42 billion, supports New Weapon Systems to ensure the DAF remains the world's premier air and space force. These systems include the Sentinel Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, B-21 bomber, C-130J, F-35 fighter, T-7A training aircraft, Long Range Stand Off facilities, F-16 Mission Training Center, Combat Rescue Helicopter, Over the Horizon Radar System, and the E-11A Battlefield Airborne Communications Node aircraft.

The DoD is building a force that is lethal, resilient, sustainable, survivable, agile, and responsive through modernization of key capabilities, the first of which are nuclear forces. The FY25 CR Spend Plan continues the focus on modernizing the nuclear enterprise by supporting the bed down of new weapons systems and missions. The plan funds four projects at Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota, for a total of \$284.5 million, and two projects at Dyess AFB, Texas, totaling \$31.3 million to bed down B-21 Raiders. It also includes three projects at F.E. Warren AFB, Wyoming, totaling \$417 million, a project at Malmstrom AFB, Montana, totaling \$20 million, and two projects at Vandenberg Space Force Base (SFB), California, totaling \$277 million, to support transition from the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile weapon system to the Sentinel Weapon System.

Sentinel will develop and deploy modern Aerospace Vehicle Equipment, Command and Launch infrastructure (e.g. launch facilities, launch centers, and other ground infrastructure), and Support Equipment & Trainers. The Sentinel program is the largest Air Force land acquisition effort since the original Minuteman, primarily to acquire temporary construction easements for utility corridors in the missile fields. The Minuteman III-to-Sentinel conversion must occur on a precise timeline to maintain the operational readiness of the nuclear. We will continue to inform Congress on the Air Force's progress during design, construction, and commissioning of Sentinel facilities. Once online, the B-21 Raider and Sentinel weapons systems will ensure the Air Force can effectively deliver two-thirds of the Nation's nuclear triad well into the future, should the need ever arise.

EXISTING MISSION RECAPITALIZATION

The FY25 MILCON CR Spend Plan also includes \$719.2 million to fund current mission projects, focusing on the most critical recapitalization of existing infrastructure. It also includes a new dormitory in Virginia and another in Texas, a CDC in Idaho, research facilities in Massachusetts, Joint Integrated Test and Training Center in Alaska, Security Forces facility in Georgia, a Fire Station in Ohio, the U.S. portion of a NATO Airlift Hangar in Spain, and support for infrastructure in the United Kingdom.

DESIGN

Design funding remains a central focus of the DAF program to reinforce program stability and consistency. Sufficient design funding enables projects to progress rapidly through design and meet maturity criteria for admissibility into the program, provides more accurate cost estimates, and maximizes the opportunity to award projects in the year of appropriation. Without sufficient design funding, the Air Force must award designs by design phase, adding risk associated with costs and timely delivery of design. The DAF design program includes weapons- system-specific design funds supporting the B-21, Sentinel, Survivable Airborne Operations Center, and other programs.

HOUSING CONSTRUCTION, OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Quality of life for our Airmen and Guardians and their families remains a top readiness priority for the DAF. We continue to focus investment and innovation on our housing, dormitories, and CDCs.

DORMITORIES/UNACCOMPANIED HOUSING

The DAF is on track to meet the FSRM investment requirements established by the FY22 NDAA. This is part of the largest dorm investment in over a decade. However, we recognize more is needed. In FY2022–FY2024, we funded 104 projects totaling \$570 million to repair and renovate dorms, HVACs, roofs, and other critical facility systems. Projects are underway or being planned at 18 installations that will continue our efforts to improve quality of life for our most junior Airmen and Guardians.

The DAF unaccompanied housing (UH) inventory includes nearly 58,000 permanent party and over 45,600 training beds. Per FY24 NDAA requirements, interim guidance from DoD established Building Condition Index (BCI, a 0–100 scale) as the UH Uniform Condition Index. The DAF's overall strategy remains focused on restoring and modernizing dorms with FSRM funds and addressing capacity shortfalls and facility recapitalization with MILCON funds. The DAF Dormitory Master Plan guides this effort by providing the comprehensive forecasts, estimates, and recommendations required to strategically execute dormitory projects when and where they are most needed. Current assessments show 0.1% of permanent party beds are rated less than 60 on the BCI.

Training dorms are another key component of our military service members' growth and development. Current assessments show only 0.1% of training beds are rated less than 60 BCI. Notably, the DAF executed seven FSRM projects for \$67 million at training dorms in FY23–FY24.

FAMILY HOUSING

The DAF is focused on eliminating inadequate housing from the DAF inventory and correcting health and safety deficiencies. In addition to enabling planning studies, designing for future construction projects, and renovating existing DAF-owned homes, the Military Family Housing construction program also supports restructuring Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI) projects.

In FY26, the DAF Military Family Housing construction program focuses on planning studies, designs for future construction and two projects to improve housing in Japan: one project at Yokota AB and one at Kadena AB.

Our Military Family Housing Operation and Maintenance (O&M) funds efforts to sustain, improve, and modernize our inventory of approximately 14,900 DAF-owned family housing units and provides enhanced oversight of over 52,000 privatized homes. Combined, the family housing O&M and construction programs will ensure continued support for the housing needs of Airmen, Guardians, their families and caregivers, as well as our Army, Navy, and Marine Corps teammates living in DAF-owned and privatized family housing.

The DAF MHPI inventory contains over 52,000 privatized end-state unit homes spanning 31 projects across 63 installations. In some cases, the financial assumptions and economics of the deals fell short of expectations through no fault of the project owners. In these cases, the DAF requests funding to restructure to ensure projects don't default on loans and conditions of the homes remain acceptable.

PRIVATIZED HOUSING

Quality, affordable housing has a direct correlation to recruitment, retention, and readiness. Hence, we remain focused on improved oversight, long-term financial health, and sustainment of the housing inventory. We are committed to ensuring MHPI projects provide safe, quality, and well-maintained housing where military members and their families and caregivers will want and choose to live.

We continue our efforts to improve our privatized housing portfolio and address the remaining elements of the MHPI reforms set out in the FY 2020–23 NDAs. We made significant progress to implement reforms to enhance our oversight of privatized housing and hold MHPI companies accountable for providing quality housing. Specifically, several congressionally mandated provisions were implemented throughout various DAF housing programs.

Since 2020, we have added 218 government positions across the privatized housing program, increased inspections, provided additional training to housing personnel, and revamped housing governance. We continue to maintain Resident Councils for two-way communication between the residents and installation and project

owner leadership. We then use feedback from tenant satisfaction surveys to develop action plans for improving the residents' experiences and encourage our Airmen, Guardians, and their families to engage with resident advocates to help resolve any disputes and improve communications among all relevant DAF stakeholders.

We also expanded our metrics for assessing the health of the privatized housing portfolio, particularly with regards to resident satisfaction, maintenance quality and responsiveness, and property management operations. Most of our private partners meet or exceed DAF standards as prescribed in our metrics. However, when we identify concerns with operational performance, we have placed a small number of private partners on Community Action Plans, or if more systemic, on Performance Improvement Plans with milestones and schedules. The goal is to remedy deficiencies and ensure our military families receive quality service and housing.

Some privatized housing projects require financial restructuring to continue to remain financially stable and market comparable. The restructure goals are to ensure the projects can fully fund operational expenses, debt servicing, and sustainment of the homes for the life of the lease and also fund reinvestment needs during the mid-term reinvestment period.

UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE

Space Force Guardians secure our Nation's interests in, from, and to space. Our core purpose as a service is to achieve space superiority in a rapidly evolving and increasingly contested domain. Space superiority requires the Space Force to be trained, equipped, and ready to conduct space warfighting operations. Through achieving space superiority, the Space Force will provide the foundation for the Joint Force to project power and dominate other domains, secure the homeland, deter, and, if necessary, defeat aggressors who threaten our Nation and way of life.

The Space Force presents combat-ready squadrons and detachments to the combatant commands through component field commands. While the service provides deployable combat detachments to the combatant commands, most of the combat-ready space forces we field are employed-in-place, meaning we execute combatant command missions from our installations, which serve as power projection platforms. Mission-ready, resilient installations and facilities are therefore integral to Space Force readiness and warfighting effectiveness.

The Space Force is committed to resourcing infrastructure requirements by identifying those projects that directly impact the performance of weapons systems and prioritizing them for funding consideration. We prioritize projects balancing weapons systems, quality of life, and force support infrastructure requirements to reduce risk to mission and address the requirements of an independent military service. Our investment in MILCON increases capacity and focus on reducing risk to mission and force. We've placed a particular emphasis on mission bed down, energy resilience, assured access to space, security improvements, and combatant command requirements within the Indo-Pacific. Our investments in FSRM address existing infrastructure and focus on improving readiness and quality of life for Guardians, Airmen, their families and mission partners. These initiatives are focused on electrical, heating and cooling, water, fire suppression, roofs, and dorm improvements.

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION

MILCON increases capacity and readiness for the Space Force. The Space Force received \$109.8 million in the FY25 MILCON CR Spend Plan. FY25 USSF Unspecified Minor Military Construction projects include \$7.2 million to install redundant power distribution at Strategic Weapons System Ashore and Space Launch Complex 46 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station (SFS), Florida; \$6.3 million to install an emergency generator at Morrell Operations Center, Cape Canaveral SFS, Florida; and \$11 million to replace fire and water wells at Clear SFS, Alaska. The first two projects support our Spaceport of the Future (SOTF) initiative. Additionally, \$84.9 million was included in the FY25 MILCON CR Spend Plan for Design, including \$63 million for assured access to space (Spaceport of the Future). This significant Design request is necessary for projects to rapidly develop, to provide accurate estimates, and maximize the opportunity to award future MILCON projects in the year of appropriation.

In an era of rapid technological advancement and evolving security threats, the Space Force needs agile space architecture to appropriately address the unpredictable challenges we face. The launch complex remains the foundation of our assured access to space. Assured access to space procures launch services and delivers on-orbit capabilities used by joint warfighters, combatant commands, intelligence agencies, civilian services, and the commercial space industry. Globally competitive

ranges with capacity and infrastructure to support launch and test operations on demand therefore advance our National security interests.

The SOTF program invests USSF MILCON dollars into our aging launch infrastructure to guarantee the DoD's ability to provide world-class launch capabilities to public and private partners. Launch Ranges at Cape Canaveral SFS and Vandenberg SFB were established in the 1950s to support long range testing and emerging government space launch actions. Despite the infrastructure for these ranges being established decades ago, they have been continuously maintained, sustained, and improved through the years to meet the needs of a limited range customer base.

However, as demand for national security, civil, and commercial space capabilities continues to grow, our launch range infrastructure has not modernized sufficiently to meet the significant increase in launch demand. Accordingly, the Space Force undertook a broad effort to analyze our launch infrastructure enterprise and assess range modernization efforts to maximize our ability to support U.S. launch requirements. Launch rates rose approximately 30% each of the last 2 years, and we expect rates to continue to rise through the Future Years Defense Plan. Therefore, the Space Force is prioritizing enhancements so that we have the infrastructure needed to meet these launch demands. Increased demand requires significant planning and resources; all of which are captured under SOTF. SOTF is an all-encompassing initiative for which the Space Force is taking a comprehensive, holistic approach to review all factors contributing to range costs and launch throughput.

FACILITY SUSTAINMENT, RESTORATION, AND MODERNIZATION

We view the FSRM and MILCON programs as interdependent. Together, these funding streams provide the sustainable foundation for 14 Space Force installations and more than 80 smaller geographically separate units, sites, and ranges. FSRM preserves infrastructure readiness by providing flexibility to repair facilities and infrastructure, thereby maximizing lifespan. The Space Force received \$444.5 million in the FY25 MILCON CR Spend Plan.

Our top FSRM execution priority areas as a service are Combat Readiness and Mission Assurance. Space Force FSRM focuses on installation resiliency and enabling our employed-in-place force presentation model. Our FSRM investments strengthen our installations as warfighting platforms and ensure the availability of these weapons systems for our no-fail missions.

QUALITY OF LIFE

The Space Force's employed-in-place model presents unique challenges to Guardians.

Given most of our members are not deployed downrange like many of their sister service counterparts, Guardians must balance executing their mission and managing the responsibilities of family and home life.

To maintain morale, retain our members and their families, and secure mission readiness, Space Force quality of life programs and associated MILCON and FSRM investments serve as essential force multipliers. Our service is committed to investing MILCON and FSRM resources to support CDCs and providing safe, quality, well-maintained housing and dorms for Guardians and their families. When our Guardians are free from worry, they can better dedicate themselves to protecting our Nation's interests in, from, and to space.

WEAPON SYSTEM SUSTAINMENT

Space Superiority also relies on a robust Weapon System Sustainment (WSS) strategy, fully integrated with FSRM and MILCON programs. This integrated approach is critical given the Space Force's employed-in-place operational posture. WSS directly contributes to space superiority by ensuring sustained system availability and maintainability through depot-level maintenance, including software updates and sustained engineering. This proactive sustainment posture safeguards equipment health and readiness, ultimately maximizing operational capability and ensuring continued dominance in the space domain.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of the Air Force's MILCON and FSRM programs. We appreciate Congress' continued support for our enterprise and look forward to working with you on our MILCON and FSRM priorities.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. General Warakomski.

**STATEMENT OF BRIGADIER GENERAL ZACHARY S. WARAKOMSKI,
ASSISTANT DEPUTY CHIEF OF SPACE OPERATIONS FOR OPERATIONS,
CYBER, AND NUCLEAR, UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE**

General WARAKOMSKI. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the U.S. Space Force for our Military Construction Program.

The Space Force remains laser-focused on securing our nation's interest in, from, and to space, and as access to space grows, the strategic landscape is becoming increasingly complex. Many of our systems were fielded in an uncontested environment, and today our adversaries are aggressively fielding capabilities to contest and ultimately control space, fundamentally shifting it into a warfighting domain.

They are also posturing to challenge our critical infrastructure both at home and abroad. Meanwhile, our installations serve as home to our Guardians, Airmen, mission partners, and their families who live and work there. The preponderance of our combat-ready guardians are employed in place at their home stations, executing their missions from our installations, which serve as power projection platforms.

The vital importance of our facilities and infrastructure cannot be overstated. It is foundational to the launch and operational missions we conduct across the entire spectrum of conflict to provide essential capabilities to the Joint Force.

Military Construction funding for the Space Force provides flexibility, balancing infrastructure requirements across our weapon systems, quality of life, and Force support portfolios. FSRM priorities include essential upgrades to power, electrical and water systems, heating and cooling, fire suppression, roofs, and dormitories.

MILCON priorities focus on increasing capacity and reducing risk to mission, with an emphasis on mission bed down, security improvements, and assured access to space.

The Spaceport of the Future Initiative, encompassing our East and West Coast launch complexes, remains the foundation of our assured access to space and is instrumental in enhancing our national security space launch capabilities. We continue to diversify launch providers, increase launch sites, and invest in range facilities and increase payload processing capacity, all while closely monitoring the long supply chain.

We want to thank Congress for the \$109.8 million in MILCON, \$444.5 million in FSRM, and the \$84.9 million in planning and design that Space Force received in fiscal year 2025. This includes \$63 million in planning and design for Spaceport of the Future to keep our launch enterprise globally competitive.

Thanks again for your continued advocacy for Space Force MILCON, as well as the Quality of Life Initiative supporting our guardians, airmen, and their families.

I look forward to our dialogue.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you very much. Thank you for your testimony. We will get started with our questions.

I had the opportunity to go to the Army Museum over the weekend. I saw a little blurb on one of the morning shows about the new exhibit there. And it is in the Army Museum, but it really is

about the fighting patriots that really, you know, stepped forward at the time of crisis as our country was beginning. But I would really recommend that all of you go and see it.

It is outstanding, again, it is in the Army Museum, but it is really not an Army museum in the—Army exhibit in the sense that that same spirit is what embodies you all, the people that have served since then, who have done such a tremendous job of keeping us safe, keeping us free, sacrifices of you in uniform, and your families, it certainly is a family affair. And we are going to be talking about housing, and all of the things that we can do to keep families together, you know, that aspect of things.

So let us start out with Mr. Marks. Mr. Marks, given the ongoing legal uncertainty surrounding project labor agreements, how is the Department managing the day-to-day impact on projects in the pipeline, especially those approaching award that are now stalled due to uncertainty over whether a project labor agreement (PLA) is required or not? Has any guidance been given to avoid delays or compliance issues in the interim? And finally, how will this impact the projects in this year's request if it is determined that PLAs are required?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, first, thank you for that question, and I do appreciate—

Senator BOOZMAN. Lots of questions.

Mr. MARKS. Yes, Senator. But I do appreciate the time that we did have to begin to discuss this. First and foremost, as I shared with you, anything that increases cost and schedule is of concern to the Department right now, and so we are working very, very hard to look at that. The administration supports the use of project labor agreements where those are practicable and cost-effective, but I again want to emphasize that I affirm and recognize your concerns about the costs and the drivers that could potentially cause those projects to increase.

Right now, we are not going to be pursuing any blanket deviations, but we are working with NAVFAC and USACE to go project by project and ensure that we are finding the most economical and speedy way to continue to move these projects along so that we can assess those on a project-by-project basis.

We are also working with OMB to determine our next steps and how we best address this issue for the long term, given the nature of where we stand today. And so the impact of that, as we spoke earlier, is all about mission and readiness and how we drive that forward, and so much of the directions that we have given in working with these esteemed colleagues to my left is really to continue to drive those as quickly as we possibly can to meet the readiness concerns we have, and to keep the costs down as best as we possibly can.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Thank you. The Deputy Secretary of Defense directed a review of the MILCON portfolio to identify opportunities for greater efficiency. As you know, initiatives like this often take time while the review isn't complete, I would like to hear from the panel: Are there any early findings or promising areas that could be acted on quickly. Since you are already in the midst of building the fiscal year 2027 budget, is there any realistic expectation that these efficiencies will be reflected in that submis-

sion. Or are we likely looking at a longer timeline before we see tangible changes?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, let me lead with that just in a broad sense, and then I will defer to my colleagues. As we are working on those, some of the early things that we are examining continue to be the use of other transactional authorities where it makes sense to move quickly. More importantly, we are taking a page from our partners at Defense Innovation Unit with accelerated design build, ways to bring contractors together more quickly, get through this changing requirements idea so that we can get it done quickly, and move it ahead quickly, the idea of also building projects—bundling multiple projects together where that makes sense, so that we can, again, move things together quickly.

And then finally, the idea behind replacing failed or failing facilities, so the repair-by-replace work that we have done collectively to more efficiently replace those using O&M dollars again. All of those are things that we want to share collectively and make sure that we are doing those in a way that moves us ahead transparently to meet the mission requirements.

Senator BOOZMAN. Anyone else.

Admiral JABLON. Senator, as you said, the MILCON cost is really astronomical and really getting out of hand. So what our objective is to think, act, and operate differently in the Navy for possible alternative construction methods, module construction using tension fabric structures instead of regular brick and mortar; that will buy us some efficiencies both in cost and time.

Also, Honorable Marks mentioning about block of specific types of buildings that we do repetitively, such as CDCs and barracks, could bring the cost down.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Senator Ossoff.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Miller, thank you again for being here. Thank you for our conversation yesterday as well. I think you are aware last August I had the pleasure of hosting Air Force Chief of Staff General Allvin in Georgia. We visited several installations including Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta.

And man, are the people of Valdosta proud of and supportive of Moody. Mayor Matheson, Dr. Lucy Greene of Moody support group, I mean, that is a base community that just loves hosting the Air Force and provides so much support for the airmen and the civilians who work on and around the base. And they are thrilled that Moody has been selected to host the F-35 with the A-10s leaving the Force, and critical infrastructure upgrades are already underway to prepare the installation for that transition.

You and I discussed this yesterday, and here in this public setting I would like your commitment again that you will work closely with me, with the subcommittee, with the community in Valdosta to ensure that the base is prepared and successful to swiftly bring those aircraft to Georgia?

General MILLER. Ranking Member Ossoff, thank you for the call yesterday, for taking the time. Absolutely, Moody has so much combat capability for the United States Air Force in one place, from the rescue squadron, to the base defense group, to the fighters there, A-10s now, F-35s in the future, I do commit to you to work,

it is a multi-faceted question to—you asked, how do we pull to the left?

And so pulling to the left is, you know, looking at the environmental requirements, the facility requirements that you just mentioned, the aircraft laydown, all the combat capability. And most familiar with Robins' and Valdosta's, you know, support to the Air Force communities, and can't thank Georgia enough for that.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you. Looking forward to working with you on that. And I do want to discuss Robins, and again, you and I discussed this yesterday, but I want to raise here in this public setting once again with you the condition of the Air Logistics Complex. I mean, you know how extraordinary the work being done at Robins is in terms of all of the maintenance, and not just on the airframes but also the avionics and so many of the systems, but that air logistics complex really needs more investment.

The condition of the facilities' degradation, neglect, faulty construction was just—it is a disservice to the airmen and civilians who are there making sure that the Air Force has aircraft, avionics systems that are in the state they need to be in. So I am asking you here for your commitment to work with me and the subcommittee and the leadership at Robins to accelerate investment in key projects at Robins that may include FSRM funding, and to upgrade facilities at the Air Logistics Complex.

General MILLER. Yes, sir. And in the public forum, I do want to just applaud, Warner Robins Air Logistics Complex produces—has turned around vexing problems we have had with weapon systems F-15, C-5, C-130 in all aspects, meeting on-time delivery and providing more flight line availability for those weapon systems in wings throughout the Air Force.

And you remarked avionics in particular is a particular skill set that the complex there produces for many weapon systems that I didn't just mention, and you do have my commitment that looking at, not only the workload that is there now at Warner Robins, but what is in the future also coming to Warner Robins, that the facilities, the infrastructure, the overhead cranes, the power, all the ability in the classified environment also for the avionics, as mentioned, will be addressed and planned for in advance and not late to need.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you so much, looking forward to working with you, General.

And Admiral Jablon, thank you as well for your service and your testimony today. Georgia is proud to host Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay. We are proud to host the East Coast home for the Ohio-class submarines. We are working closely with the Navy and with the Department in order to prepare for the transition to the Columbia-class boats. It is one of my top priorities to make sure that we are investing in Kings Bay to prepare it for the equipment and the missions that are coming.

Can I have your commitment, Admiral, to work with me and the subcommittee and the leadership at Kings Bay, and local leaders in Georgia to ensure that the base is fully prepared to accept the new Columbia-class submarines?

Admiral JABLON. Senator, thank you for that question. As a former Submarine Group 10 Commander in Kings Bay, you do

have my commitment to work with you and the subcommittee. As you know, the Columbia-class submarine is our number one priority in the Navy, and the infrastructure which supports that is vital to its success.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Admiral.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Hyde-Smith.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Ranking Member. And thank you for being on the panel today and your willingness to serve, and I just appreciate everybody here in uniform, and that is not in uniform, for your commitments. I just want to get that out there.

And I really appreciate the fact that in your fiscal year 2025 budget you included the Keesler Air Force Base Tower. That is so important for that air traffic control tower there, and it is certainly part of our national defense, but we are very proud of it and appreciate that.

And this is for those who want to answer that, a concern of mine, is how is the Department ensuring that smaller but strategically essential installations, such as those in Mississippi, are not overlooked when it comes to long-term planning for necessary infrastructure upgrades and resource prioritization?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, thank you, and good morning. First and foremost is, as I have mentioned before in previous testimony, the understanding that combatant commanders and the laydown, and the need, so as we think about things like Golden Dome, when we think about the defense of our installations, counter-small unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), other things, is the importance of our installations, again, not only as Force projection platforms, but as warfighting places themselves.

And so as we take that, the Department is taking a comprehensive look at all of our locations to ensure that we are in the right locations at the right time, and making sure that we are making the proper investments to meet those there. And I know each of the services has their own determination of how that is important, but I assure you that we are taking that seriously as we look across the entire portfolio of our installations and their importance to what the future defense of the national—our national security.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you for that. And I will go back to you. The prior administration was very slow in evaluating, processing, and reporting to this committee the required projects restructurings under the Military Housing Privatization Initiative, particularly those caused by shortfalls in the long-term reinvestment accounts for those projects. What is your team doing to expedite these evaluations and reports to this committee and OMB so that our service members can benefit from the much-needed improvements these restructurings will provide for them?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, thank you for that, and as a past resident of military housing, I assure you that I appreciate greatly what you are discussing here today. What we are doing right now is to take a hard look at that, working with my service partners to ensure that the investments that are being made are there. That the care of our families is of utmost, not only for their own readiness, but their health, life, and safety as well, as you know.

And so I wanted to make sure that we take a harder look at that again early into the job and diving deeper with each of the services to look at that, but I share your concerns and will continue to share with this committee what we learn and how we make improvements to the portfolio.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. That is very much appreciated.

And I have no further questions.

Senator BOOZMAN. Senator Gillibrand.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In January General Wilson, in January of this year, I wrote a letter advocating for the inclusion of a new 42nd Infantry Division Headquarters on the Army's fiscal year 2026 unfunded priority list. Funding this project will secure an overdue upgrade to the 42nd Infantry Division Headquarters in Troy, New York, and help facilitate the planned construction of an \$800 million cannon factory at the nearby Watervliet Armory.

I would like you to speak to the significance of both projects. What can you tell us, tell this committee about the impact of the new headquarters for the 42nd Infantry Division and the importance of continuing the expansion of the Watervliet Armory?

General WILSON. Yes, Senator. On the Watervliet Army Depot, Army Materiel Command has prioritized that facility in their Facility Investment Plan. The Facility Investment Plan that is ran annually by the Army Installation Management Command. And so that is accounted for in that space is all of our projects, and we run this Facility Investment Plan annually across, with senior commander input, and they determine what prioritization each of their projects in their respective areas will have, and we continue to support those commanders on the ground priorities from the Department of Army staff level.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you. General Miller, I would like to discuss infrastructure projects in Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station. I am requesting funding to construct a combined operations airfield facility to further support the work done by the 914th Operations Group and Subordinate Units. It is my understanding that although this project is not in the President's Budget Request, it is a strong candidate for the unfunded priority list.

Can you speak to the benefits of a modernization and properly sized combined operation airfield facility, particularly at a location like Niagara Falls, which is certified nuclear-ready, and supports the worldwide combat air refueling mission?

General MILLER. Thank you, Senator, for the question. The combined ops—having a combined mission set in one facility has very qualitative improvement for the mission, when people work together and they can team together, especially and a responsibility like you just described that Niagara Falls has, and other responsibilities that could go there, having a team that works at a facility that they can be proud of, that they are—that will be able to last for mission upon mission that comes down, not just playing a short game for the mission but a long game, has a huge impact.

And we are a retention force, as you know, so when we bring an airman into whichever component within the Air Force, Guard, Reserve, or Active Duty, we want to keep them, we are investing in them. It is a high-tech service, and so they are making a decision

on whether they are staying based on the facilities they get to work in, you know, the care that we put into where they work, where they live absolutely important.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Yes. Well, thank you, General Miller.

General Wilson, it is my understanding that the new runway lighting infrastructure is needed to improve aircraft safety during takeoff and landing at Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield, located at Fort Drum. Considering the recent frequency of airfield incidents, including the tragic collision at GCA in January, can you speak to the importance of this project as well as other infrastructure projects that may be necessary to improve air traffic safety?

General WILSON. Yes, Senator. In fact, the Army supports this, and supports the move from fiscal year 2027 to '26 for this project time line move out.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Yes.

General WILSON. And that was just signed on yesterday.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Great. Thank you.

And last question, General Miller, with the continuing proliferation of small, unmanned aerial systems, including the strategic success of Ukraine's Operation Spiders Web and Israel's recent drone operations staged from within Iranian territory, I am wondering what additional passive infrastructure defenses the Air Force may be considering to protect aircraft on the flight line, including construction of hardened aircraft shelters.

General MILLER. Thank you, Senator. We have been thinking about this long before the dramatic events that everyone saw on television. I think it is a multifaceted problem with a multifaceted approach, facilities absolutely has a play there, but also electromagnetic spectrum, direct energy, the authorities, especially within the United States, coordination with the FAA, coordination to prosecute, whether it is FBI that is going left of launch of Counter-SUAS.

So facilities, and infrastructure, and hardening does have a play, but it is a multifaceted play. We don't want to spend years and years only going after the facility piece, only to learn that something—that there is a different threat that we are seeing in the rearview mirror.

Senator GILLIBRAND. And when can we expect a plan or proposal with regard to UAS?

General MILLER. I actually work very closely with our director of operations who is the lead for the Air Force because all the things I just mentioned, which I know we are short on time, but I will get back with the A-3 as the lead for the Air Force on it, and we will get back with your office, or if you have time, with you.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Anytime. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Ranking, Member.

Senator BOOZMAN. Admiral Jablon, and General Miller, the Navy and Air Force sustained major infrastructure damage on Guam due to Typhoon Mawar. While Congress provided initial down payment to the Disaster Relief Supplemental, significant unfunded recovery remains. There appears to be little, if any, disaster recovery fund in this year's budget request. What actions are the Navy and Air Force currently taking to address the damaged infrastructure on

Guam, and what is your plan to request and secure the additional funding required for full recovery?

Admiral JABLON. Senator, thank you for that question. As I mentioned in my opening statement, really thankful for Congress' supplemental of \$2.2 billion, focusing those—that investment specifically on FSRM investments to get after the Typhoon Mawar effects that destroyed many facilities.

The backlog of infrastructure to correct from Mawar is about \$40 billion right now, so we are looking at those most critical infrastructure assets, hardening, our electrical utilities, going after electrical utilities within the Navy base at Polaris Point, to focus FSRM and MILCON dollars on that. But we are working as diligently as we can in a prioritized way to get after Mawar recovery efforts.

General MILLER. And Chair Boozman, if I could add? From the punishing environment, as you know, of Guam, of humidity, wind, it has a degrading effect on equipment. We have had a lot of prepositioned equipment that we had prepositioned at Anderson, and this is prior to the typhoon where we didn't have adequate facilities to shelter from the weather. That was only accelerated through—when the typhoon hit, so we had degrading, spalling concrete, and uncovered equipment that just accelerated after the typhoon.

We have taken the funds that have already been provided by Congress and doing warehousing to get equipment out of the weather. We have \$109 million in two projects which we will award in August and September to address two dorms that we need to renovate, two out of four, that we are looking at.

But to get here, to your question very directly, we would be decades trying to absorb the requirements that we have within the base budget for the service. If it is—\$8 billion, is the current estimate for the Air Force, which is more than twice as much as we have in MILCON for any 1 year, for current-mission MILCON, and new-mission MILCON.

Senator BOOZMAN. Senator Murkowski.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And good morning, gentlemen. Thank you for your service. I want to begin my questions to you, General Miller. You are nodding like you are expecting this.

[Laughter.]

General MILLER. You have a good team, ma'am.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Yes, I have an excellent team. Thank you very much.

I want to talk about the Joint Integrated Test and Training Center (JITTC), this is the Joint Integrated Testing and Training Center at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER), one of the Air Force's top priorities for MILCON. In the fiscal year 2026-1 files that the committee received last week, the Air Force increases that request to \$152 million in fiscal year 2026 authorizations.

Can you share with the committee how we jumped—this was always a significant project. It was big, even in Air Force terms, but increasing from \$97 million to \$152 million? And also whether or not we should expect any delays or other consequences in the project based on the late addition to the scope of the project?

General MILLER. Yes, Senator, thank you. That the importance of the JITTC, I don't have the words to describe how important it is to the Joint Force, to the Air Domain. So you know the mission analysis behind that, in the analysis as we were going forward, the power requirements because of that unique capability that the JITTC brings drove an additional substation that was required. So \$105 million additional dollars, that that was the majority of the escalation is, the power requirements are so dramatically larger for what the mission of the JITTC will be. That was the escalation.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So can you, General, can you share then—because you know the situation in Cook Inlet with the natural gas supplies dwindling, how is the Air Force working to secure long-term energy needs for, not only for JBER, but really for the bases more broadly in Alaska?

General MILLER. So Senator, I am sure you are aware of the recent announcement for the microreactor at the—

Senator MURKOWSKI. Yes, finally. We are pleased to see that.

General MILLER. Yes ma'am. And that is really, I think, that is an indicator for the future for us, not only for a location that is so reliant on a source of reliable that is repetitive energy to have it there, but from a resiliency standpoint, from being able to island off of the grid. It was mentioned earlier in testimony that absolutely attacking our SCADA systems at the beginning of an attack from a cyber perspective is an easy take for an adversary.

So if we have mission systems that are relying on a commercial electrical grid and thinking about the impact that would have. The energy independence that it would give us for—to be able to island from an energy perspective on installations with critical missions throughout the United States and deploy, and I think the encouraging piece there is, it is a 5-megawatt reactor, but to build—if there are additional requirements to build additional work. We are looking forward to that and seeing, you know—

Senator MURKOWSKI. What is it going to do to your time line? Are you worried about that, that it pushes out the time line for the JITTC to be fully stood up?

General MILLER. Time is not on our side on any piece of this, so I will have to get back with your team on the specifics of the time line. I was aware of the dollar escalation, from a time perspective. I think once they came to the conclusion that there is just no way to meet it with the current power requirements, they took that into the planning. I will have to take that for the record to get you the details on that.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, I would appreciate that.

Let me turn now to you, Mr. Marks. Also sticking with the energy vulnerability, we know the situation in Alaska, again, a great reliance on natural gas out of the Cook Inlet, and up in the interior there, specifically at Fort Wainwright, the concern about Wainwright being vulnerable to unexpected outages and operational issues.

I am wondering whether the budget request reflects appropriate funding levels to address energy reliability challenges like we have at Wainwright. And then I am going to throw an extra question in here related to dual-use infrastructure. I have been pushing much more aggressively on what we can be doing within, particularly,

the Alaska environment, to move towards opportunities to construct projects that are able to serve multiple departments and agencies. I am concerned about energy, and I want to focus on dual-use infrastructure.

Mr. MARKS. Senator, thank you for that. First, being sensitive to time, I know the first one: Installation energy resiliency plans are certainly part of what has been put into the program. And so I will be happy to come back to you and we can discuss that one further.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Great.

Mr. MARKS. Alternatively, on dual-use, I agree with you, partnerships and industry best practices are things that we need to continue to pursue. And so also that is something that we can share together, and I will be happy to come back and meet with you on that.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I have many questions that I will submit for the record. But I appreciate the individuals being here today.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Baldwin.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member. And thank you to all of our witnesses. Thank you for your service.

I want to start with you, General Wilson. I understand the Army Reserve is facing a multibillion-dollar backlog in deferred facilities, restoration, and maintenance, and I am concerned about the impact this backlog has on readiness, for not just for the Reserve but also the Active component, given the critical sustainment and logistics capabilities that reside within the Army Reserve.

Fort McCoy in Wisconsin is a key installation for Reserve component training and large-scale mobilization. For the Army G-9 perspective, how are Military Construction investments at Fort McCoy, as well as those for individual Reserve units in Wisconsin, being prioritized to support their long-term strategic value?

General WILSON. Thank you, Senator. All of those requirements are prioritized by that component, the Army Reserve, COMPO 3, and so what comes in as part of the Facilities Investment Plan for the COMPO 3, it is their assessment based on the status of their facilities and infrastructure. And like Fort McCoy, which is a serious mobilization station and site for the Army. I can tell you that they are giving it the right level of attention and ensuring that is accounted for in the Facilities Investment Plan moving forward.

Senator BALDWIN. Okay, thank you, General Wilson.

Secretary Marks, I worked with this committee to secure funding for a new community noise mitigation program implemented by the Office of Local Community Defense Cooperation. I was disappointed by the long delay in making the first round of funding available to local governments, and I want to make sure that you are aware that communities such as Dane County in Wisconsin have been waiting for this funding for years.

The 115th Fighter Wing began receiving F-35 aircraft in 2023, and the neighboring residents are still waiting for Federal assistance in addressing noise impacts.

So Assistant Secretary Marks, will you work to ensure this funding competition moves forward without delay?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, absolutely. And first let me thank you for your leadership on that. As someone who just left an F-35 training base with more than 50 F-35s, I understand the source of your concern at Truax. So thank you for that.

Senator BALDWIN. Okay.

Mr. MARKS. Yes, ma'am, and in fact, what I would like to do is come back to you and sit down with you and explain the competitive process in ways that I think we can bolster the case to make sure that that does move forward without delay. So I would be happy to come back and do that with my team, if that would be acceptable. The second round of competition is ongoing right now.

Senator BALDWIN. Yes, it is.

Mr. MARKS. And so we certainly want to make sure that we put all of the effort behind that, and I acknowledge that, and we would be happy to schedule that with your team.

Senator BALDWIN. Yeah. It closes out shortly in early July.

Mr. MARKS. That is right.

Senator BALDWIN. And I know that my community is working very hard on their submission for that, and I would welcome a follow-up with your team to talk in more granular detail.

Mr. MARKS. Yes, ma'am. Happy to do that, ma'am.

Senator BALDWIN. Mr. Secretary, this committee has also long been concerned about the backlog of cleanup efforts at current and former defense installations. The most recent publicly available information from the Defense Environmental Restoration Program on the status of planned remediation is from fiscal year 2023. That information lists an intent to devote over \$1 million to cleanup activities, in Wisconsin in fiscal year 2025.

I know I speak for many on this committee when I express my dissatisfaction with the full-year Continuing Resolution that passed in March. But my question for you, Mr. Secretary, is: What is the status of this fiscal year 2025 funding that was planned for locations in Wisconsin, including Badger Army Ammunition Plant? And the second question is: Is the Department still on track to devote this funding towards urgently needed cleanup efforts there?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, thank you. We take our environmental responsibilities very seriously, and I do owe you a deeper dive as I am learning the position right now with my team on each of the cases, and unless General Wilson may have more to this. But I can assure you that we are going to continue to push forward for those things. What I need to make sure that I go back and look at is how that all lays down flat within Wisconsin, which I don't have with me today. Be happy to take that for the record and come back to you on that.

Senator BALDWIN. I would appreciate that. Maybe we can do both topics at once as a follow-up meeting.

Mr. MARKS. Absolutely, ma'am. Yes, ma'am.

Senator BALDWIN. For many years, the Badger Army Ammunition Plant operated, and while it was declared surplus to the Army's and the Department of Defense's needs back in the late 1990s, there is still some remediation that needs to happen there.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General WILSON. And Senator, from the Army standpoint, we account, there is 27 sites that we are still working toward, and we

are committed to the EPA standards for remediation and the prioritization, of course, the most contaminated location is how we are making sure that we step through the list.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. And the Senior Senator from North Dakota, Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, thanks to you and Ranking Member for holding this hearing today.

I would like to thank all of you for your incredible service, and as well as all your staff that is here with you. Thanks for your incredible service. We appreciate it, and for being here today.

General Miller, some gratitude to you for the resurfacing at the Grand Forks Air Force Base runway, or the upgrades I should say, to that runway, very important. Right now, we are actually hosting, as you know, the B-1 from Ellsworth as they are making modifications there for the new B-21, and I think we are the logical place to bring it for the Dyess B ones when they have to do the same. So thank you for that, being on top of that. Appreciate it. And by the way, that is going very well. In addition to our ISR mission, hypersonics, satellite, and all the other things we do there at Grand Forks.

I want to ask you about Sentinel though. Very important that we keep Sentinel on track, as you know, because of the Nunn-McCurdy Review, we have had a pause, but now from what I have seen, Air Force is doing some very good things about getting to concurrency and actually installing Sentinel across the three ICBM bases and working to get back on track.

And we work very hard to keep that program funded, and we are doing that again through reconciliation. Talk to me about how you are going to make sure that that gets done concurrently across the three bases, and on schedule?

General MILLER. Thank you, Senator, for the question, and the concurrently versus serial, you know, and getting there is important work right now even during the restructuring on Sentinel for utility corridor work, which is vitally important regardless of the specific restructuring action. The utility corridor work that is being done now and the planning and design for launch facilities and launch control facilities all has to be done in advance.

I think, not knowing what the future brings, there are budgetary requirements in the future, doing the things we can do right now in the known environment is important. And so that is where we have—parts of the Sentinel program paused under the restructuring, but not the part you just described. So the utility corridor and the planning and design for that launch facility, launch control facility all can be done and is being done now.

Senator HOEVEN. And you are committed to proceeding as I have just described, and you and I have just discussed?

General MILLER. Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you. And then the weapons generation facility at Minot Air Force Base, right now, the only place that we have, air launch cruise missiles, particularly, nuclear air launch cruise missiles, is Minot, and Barksdale will be the only places going forward. We need upgrades to that Weapon Gen Facility. Talk to me about how you are going to get that done in a timely way?

General MILLER. There are \$44 million in projects that Global Strikes identified specifically to get that FSRM actually to keep the weapons' storage area not only viable but able to accept Long Range Standoff (LRSO).

Senator HOEVEN. LRSO, right.

General MILLER. LRSO, specifically. There different requirements over time that are just a function of weather, keeping airmen out of the weather from a security standpoint. But then there is configuration of a specific—and I know we are in an unclassified environment, but a configuration and security that have to be addressed, which Global Strike has looked at all those requirements. And I know it has competed extremely well in the prioritization for the FSRM dollars.

So they definitely have a strong voice—you know, they definitely have a strong voice within our prioritization within the Air Force.

Senator HOEVEN. And your intention is to have those upgrades in place by the time LRSO is ready to go, because right now we are not on track for that, but your intention is to be on track for that?

General MILLER. My intention for the configuration piece, absolutely. I need to go back, and loop back on the roads, the roofs, the non-configuration piece. I need to take that one for the record, Senator, and come back to you or your staff with—to get that part of the answer.

Senator HOEVEN. Thanks, General.

General Wilson, for our number one project for our guard at the 817th Engineering Company in Jamestown, they are actually using the Civic Center. This is a large Sapper Group engineering company that has been deployed multiple times around the globe, always does an incredible job, they need a new facility. There is \$2.5 million in the 2025 Continuing Resolution, but it was not in the 2026 Budget Request, this is a priority. What can you do?

General WILSON. Senator, we will make sure that we circle back with the guard from their facilities investment plan consolidated list that was approved by them. Of course, that prioritization, we are committed to supporting based on the resourcing that becomes available.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay, and this next one, I know is really important to the Chairman of the committee here because he likes to come up to North Dakota and go to Devil's Lake, where we have an incredible Army National Guard base, Camp Grafton. And not only does it provide a lot of training, particularly for NCOs, but also it houses the BIA Law Enforcement Training Center, which is the only one we have other than down in Artesia, New Mexico.

There is a facility there for lodging, and I know you would want our chairman to be comfortable when he comes up there. And that has been 100 percent design completed, \$8 million spent on the project cost, but he might be coming pretty soon, so we need to make sure we keep that moving. And out of deference to our Chairman, can you help me keep that moving?

General WILSON. Yes, Senator, we will keep track on the progress. And the Corps of Engineers does a pretty good job in the oversight.

Senator HOEVEN. They do. Again, really appreciate all of you and the work you do. Thank you so much.

And again, thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BOOZMAN. We look forward to staying there.

Senator Ossoff.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Admiral Jablon, as you know, Albany, Georgia, hosts Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany, which is essential to Marine Corps readiness and sustaining expeditionary combat power for the Marines. I would like to hear from both Admiral Jablon and General Sklenka on this, please.

In fiscal year 2023, I worked alongside the Marine Corps Logistics Base leadership in the Albany community to help secure planning and design funding for a new consolidated communications facility at the logistics base to more efficiently support the vital Marine Corps logistics mission there.

My question for you is: Will you work with me to ensure that we move swiftly to construction for this project? Again, we have already funded planning and design; it is the top priority for the facility and the community?

General SKLENKA. Senator, you absolutely have our commitment. Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany is our Marine Corps' sole depot. It is, when you look at among first, in terms logistics support entities within the Marine Corps, Albany is it. And any way that we can ensure that we deliver capability to our warfighters quickly and effectively we will take that.

Senator OSSOFF. Anything to add, Admiral?

Admiral JABLON. No, Senator. That depot is under Lieutenant General Sklenka's authorities.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you. General Wilson, as you are aware of Chattahoochee Valley in Georgia, proud home of Fort Benning, the Maneuver Center of Excellence, as well as elements of the 75th Ranger Regiment, and I am particularly concerned, as I mentioned in my opening statement, about quality of life for service members at Benning and across the country.

In fiscal year 2024 I helped to secure the funding to plan a new elementary school at Fort Benning to replace Dexter Elementary School on post. Dexter was built in 1968, it is an aged facility, but the children of our service members deserve the very best. Again, we have already funded planning and design. Do I have your commitment, General Wilson, to work with me and the subcommittee to try to expedite the construction of that new school for Military families at Fort Benning?

General WILSON. Yes, Senator, you do have my commitment.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you. General, I also want to raise with you the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Lab in Forest Park, Georgia, on the Fort Gillem Enclave, which is DOD's only full-service criminal forensic lab. And I have had the pleasure of visiting the facility. It is remarkable what they do, both for traditional criminal forensics, but also for material that is secured and exploited from battlefields around the world.

Last year, working alongside Senator Reverend Warnock, we successfully helped extend the authorization needed to complete the construction of a new forensic lab at the Gillem Enclave. Can I

have your commitment, General Wilson, to work with me and the subcommittee to ensure that this project has the resources necessary to see it through?

General WILSON. Yes, Senator.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you. Mr. Marks, I want to touch on the plans for reconciliation and try to get some clarity from the Department. There is \$900 million of Military Construction funding requested in the reconciliation measure. What specific projects is that funding for?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, I appreciate that question. As we view this as one bill, we are looking at defensive systems, munitions, munitions procurement, readiness, and quality of life programs are all included in that package.

Senator OSSOFF. That is many things and important things. My question is: What specific projects will be funded by the \$900 million allocation requested for the reconciliation measure as opposed to the remainder of MILCON funding, which the administration wants to move through the normal appropriations' process? What is that \$900 million for specifically at the project level?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, let me come back to you at the project level so that I can show you those things again. New to that, and I don't have that granularity right now.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. Will you please commit to providing the subcommittee with a project-by-project list of which projects are intended to be funded by the \$900 million reconciliation portion, versus the remainder of the traditional appropriations?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, I will work with you to try to get the best answer to that question, yes.

Senator OSSOFF. Well, I appreciate that commitment. And can you think of any reason why, where, as this typically proceeds fiscal year, after fiscal year, the subcommittee is provided with a list of projects that constitute the totality of the MILCON budget request, why there would be this nearly billion dollars floating out here that wouldn't have a project-by-project justification?

Mr. MARKS. Senator, I believe it would be there. Again, what we are looking at is the submission of the 2026 Budget as a stand-alone, and then the FY DP will come in 2027, so I will have greater granularity looking into the future, but let me get back to you on that, Senator. And I will do my utmost to answer that for you.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. So just to be clear, Mr. Marks, you are going to follow up with the subcommittee, and you are going to get us a list of those projects that are intended to be funded via the \$900 million reconciliation portion of the overall MILCON budget?

Mr. MARKS. We will attempt to do that, yes, Senator.

Senator OSSOFF. You will attempt to do that. Okay. I appreciate that.

And Mr. Chairman, that concludes my questions.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. And I want to thank our witnesses for being with us today, and thank you for your service. And I know we look forward to working closely together to improve the quality of life for our men and women that are in uniform, and their families, and then also to give them the resources to keep them safe as they keep us safe.

For our retiree General Miller, again congratulations, and thank you for your dedicated service for so many years, we do appreciate that. And as I said earlier, I know this is a family affair. We greatly appreciate them.

ADDITIONAL COMMITTEE QUESTIONS

For Members of the Subcommittee, any questions for the record should be turned into subcommittee staff no later than the close of business on Tuesday, June the 24th.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO HON. DALE MARKS

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR DEB FISCHER

Question. Would the Department of Defense support appropriating Facility Sustainment Restoration and Modernization (FSRM) funding for 3-years?

What efficiencies, if any, would this create? Please provide examples, both qualitative and quantitative. If available, please provide estimates for potential savings, to include cost avoidance.

What would the impact be on your overall FSRM backlog?

What would the impact be on future military construction needs if your overall FSRM backlog is reduced?

Answer. The Department recognizes the potential advantages of multi-year availability of Operations and Maintenance funds for Facility Sustainment, Restoration, and Modernization (FSRM). These include cost savings through single contractor awards facilitating long-term planning (e.g., supplies, workforce) and reduced administrative overhead. It also enables comprehensive planning for large, complex projects unsuitable for traditional 1-year contracting cycles, and allows for tackling larger chunks of the deferred maintenance backlog, rather than phased or piecemeal approaches. Currently, annual O&M appropriations limit the Government's negotiating power due to tight deadlines for solicitations and awards before funds expire after 1 year. This compressed timeframe and the annual end of year deadline encourage higher contractor bids to mitigate potential risks.

Therefore, as part of the Fiscal Year 2026 President's Budget, the Department has requested appropriations language that would allow for five percent of the Operation and Maintenance (O&M) appropriations to be available for a second year, which would provide additional flexibility and mitigate many of the inefficiencies of single-year FSRM. A second year of O&M funding availability provides more time to plan, design, contract for, and execute comprehensive facility renovations to extend the lifespan of facilities and delay or avoid military construction replacement projects. The Department is exploring options to yield the best facilities maintenance program possible while meeting appropriate Congressional oversight requirements. We look forward to continued partnership with Congress to achieve that goal.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JON OSSOFF

Question. We can all agree that this year's budget submission timeline has been unfortunate, to say the least. Adding to this year's uncertainty, the Department also chose to leave nearly \$900 million of requirements in mostly planning and design funds, out of the budget request, and instead place it in reconciliation.

Assistant Secretary, what specific projects is that planning and design funding for? Can you provide a list of what projects these designs will be for?

Answer. The Department is providing a spend plan consistent with the letter sent to the Department on July 22, 2025 from HASC Chairman Rogers and SASC Chairman Wicker. The Department will provide further information consistent with Public Law 119-21 as requested in the letter.

Question. Who will make the decision about how that money gets spent? Will it be you, moving down your unfunded priority list or up to OMB?

Answer. The Department intends to spend the funding consistent with the spend plan that will be transmitted pursuant to Section 20013 of Public Law 119-21.

Question. Recognizing that these funds are considered a requirement for fiscal year 2026, why would they be requested in reconciliation as opposed to regular appropriations? Knowing full well reconciliation is never a guaranteed legislative tool,

why would you risk nearly a billion dollars in funding required for our National security?

Answer. The Department is focused on meeting critical warfighting requirements as efficiently and expediently as possible. The Department appreciates the support to the critical missions funded by Section 20013 of Public Law 119–21. I commit to ensuring that every taxpayer dollar spent supports increasing our lethality.

Question. Would you characterize the Department’s request as a slush fund of \$900 million for MilCon?

Answer. The funding provided in Public Law 119–21 will be spent on critical priorities in missile defense, air superiority, and nuclear forces and improving infrastructure and capabilities of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. I am laser-focused on working with other senior leaders in the Department to ensure that this funding is spent with maximum efficiency and at the best value to the U.S. taxpayer.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO LTG DAVID WILSON

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR DEB FISCHER

Question. Would the Army support appropriating Facility Sustainment Restoration and Modernization (FSRM) funding for 3-years?

Answer. The Army supports authorizing FSRM for 2 years, with appropriate controls to include the goal of awarding in year one. Army sees limited advantage for a 3-year authorization. Authorization for 2 years will reduce risk and uncertainty resulting from the constraints of single year funds

Question. What efficiencies, if any, would this create? Please provide examples, both qualitative and quantitative. If available, please provide estimates for potential savings, to include cost avoidance.

Answer. Anticipated efficiencies from this initiative include:

- Allows commands to reallocate funds when bids are substantially different than budgeted amounts. This helps in situations where bids are either high or low. Per bullet four below, expect to see fewer situations where this occurs due to additional time for pre-award work.
- Provides additional time for contract procurement when Congressional notification is required.
- Offsets recurring impact of Continuing Resolutions where funds are received mid-year complicating execution of FSRM funding and investment plans. The Army is continually pushed into executing FSRM work at Year End and loses most of our negotiating leverage. While the Army does not have quantifiable data to support, anecdotally, contractors are collectively aware of the fiscal year deadlines and inflate their bids. This proposal allows more efficient execution of both Sustainment and Restoration & Modernization work.
- Alleviates the difficulty in conducting a thorough review of site conditions and/or inaccurate request for proposal (RFPs) and scopes of work (SOWs), the lack of pre-award work often results in additional funds for contract modifications.
- Provides time to better define R&M projects requiring longer procurement time, e.g., larger, more complex projects.
- Provides flexibility to execute emerging requirements, e.g., damage caused by extreme storm or other natural events which occur late in the fiscal year.

Question. What would the impact be on your overall FSRM backlog?

Answer. Since the Army anticipates better defined projects, accounting efficiencies, and normalized workload will result in lower bids and costs for projects, additional projects will be funded and backlog reduced when compared to status quo.

Question. What would the impact be on future military construction needs if your overall FSRM backlog is reduced?

Answer. The Army anticipates military construction needs would decrease if the FSRM backlog is reduced. A lower backlog (i.e., high facility condition index) would redirect resources from break/fix activities to more sustaining activities (e.g., preventative maintenance) that helps ensure facilities can function through their design lives. Longer design lives will reduce the need for full facility recapitalization which is typically a MILCON requirement. In many cases the R&M program can relieve pressure on military construction in those cases where a major renovation can satisfy mission in lieu of a full facility replacement.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JON OSSOFF

Question. It has been 5 years since legislation was enacted to provide more protections for military families living in privatized housing.

In 2022, I led an 8-month bipartisan investigation into substandard privatized military housing conditions, which uncovered mistreatment and neglect of families living in privatized military housing on several installations, including on post at Ft. Gordon in Augusta—where families were getting sick because of mold in their homes.

While there's been some progress to upgrade privatized housing conditions on Ft. Gordon and elsewhere, we continue to hear troubling news from servicemembers and their families about the poor conditions of privatized housing and the inadequate support from housing providers on installations in Georgia and across the country, including on Georgia's Ft. Stewart and at Hunter Army Airfield.

Yet confusingly, the Army's fiscal year 2026 budget request seeks to reduce funding for privatized housing maintenance and oversight.

With perpetual issues plaguing military privatized housing, why is the Army attempting to reduce funding essential to protecting military families and what impact will the cuts have?

Answer. The funding reductions are in response to a variety of factors. First, the largest reduction of \$21.7M in requirements reflects the conclusion of the FY2020 NDAA mandated third-party inspections for all domestic privatized housing, to include Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Alaska, which will be concluded by end of FY2025. The reduced FY2026 inspection requirement accounts for the remaining government-owned/controlled inventory, which is primarily overseas (10K homes) and will be completed by the end of FY2026.

Additional reductions are largely attributed to the reduced civilian personnel supporting housing operations, pricing adjustments, and broader budgetary cuts. We are assessing the impacts of the Deferred Resignation Program and potential outcomes of the cuts to personnel and funding. The Army is placing strong emphasis on responsible restructuring, which will include assessment of tasks and roles that can be streamlined and effectively executed with a smaller workforce. Our goal is to minimize the impacts of these cuts on servicemembers and their families.

Question. If we were to provide more funding, could you use it and how?

Answer. Additional funding would be immediately used to strengthen oversight, improve responsiveness to tenant/resident concerns, and enhance the long-term quality and safety of privatized housing. Despite the projected budgetary and personnel cuts in FY26, the Army must maintain sufficient resources to support, train, and sustain a permanent, dedicated workforce. This includes housing inspectors, tenant/resident advocates, and personnel overseeing privatized housing operations. As the Army modernizes processes and integrates AI tools where appropriate, we must reassess and realign workforce requirements while prioritizing staffing for mission-critical housing functions.

Further, additional funding could expand our operational capacity to meet current and future NDAA requirements more effectively, through cross-functional training courses, expanded contract support services, and continued modernization of oversight tools and systems to improve data collection, performance tracking, and transparency.

It is critical that the Army maintains a strong commitment to protecting military families through adequate investment in housing oversight, tenant/resident support, and long-term infrastructure improvements. Quality of life for those who serve not only affects morale but also recruitment, retention, and overall readiness.

SUBCOMMITTEE RECESS

Senator BOOZMAN. The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:51 a.m., Tuesday, June 17, the subcommittee and recessed, to reconvene subject to the call of the Chair.]

**MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VETERANS
AFFAIRS, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPRO-
PRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026**

TUESDAY, JUNE 24, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met at 10:31 a.m. in Room 124, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John Boozman (chairman) presiding.

Present: Senators Boozman, Collins, Murkowski, Hoeven, Hagerty, Fischer, Rounds, Hyde-Smith, Ossoff, Murray, Baldwin, Peters, and Gillibrand.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF HON. DOUGLAS A. COLLINS, SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN BOOZMAN

Senator BOOZMAN. Good morning. The subcommittee will come to order. Mr. Secretary, it's good to see you, and thank you so much for coming today to discuss fiscal year 2026 and 2027 budget requests.

The budget request total \$441.2 billion in fiscal year 2026 for the Department of Veterans Affairs, including medical care collections, the Transformation Fund, and the Toxic Exposures Fund, representing a 10 percent increase over fiscal year 2025 enacted levels. This includes \$134.6 billion in discretionary funds, a \$5.4 billion increase from fiscal year 2025.

The request includes \$301.2 billion in mandatory funds, a \$34.2 billion or 12.8 percent increase over fiscal year 2025. Within this amount is 52.7 billion in the TEF, \$22.2 billion increase over fiscal year 2025. The budget also requests a total of 122.6 billion in medical care advanced appropriations for fiscal year 2027. Finally, the request includes \$262.1 billion in advance for veterans' benefits.

Mr. Secretary, I need to say at the outset, that because of the significant delays in submitting the budget, the committee's yet to receive detailed budget justification materials from the Department. These materials are essential to the committee's work, and I hope we'll see them very soon.

The PACT Act has certainly been a dramatic change for veterans, and I also think VA has a good story to tell about its implementation. The new veterans enrolling, and the number of PACT Act related claims received and processed, it also created the Toxic

Exposure Fund. This year's budget request represents more than a \$22 billion increase.

The budget request includes a large increase for the electronic medical records program, a total of \$3.5 billion. DOD stumbled out of the gate in its efforts to deploy the system. But after a pause, it successfully completed deployments throughout the country and abroad. VA announced that not only are deployments of the system resuming, but they're accelerating. With well more than \$12 billion of taxpayer money invested, it's time to start seeing a return on the investment.

But given the difficulties experienced in the Pacific Northwest, I look forward to hearing more about how these deployed sites will be brought up to standard and how VA plans to execute the new accelerated deployments.

Mr. Secretary, you've been in the headlines recently as the VA reviews the size of its workforce. Members are hearing from our constituents regularly on this, and I look forward to hearing more about your plans, to ensure you have the right people in the right places to take care of our veterans.

In addition to updates on those big picture items, we also look forward to hearing details about the Department's request for mental health services, including efforts to prevent veteran suicide, initiatives to prevent veterans' homelessness, resources dedicated to care for women veterans, and efforts to improve care for our rural veterans. We look forward to discussing these and other issues this morning.

Before we hear from the Secretary, I'd like to recognize my colleague, Senator Ossoff, for any opening comments that he would have.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JON OSSOFF

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A pleasure to be back with you again. And appreciate our bipartisan working relationship, and looking forward to continuing our shared efforts to support America's veterans. I want to welcome you Secretary Collins, a fellow Georgian. Thank you for your service.

And before we begin, as always, but particularly given events in the Middle East over the last several days, I want to express my gratitude to all of those who serve the United States with such courage and professionalism. I know we are all united in praying for the safety of service members, as well as diplomats and intelligence professionals who are overseas defending the nation.

As we examine the Department's fiscal year 2026, \$441 billion request, I want to begin by emphasizing that it is our shared priority on this subcommittee, across the aisle, to ensure that the men and women who have defended the United States in uniform receive the care, support, and benefits that they've earned. And I emphasize that word earned because VA benefits are not handouts or giveaways. This is a sacred contract between the nation and those who have defended it, as well as their families.

The purpose of today's hearing is for the Secretary to present the VA's budget request for fiscal year 2026. I echo the chairman in expressing my concern at the lack of supplemental materials and budget justification materials, which makes it very challenging for

us to assess the merits of the overall request. I hope we can get some more details in the course of this hearing.

We see that the overall discretionary and mandatory funding levels for VA have increased. We recognize, the chairman also mentioned, in the first 2 years of the PACT Act between August of 2022 and August of 2024, in Georgia alone Mr. Chairman, more than 6,500 new Georgia veterans enrolled in VA healthcare.

We have seen 51,000 veterans with PACT Act claims granted, and of course to serve America's veterans, the VA needs to be staffed appropriately, to provide care both within and without the walls of VA facilities. And the VA needs to be welcoming to all veterans who have worn the uniform and to offer programs and assistance that these veterans need.

Mr. Secretary, you've requested a significant increase to expedite the rollout of the electronic health records modernization effort, as well as an increase in the construction accounts. Perhaps most significantly, and I know of some substantial bipartisan concern, we see a shift of \$18 billion away from what Congress advanced last fiscal year for VA medical care.

Those funds have been reprogrammed toward The Toxic Exposures Fund, of course, a worthy endeavor and something that was established via the PACT Act. But there is substantial concern about this cut to the medical care account. I hope we can get some more details on that in the course of this hearing.

And Mr. Secretary, you know that now and long predating your tenure, Georgia veterans and veterans across the country are deeply frustrated. They're frustrated by wait times for appointments and care. They're frustrated by years—long adjudication of their claims, and the feeling that they're just slamming their head into a brick wall when they try to claim the benefits they've earned through their service.

Veterans are frustrated that they can't get answers and basic information from the Department. And frankly, Mr. Secretary, Members of Congress are frustrated that we can't get basic answers and information from the Department. And if you step back and think about it, if United States Senators can't get transparency from the VA, what hope is there for the rest of the country?

Mr. Secretary, when you came and met with me in advance of your confirmation, you promised me that as a former Member of Congress, you understood the vital role of Congressional oversight and pledged to be transparent and responsive.

But to be very candid with you, so far this year, although I've appreciated our opportunities to speak, the Department has been unresponsive to Congressional oversight, and has acted unilaterally without consultation of Congress in ways that I think you're aware have caused substantial concern and opposition on both sides of the aisle, and in both chambers of Congress.

So, I appreciate that you've been willing to get on the phone when I call, but Mr. Secretary, with all due respect, I don't call just to hear the sound of your voice. I want to make sure the Department is providing this subcommittee with the information that Members of Congress have requested, so that we can make sound decisions on behalf of our constituents and America's veterans. So, we are not off to a great start when it comes to transparency and

responsiveness, but I'm hoping that that can change, and we can build an effective working relationship.

There are a few core concerns where we need more transparency; with respect to contract cancellations, the VASP program, staffing levels, the budget justification, supplementary materials that this subcommittee receives almost always in advance of this hearing, but which we lack today.

And members of this subcommittee and members of the Senate, Mr. Secretary, are going to continue to ask for information about your plans and intentions and Department operations, because as you know, from your time in Congress, that's our job. It's what we were elected to do. We can't legislate just based on someone's word or promise. We have to verify and understand precisely what you and other members of the Executive branch are doing.

So today, I look forward to hearing how the specifics of your fiscal year 2026 requests will ensure that, for example, clinical staffing gaps are filled. I also have some questions as you anticipate, and we discussed yesterday, Mr. Secretary, about some specific Georgia facilities. I thank you for your service to the nation. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the time.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. You are recognized Secretary Collins.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF HON. DOUGLAS COLLINS

Secretary COLLINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and it's good to see both of you and also the other Members that are here today. And Chairman, thanks for the opportunity and Ranking Member, again, is always good to be with a fellow Georgian.

And there's a lot of things going on. One of the things is, my first opportunity to come before this committee, and I've been looking forward to it for a while, to look at where we're at, to take an assessment in about four and a half months into my tenure, also into roughly about halfway through the first five and a half-six months of the Administration.

And one of the things that I have found, and I expressed this to you before, is I've traveled to about 17 states so far, 16-17 states, about 60 facilities and seeing firsthand what our VA is capable of and what we're doing, and the issues, and the struggles that we have as an organization that for the years has had issues.

And I think this is the thing that I want to bring out. As we go forward, it's not a matter of if there's a problem, there has been a problem. And I think this transcends even my time, definitely as Secretary, but even really coming into my time when I was in Congress, for over 8 years. We've seen this in Georgia, I was here in Congress when the first issues started coming out of Augusta, Georgia, when it started coming out of Phoenix. When we have found the Choice Act, that's how we then came to the MISSION Act. Which then leads to a lot of where we are today.

Now, some of the things that I have said before, and I want to say again, is that we are a very special group with the largest, of course, of all the Federal agencies outside of DOD. And if you break DOD up, we're actually the largest single agency. We're larger than the active-duty Army, personnel wise.

When we look at that, and you look at the mission that we have, and the silos that have been created many times in our hospitals and our benefits, one of the things I want to be very specific about is that we treat the best clients in the world. We have a very specific purpose. We're there to treat the veteran. And that became my core mission when we first started. This was to make sure that veterans were our center focus and not the organization itself.

As a Member of Congress and as I'm hearing from both Chairman and Ranking Member this morning, there is difficulty at times, and especially when 60 percent of your phone calls have to do with VA-related items, whether you're a member of this committee or not. That's a lot. And I've already said before that when 60 percent of the constituent calls have to do with VA, then that's a failure on our part. Somewhere along the way, we've not made it either easy enough, or processed enough, or give answers well enough, to make sure that the veteran is getting what they have, and I appreciate what the Ranking Members said, earned.

As one of those who has served for over 23 years in the Air Force and in the Navy as well, it is something that I take very seriously. It's an honor. It's not a gift from the government. It's an earned benefit when you raised your right hand. When we look at this, it has made me understand how much that we have to go and how far we need to get there.

In the past, what I have heard when I was in the Hill and off the Hill, is the issues of delays, wait times and others, which by the way, is also an interesting issue. And it's also interesting for us as we have to deal with the realities of our VA medical center, which is the largest healthcare system in the country is that we're one of the few that actually take wait times and use them the way that we do.

Most are doing it with the customer satisfaction. They look at wait times and they vary, because of the population they have. We need to make sure that our wait times for our veterans is something that they can get, not only in our system, but outside of our system. Community care, coupled with our direct care, is something that is vital. It's what the MISSION Act requires, and we're going to actually put that in purpose. We've not had that the last few years. We're actually putting a re-emphasis on it.

I'll hit more on healthcare and I look forward to our Health Records Management System. I think that's a great discussion we need to have. And Mr. Chairman, you brought that up and it's been brought up by the Ranking Member as well. This is vital to not only get our healthcare records management system up to date, but taking what has happened and moving us forward in the future. Because right now, it is a problem with our community care and it's a problem internally as well, because our system is not where it needs to be. We are using a system; it is very outdated.

I want to move really quickly to our veterans benefit. One of the things that this morning we were able to actually announce that we have finished 2 million disability claims this year, faster than has ever been done, in light of all that is going on. And we're looking to be 14 percent higher over the year by the year-end of processing disability claims.

When I took over in February and January 20th, and when I came in the first week of February, there was 260,000 of our backlog disabilities, over 125 days. That number is now under 190. We've cut almost 71,000 off of our disability claims in a little over three and a half months. That's what that does. It clears up our backlog. It gets our answers to our veterans quicker, and it make sure they get what they want and what they need.

Overall, the VA is this, and I'm going to end with this. I don't think that anything that I have wanted, expressed, or said for my goals for the VA are different than any Veteran's Service Officer (VSO), any Member of Congress, any member of veteran who wants the same, they want an access that is easy. They want an access that is good. They want a quality facility. They want an excellent use and efficiency of the taxpayer dollar. And I believe that is what we're working toward.

We all have differences on how to get there, and that's what these committee hearings are for, and that's how we work together. And I look forward to working with this committee as we move forward and continuing to answer questions in the best way we possibly can.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'll yield back.
[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. DOUGLAS A. COLLINS

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Since becoming the Secretary of VA, I have met many of the men and women who show up to work every day at the Department with a deep dedication to our mission-delivering health care and benefits to millions of Veterans who have served our Nation. They have my sincere thanks, and I cannot wait to meet more of them in the months ahead.

In this same period, I have come to learn what many of you on this subcommittee also realize: VA needs reform. We must do a better job of delivering timely care to Veterans, getting to "yes" so Veterans can get the benefits they have earned, and making sure the money Congress appropriates to VA is not diverted to non-mission critical or even wasteful programs.

In 2024, discussions in Congress about the need to reform VA were often just a thinly veiled request for more employees. But the Department's history shows that adding more employees to the system does not automatically mean better results.

The Biden Administration's record is a perfect example. During those 4 years, VA failed to address nearly all its most serious problems, such as benefits backlogs and rising health care wait times. The numbers speak for themselves:

The number of VA employees grew by more than 52,000 full-time equivalents from fiscal year (FY) 2021 to FY 2024. Did all those extra people make things better for Veterans? No. In fact, VA's performance got worse, as health care wait times rose and the number of Veterans waiting for disability benefits increased.

Something must change, and it is up to us to make that change. Under President Trump, we are working to solve problems that have persisted at VA for decades. Our goal is to create a Department that works better for the Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors we serve.

I have never been shy when it comes to addressing tough issues head-on, and I will not ignore the elephant in the room here today. As everyone here is aware, we are conducting a thorough review of the Department's structure and staffing across the enterprise.

As I have said countless times, this review is aimed at finding ways to improve care and benefits for Veterans without cutting care and benefits for Veterans. Our goal is to increase productivity and efficiency, eliminate waste and bureaucracy, and improve the delivery of health care and benefits to Veterans.

We are going to maintain mission-essential jobs like doctors, nurses, and claims processors; and reduce administrator, advisor, and middle manager posts to eliminate duplicative, unnecessary layers of bureaucracy that do nothing to serve our Veterans and hinder our mission.

Our goal is to ensure we have employees where they are needed, cut unnecessary overhead, and strategically reduce staff to ensure VA's budget is mostly going directly to Veterans. We will accomplish this without making cuts to health care or benefits to Veterans or VA beneficiaries.

Year after year, calls for VA reform come from every corner—lawmakers, the media, watchdogs like Inspectors General and the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Veterans Service Organizations, and individual Veterans across the country.

This year, finally, we have embarked on a historic effort to reform VA. We have been emphatic that we will not be cutting benefits and health care—only improving them. And we are engaging career subject matter experts, senior executives, and political leadership to restructure the Department so it works better for Veterans.

We are doing what literally all VA stakeholders agree needs to be done. So, what has the reaction been? We have been met with a barrage of false rumors, innuendo, disinformation, and speculation implying we are firing doctors and nurses, forcing staff to work in closets and showers, and that there is “chaos” across the Department.

Why? Because we canceled some duplicative contracts for work VA can and should be doing in-house, and we let go of one half of 1% of non-mission critical employees.

To hear our critics tell it, the Department was perfect until we started making changes in January 2025. Everyone knows that is not true.

The fact is that VA health care has been on GAO's high-risk list for more than a decade. GAO even says VA faces “system-wide challenges in overseeing patient safety and access to care, hiring critical staff, and meeting future infrastructure needs.” We are working hard to fix these and other issues, and we need your help. We want to work with Congress to fix VA. But our shared goal needs to be making things better for Veterans rather than protecting the Department's broken bureaucracy.

VA is not a Federal jobs program. It is an organization whose sole purpose is to serve Veterans. We must never lose sight of that.

And despite major opposition from many in the media, union bosses, and some in Congress, we are already making significant progress to better serve Veterans, including:

- Making sure Veterans get the health care choices they were promised under the Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act.
- Decreasing VA's disability claims backlog by 25% (<https://news.va.gov/press-room/record-breaking-va-claims-production-brings-backlog-under-200k/>) since January 20, 2025, after it increased 24% during the Biden Administration.
- Processing record numbers of disability claims (<https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-processes-one-million-disability-claims-faster-than-ever-before/>), reaching 1 million claims processed for FY 2025 as of February 20, 2025, faster than at any point in history.
- Implementing major reforms (<https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-announces-major-survivor-benefits-reforms/>) to make it easier for survivors to get benefits, after serious problems (<https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/19/politics/veteran-suicides-va-benefits-invs>) during the Biden Administration.
- Accelerating the deployment (<https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-names-nine-additional-facilities-that-will-deploy-federal-ehr-in-2026/>) of its integrated electronic health record system, after the program was nearly dormant for almost 2 years under the Biden Administration.
- Phasing out treatment for gender dysphoria (<https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-to-phase-out-treatment-for-gender-dysphoria/>). Frankly, this commonsense reform should have been done years ago.
- Ending Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) at the Department (<https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-ends-dei-stops-millions-in-spending-on-dei/>), reversing the divisive Biden-era policies and stopping more than \$14 million in DEI spending.
- Bringing nearly 60,000 VA employees back to the office (<https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-announces-return-to-in-person-work-policy/>), where we can work better as a team to serve Veterans.

But we are just getting started. We have an obligation to make VA work better for the Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors we are charged with serving. That is exactly what we have been doing and exactly what we will continue to do.

As I previously stated, we appreciate your help and support and look forward to working with you and your Senate colleagues to improve the lives of those who have worn the uniform. Today, I ask for your help on three pressing issues:

1. We ask you and your colleagues to confirm our highly qualified nominees—many of whom are Veterans—as quickly as possible. Five nominees are currently awaiting full Senate confirmation, three of whom have been waiting nearly 2.5 months for the Senate to act.

2. We ask that you pass President Trump’s One Big Beautiful Bill, which would benefit all Americans by providing the largest working- and middle-class tax cut in history.

3. We ask that you approve President Trump’s FY 2026 Budget Request.

President Trump is committed to balancing the budget while providing adequate funding for critical non-defense discretionary priorities—securing our borders, caring for our Veterans, and continued infrastructure investment. Reaching balance requires:

- Resetting the proper balance between Federal and State responsibilities with a renewed emphasis on federalism;
- Eliminating the Federal Government’s support of woke ideology;
- Protecting the American people by deconstructing a wasteful and weaponized bureaucracy; and
- Identifying and eliminating wasteful spending.

The budget levels reflect the reforms necessary to enable VA to fulfill its statutory responsibilities in the most cost-effective manner possible.

The budget provides increased funding for health care services tailored to Veterans’ needs, both at VA medical centers and in the community. The budget ensures that the Nation’s Veterans are provided with the world-class health care they deserve. In addition, Veterans who qualify for access to care with local community providers would be empowered to make the choice to see them, rather than having to drive, in some cases, hours to access the nearest VA facility.

VA discretionary budget request for FY 2026 is \$134.6 billion, and \$52.6 billion for Toxic Exposures Fund, for a total request of \$187.2 billion. This is an increase of \$27.6 billion (+17%) above the FY 2025 enacted level.

VA is committed to ending Veteran homelessness. The budget includes a new effort, Bridging Rental Assistance for Veterans Empowerment (BRAVE), which will provide \$1.1 billion to support the President’s commitment to end Veteran homelessness. VA will be directly responsible for programs and financial support to provide rental assistance and other support services.

The budget request also includes \$3.5 billion for the Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) program. VA’s EHRM effort is moving the Department from a decades-old legacy system to a modern system that is interoperable with systems at the Department of Defense and other Federal partners, as well as participating community care providers, allowing clinicians to easily access a Veteran’s full medical history anywhere they seek care. Acceleration of the EHRM rollout is now a top VA priority effort. The FY 2026 funding will enable VA to complete planned deployments in FY 2027.

Thank you for your time and attention, and I look forward to your questions.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. And with that, we’ll start our round of five-minute questions. Mr. Secretary, last year’s VA budget, which was not under your watch, last year’s VA budget request took a great amount of risk with some of the assumptions it made.

VA assumed it had sufficient carryover balances to avoid requesting a second bite for veterans’ medical care, yet later told Congress that it had a \$12 billion shortfall in those accounts, an amount subsequently revised to \$6 billion. VA also told Congress that it would exhaust its benefits funding before the end of the fiscal year, prompting us to pass an emergency supplemental.

Only afterwards did we learn that VA didn’t actually utilize any of that supplemental funding. After the events of last year, the appetite for continued bailouts in Congress is extremely low. Mr. Secretary, how much risk is VA assuming with this budget? And how

confident are you that the data and assumptions underlying the request are sound?

Secretary COLLINS. Mr. Chairman, I think that was one of the biggest issues that came up consistently in my confirmation hearings with the information that was given, taken back, move forward. As we've all come—to not rehash the entire episode altogether—there were assumptions made, and also hirings and others that took funds, and there was a rapid acceleration that, especially in the VBA side that took that money down.

What we are doing and what I have told our budget folks, and I've also told each of our business lines, that they are to work within the numbers that we have, their look—ahead, and make sure that there's nothing and the underlying assumptions for our carryovers and the funds. I ask this question almost weekly in making sure that we're at, because I will not come up here in a situation in which we've overspent or at least perceived overspent.

That was the problem that I think, again, not having a part of it last year, that was the part that bothered me the most, was their numbers were not adding up when they came up here. And then after even the OIG report and other reports came out, it just was frankly to some mismanagement in how they/we were hiring and how we were appropriating money and not keeping up with it.

I'm very solid in what I believe our numbers are for this year. I believe that the backing is solid on that as well. My budget people are here as well, and I think they'll agree with that going forward. So, I think where we're at right now is where we need to be, to make sure that we're spending appropriately and making sure the services are available.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Mr. Secretary, I know something that's very important to you is veteran suicide, which it is to me and so many other members of this committee on both sides of the aisle. VA has numerous suicide prevention initiatives, and yet we still see elevated suicide rates among veterans relative to their civilian counterparts.

Can you discuss how the VA is approaching suicide prevention? And under your leadership, what current initiatives do you believe are working to reverse these negative trends?

Secretary COLLINS. Chairman, this is the one that really literally keeps me up at night if I think about this. And when I get the reports coming in from the field, especially when we have had death by suicide occurring on our own campuses, I get those notifications immediately. And then we have, what has happened since 2008, is a number that's not really changed. In 2008, 17 to 22 veterans taking their own life.

The issue that I have is we're spending approximately in the budget \$588 million dollars for what is called prevention. But yet we're still not seeing anything different. So, what I'm looking at is a fresh new approach. We're going to look at how—and of those numbers, 17 to 20 veterans, depending on the numbers you use—half of them have not had contact with the VA. They've not been in our system, in other words.

So, things like the Fox Grant program, which reaches out to organizations which I encourage is to be renewed this time. 95 organizations have been a part of that. And they're reaching out and

helping veterans who are not necessarily enrolled in our VA system. They're bringing them in.

I have also been reaching out to other organizations, going to different places, nonprofits, and others to say, how can we work together? Because at this point, I think the monies that you're appropriating, the monies that we're trying to spend, goes to one thing: is that, can we help a veteran not get to the point where they feel like they have to take their own life?

But for me, it's just a complete re-look at how we're doing it. We can't keep doing the same things the same way and expect different results. We've got to make sure that we're doing it differently.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Senator Ossoff.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you again, Mr. Secretary.

So just to start with the basics here, Mr. Secretary, the total all—in request for fiscal year 2026 is \$441.2 billion, correct?

Secretary COLLINS. Yes.

Senator OSSOFF. And how much of your medical services request is for personnel? And how many personnel through this medical services request do you intend to employ in fiscal year 2026?

Secretary COLLINS. I have my budget guy Andrew here as well, if there's numbers that we need, Mr. Chairman, at your discretion. The issue that you brought up is, right now there are currently 465,000 employees in VA as a whole. Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has 409,000 of those.

Senator OSSOFF. I'm so sorry, the question is, how many staff do you intend to employ through the medical services budget in fiscal year 2026?

Secretary COLLINS. Andrew, do we have that—396,000.

Senator OSSOFF. 396,000. Okay. The fiscal year 2025 request—and just to be clear, that's intended staffing of medical services in fiscal year 2026? Say the number again?

Secretary COLLINS. 395,000.

Senator OSSOFF. 396,000. Okay. How many physicians do you intend to employ in fiscal year 2026?

Secretary COLLINS. Physicians, Andrew.

Senator OSSOFF. I'm sorry, who are you?

Secretary COLLINS. Andrew is our budget director. Right now, we currently have 28,868 physicians.

Senator OSSOFF. Yes. So, how many physicians do you intend to employ in fiscal year 2026?

Secretary COLLINS. We're not cutting physicians. So, at this point in time, under that budget, we're still looking to continue 28,868 at minimum. Because we're also having to add physicians, which are not, which are exempt. So, we're adding those as we can.

Senator OSSOFF. So, here's what we usually—this is, for example, the budget request from 2025, and it specifies that for 2025, we're requested 25,099 physicians. So, we usually get this in advance of this hearing. So, my question is just how many doctors you intend to employ?

Secretary COLLINS. Yeah. And at this point in time, I'll take that and get it back to you. As I told you yesterday on the phone, there'll be some more information coming later this week.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. How about dentists?

Secretary COLLINS. Same answer.

Senator OSSOFF. Do you have the number for nurses?

Secretary COLLINS. We currently employ 91,040. I'll have the breakdown.

Senator OSSOFF. But my question is how many—

Secretary COLLINS. And I understand and breakdown will be provided as I said yesterday.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. Well, how have you calculated the money you need for personnel without having yet decided how many personnel to employ?

Secretary COLLINS. In the breakdown of the budget, which right now is still going on, these are the numbers that we are using to go forward from last year's budget into this year's budget. And at this point there is also a gap in how many we currently hired and not hired. And so, at this point, I'll have the numbers for you that we've not provided yet. We'll be providing those numbers.

Senator OSSOFF. But you've proposed about \$17 or \$18 billion cut to the medical services account, correct?

Secretary COLLINS. That is not the President Budget makes adjustments to the funding that devote additional funding, appropriate funding to community care. This is not a cut to total funding to VHA. In fact, the total medical care budget grew by 17 percent to \$24 billion.

Senator OSSOFF. Not medical care, medical services. So, and just to be clear, I mean, the chairman mentioned this. We usually get this, which specifies—how many folks you intend to employ.

Secretary COLLINS. I understand completely.

Senator OSSOFF. We have a 26-page PowerPoint. But in that 26-page PowerPoint, here are specified about \$17 billion in cuts to the medical services budget. So, what are you cutting in medical services? Who specifically are you cutting since that's exclusively personnel?

Secretary COLLINS. Again, this is the issue that we have and I'll just state this for either us to go back in circles. We'll be providing more of those numbers, as I said yesterday on our phone call, this week. So, at this point in time, the numbers that we're providing are the numbers that we have at this point. I'll be happy to talk to you further about those later.

Senator OSSOFF. I understand that, that's why we usually get these in advance of this hearing. I mean, I'm wondering if we need to reconvene having received the full budget request. Because the thing that is causing a lot of consternation is this proposed \$17–\$18 billion cut to medical services. And so, today is the budget hearing, where you justify the budget request. So how do you justify this cut to medical services and who are you going to fire in order to pay for it?

Secretary COLLINS. And I'll go back to the same answer I gave you just a few minutes ago. I mean, in this process, we'll have the more information on that part of it as we go forward. The basis of the budget was based on our workforce as it existed and moving forward. And the numbers have not been cut to the medical care budget.

Senator OSSOFF. I'm sorry. Yes, it has. You have in your PowerPoint here, \$17–\$18 billion in cuts to medical services. Again, this is a 26-page PowerPoint to justify the budget. And this is the budget hearing, so who's getting fired? I don't know Mr. Chairman, if we need to reconvene after they send us the materials, but I think this is insufficient clearly, and I'll follow up in my next round.

Senator COLLINS. We don't.

Senator OSSOFF. [continued] Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BOOZMAN. Senator Fisher.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Secretary, for being here today, and thank you for the work that you do.

You spoke in your earlier comments about the wait system, and I've been proud to work on a program recently, the External Provider Scheduling system, and the system uses technology to link VA scheduling teams to providers in the community, allowing them to directly see available appointments and then schedule appointments for veterans.

This makes the scheduling process much more efficient and it increases the number of appointments schedulers can schedule per day, enabling veterans to receive care sooner. Unfortunately, last year, the Administration slow walked and even rolled back the roll-out of EPS at some VA medical centers.

Mr. Secretary, given the uncertainty that we saw with the EPS rollout last year, stakeholders are rightfully on high alert for program disruptions. Can you provide some reassurance that the External Provider Scheduling (EPS) rollout will continue without disruption under the current Administration? And do you think it would be beneficial to create a line item for EPS to create greater certainty for the program and to ensure its success?

Secretary COLLINS. Senator, I think, as you mentioned, that is one of the biggest issues that is currently out there as far as how we rate wait times, as far as from direct care to community care and back. Yes, we're going to continue with EPS and EPS has resulted in over 28,000 appointments scheduled in more than 7,400 providers of services onboarded. Just and the Omaha VAMC, as well, we just had 56 providers brought on and 755 coming in the queue.

It's also showed a reduction in the number of days from file entry date going forward to the first scheduled appointment, which is the important date, how much time does it take to get that first contact, to then get an appointment.

So, we're doing everything we possibly can. Those will be definitely used as we go forward for the scheduling on what we can get. And I look forward to working with that as we go forward. And also trying to find any other way that we could, especially with a third-party system, which is, especially when you deal with outside our community partners as well. This also leads into another discussion at some point concerning the Electronic Health Records Management System, which does not communicate well to anybody.

Senator FISCHER. Exactly. Right. Would it be helpful to you to make it a line item in the budget? The EPS system?

Secretary COLLINS. I think if that's the feeling of this body as well it's not something we would oppose.

Senator FISCHER. Okay, thank you. As you know, VA facilities are old, several decades old, and the costly renovations, they just don't cut it anymore. In Nebraska, our Omaha VA Medical Center is 75 years old this year, and I've been working to ensure a new VA medical center in Omaha as a priority. And I was pleased to see that the Department requested a major increase in the major construction account.

Mr. Secretary, can you talk about the need to continue to invest in our VA infrastructure and the Department's plans for ensuring a strong VA footprint?

Secretary COLLINS. Yes, I can. And again, as you made reference to, that's \$3 billion, so \$1 billion increase in the major construction as we look forward. This also brings up a bigger issue, and I think this is for the Chairman and for everybody here. When you look at our construction processes—because most of our facilities were averaging about 60 years in age, of these facilities. The problem we're having is over the past few years, especially in Congress, we've seen the problems of building facilities. We saw this in Colorado. We've seen it in other places, in the expanding cost of these facilities.

Part of that is how we're funding these. We're starting out with a proposition that I'll give, we'll put into the budget, major construction, say a hundred million to do a site study. Then we'll come back the next year and we'll do maybe even a little bit more, 200 million to do land. After a while, you've now run a project that should take 24 months, you've run it into almost eight to 10 years, Louisville being an example, and others being an example of how long this can get strung out. And also, you've increased the cost.

So, I'm glad we're funding it, but we need to look at more of a front-end funding model, especially if we're going to replace whole hospitals. I give this example. Right now, there's a proposal that has increased by several hundred million dollars just in the last few years, in St. Louis to replace that center. It's now up to \$1.7 billion, has not been moved forward on, but it's increasing every year due to regular costs.

And I'll just refer it back to a hospital in my hometown of Gainesville, Georgia, which built a similar sized facility. They built it for half of that, more than half of that price, and did it in less than 24 months. We've got to get out of this process of overseeing and completely redo how we're looking at major construction.

Senator FISCHER. I agree with you on that. It's important to be able to move it because then you're using taxpayer dollars to provide for our veterans in a more responsible manner as well. I think we have to also look at flexibility. And when I was first elected to the Senate, one of the first things I did was write the CHIP IN for Veterans Act, and we have had such success in the Omaha area with that partnership established with the community.

So, I thank the VA for being responsive in processes like that so we can continue to provide services to VA as we work to make better use of taxpayer money on the larger facilities that of course, are also needed. So, thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thank you.

Secretary COLLINS. And we look forward to continuing support of the CHIP IN as well.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks to you and the Ranking Member for having this hearing today.

Secretary, I want to start actually by thanking you. It seems to me that to run a very large agency like the VA successfully, you have to do a number of things. First, provide leadership, then build a strong team, and then empower them. And from what I've seen, that's just exactly what you're doing.

And the example I want to point to is the Fargo National Veterans Cemetery. Because of your strong leadership and your willing to work with us, we've created a partnership between the VA, so your agency, the state of North Dakota, the private sector, and veterans, to move forward on a very important project for our veterans in the region. That's going to be a huge benefit to our state of North Dakota.

This is our one and only Federal veterans cemetery. It's going to serve all of Western Minnesota and everything in South Dakota, all the way over to Spearfish. I say that for the benefit of my colleague, Senator Rounds, and we were governors together, so we go back a long ways. But South Dakota's got a nice cemetery for our veterans way out in the Western end.

And so, this is incredibly important for this region of the country. And you were willing to sit down and listen to what we're trying to accomplish. And then you directed your people to work with us. I want to give a special thanks to Jon Lauder, to Darrell Owens and also to Don Bivens. But mostly to you, because it's that kind of leadership that enabled you to actually leverage your resources.

So, we're talking about your resources today, and you only have so many resources at the Federal VA, and you're always going to have demand for more services than you're ever going to have resources to supply. So here you are, leveraging state and private sector resources in a very significant way to do a lot more for veterans where they really need the help.

And so, for the veterans and their families, they're going to now have a cemetery in the Fargo-Moorhead region, which is more than a quarter of a million people right there. And then you've got, as I say, that huge area that you're going to serve. And that doesn't happen without the right kind of leadership. And so big thank you to you.

But also, it emphasizes how important it is—and I want to very respectfully ask our colleagues on the other side of the aisle—work with us to get more of your folks in place. For example, the Assistant Secretary overseeing the cemetery, Sam Brown, he hadn't been confirmed yet. Don Bivens, who's going to be your Congressional person for the Senate, he hadn't been confirmed yet. You need these folks in place.

And serving veterans has never been a partisan issue. It's an issue that we all need to work on together. And so, the point of this is first, big thank you, and this is so important that we're moving forward now the right way, and we look forward to continue to

work with you on it. But it really highlights the need for you to get your folks, your team in place, you so you can do more of it.

Secretary COLLINS. I appreciate that, Senator. Let me just also emphasize this as well, it's not just Sam at our National cemetery as well. Our CFO, Topping, is still waiting to be confirmed as well. That's a big issue. I know especially since we're sitting here discussing budget. Also, our General Counsel. We're sitting here—we're in June right now, going forward.

So, any encouragement that we could to get these passed, and I understand the differences in bodies and members wanting to vote, but at least put them to the floor and vote on them. Because it does have an effect in the Departments, not just mine, but others. But right now, we have a single confirmed appointment in our Department. We have the Deputy and that's it.

Senator HOEVEN. Yes. And 100 percent and you've gone through the full process and you bring experience not only as a congressman, but as a colonel in the military, as somebody who's served in combat. I love the fact that your dad was in the highway patrol. I was governor, so you know how much I love the highway patrol.

So, I mean, you just bring that background and I would hope that everybody could look at that and say, okay, sure. If there's somebody in there, that there's truly an issue and they're controversial, whatever, but let's see if we can't get more of these folks on board to serve our veterans. So that's my pitch there as well as a thank you, big thank you.

The other thing I want to bring up briefly is for veterans getting access to VA reimbursement in nursing homes, they have to go through a whole additional set of reviews and regulations, which a lot of nursing homes won't do. And if we could just make those reviews and requirements consistent with what CMS requires, I think a lot more nursing homes would accept VA reimbursement for veterans, which is really important to the family because they don't have to dissipate all their resources before they would go on Medicaid, right? And then they can have that veteran in their community.

And the Office of Federal Compact Compliance Programs—I say that for a reason. It sounds kind of bureaucratic, governmental, and that's exactly the process. When they're throwing a lot at things in place that require duplicate costs, and whatever you can do to work with us there, I think would really help veterans get access to long-term care.

Secretary COLLINS. Senator, I'm looking for everybody, because that is one of the issues that we look forward, is our older veteran population. This is going to become more and more of an issue as we move forward, especially something we have to look at. It is concerning to me that we do have duplicative, not only in this area of long-term care, but others as well. It's one of the biggest things that I have faced in my tenure in just a large bureaucratic organization.

I said this before and I will continue to say it. Unfortunately, the VA has come sort of the example that's used most of the time for bureaucratic organizations that are large and unwieldy and don't get stuff done. I'm trying to streamline that to where we can get decisions made a lot quicker.

Senator HOEVEN. Right on. And it's not just institutional long-term care; it's also home care.

Secretary COLLINS. Exactly.

Senator HOEVEN. And so that's a big deal. Really big deal too.

Secretary COLLINS. And I am looking forward to, we're continuing to up with the Elizabeth Dole Act and continue to move forward on a lot of that caregiver issues that are going to be coming along.

Senator HOEVEN. Again, thank you Secretary. Appreciate it. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Hyde-Smith.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you Mr. Chairman. And thank you, Mr. Secretary. We so appreciate your willingness to serve and your leadership is very much appreciated by this body. You've got a tall drink of water in front of you, but, so thank you for stepping up to that. And we appreciate you coming to Mississippi back in April, to the State Veterans Home there on the Gulf Coast. That meant a lot to the community and to our veterans that we have there. Very important segment of our society on the Gulf Coast.

We have about 180,000 veterans in Mississippi. And these men and women stepped forward, many from rural towns and small areas. It amazes me the percentage of veterans that we have that came out of small, small towns that didn't even have a red light in them. We are very proud of that, because it's our duty to ensure when they come home, that they do have access to quality care, that's going to meet their specific needs.

And as the challenge that you and I both are aware of that they face, is the shortfall in the infrastructure, particularly construction funding for VA medical centers. And the fiscal year 2024 VA state home construction grant priority included 184 projects, yet only 10 were approved for funding. Many of these delayed projects involved the basic repairs as well as some critical upgrades that are truly critical, but things that directly affect the quality and safety of our veterans in the care that you're so well aware of.

So how does your Administration plan to address the Department's growing infrastructure needs, given the reality of limited construction funding?

Secretary COLLINS. Well, that's what we had hit a little bit earlier, and I want to just go specific, and you're talking about the 184 projects on the priority list and ten approved for funding. This is the problem that we're facing all along. And it's not something that goes away, and it's the reoccurring maintenance issues. It's the growth issues. There are areas—our home state of Georgia, Atlanta, is one that is growing, probably one of the fastest in the country.

And yet, we look through long-term construction plans, it's trying to get the process moving. The big thing, and I think, and I would love to have both sides of the aisle help on this, we really need to go back and take a look at how we're doing long-term construction inside the VA. And it's going to come from statute, a great deal. Because we have, Corps of Engineer involvement, we've got major projects. We've got a lot of different things that really just throw a roadblock into how we are to get these projects done.

And what we're wanting to do is we've used—in fact, we moved some monies this year to get some non-reoccurring maintenance cost knocked off that had been lingering. So, we used some of that money, and that was before I got there and even afterward.

One of the reasons we do have a larger ask is because of in 2026 was geared toward critical and safety needs as we go forward. But we did not get to ask for a full capital account on the previous budget, which was not ours because of the yearlong CR, and because of the CR process. That's another issue that's going to come in involved in this as we go forward. So, we're looking at everything we possibly can.

And in some of the areas where hospitals just may not be in a process of being, especially from the major hospitals being rebuilt, is can we do larger size CBOCs, clinics, that can take some of the pressure off of some of our hospitals and then redo some of what is in our current hospital set up.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. And thank you for your work on that because I mean, you certainly have it focused and you're certainly aiming to that. But you and I both know, we are so aware of the long wait times for appointments, and I know that you're working on that, the red tape that trying to access the care and the benefits that they've earned. But despite the record levels of funding for the VA in recent years, many of these frustrations still remain.

So, you want to share with us what your Department is doing to make sure the funding plus ups are translating into faster, more efficient care for veterans?

Secretary COLLINS. Well, we're looking at back now and also taking advantage of all the resources that we have. And I think that's been one of the issues that I've looked at in just the last few months is, are we using the resources given by Congress, not from just a dollar and cents standpoint, but also from the aspect of using our community care networks and using the balance that we have, especially in our growing areas to make sure that veterans can get the care that they need quicker.

Unfortunately, in the last little bit and especially in the last few years, we've seen a move away from community care and to keep it more internal, keep it in-house. And I won't go to the national motivations for that. I think there was many involved, but I believe VA care is VA care no matter where we're paying the bill at, because we're going to hold them to the same high standards.

So, we've got to look at it from a perspective of, are we using our community care partners, which sometimes are quicker than our direct care, and many times we're quicker in our direct care than our community partners. But in certain specialty areas we are also using the best medical interest standard now, which is also giving the doctor and the veteran much more of a discussion together on what is the best medical interest for that veteran to get that care quicker and in the process they need.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Yeah. And we're seeing results there. I certainly appreciate that. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Murray.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and our Ranking Member, Senator Ossoff. Good to work with both of you on this really critical committee.

Secretary Collins, you are charged with making sure we keep our promises to our veterans. And I will tell you, as the daughter of a veteran, one who had great need for the VA benefits, I take this work seriously.

Now, Mr. Secretary, I know you hate scaring our veterans, but here's what I know. When you fire thousands of VA staff with no rationale beside Musk said so, that really scares veterans. When you cancel hundreds of contracts, including a cancer registry in my state, that scares veterans. When you muzzle our researchers, that scares veterans.

When you eliminate the VASP program, which helps save veterans from foreclosure in their homes, that scares veterans. When you remove language saying veterans and doctors can't be discriminated against based on their political views or marital status with no explanation until after people called it out, that scares veterans.

And more than just scaring veterans, it puts the care and the support they have not only earned, but are entitled to, in serious jeopardy. So, if you're concerned about scaring veterans, my suggestion is to stop doing what you're doing, focus on what matters. Stop implementing policies with no explanation or analysis, lift the hiring freeze, and get our facilities fully staffed.

So, to that end, I have a few questions about some of the actions that veterans have told me they are deeply concerned about. And I hope today you can put their minds at ease and give us some clear, straightforward answers. Secretary Collins, there's been a lot of discussion regarding your decision to modify VA provider guidelines that would open the door to discrimination. You struck the words age, national origin, politics, marital status, and disability, from the anti-discrimination policy that was applied to our VA hospitals and our clinics.

When you change the guidelines and removed the words, making clear when discrimination is not tolerated, what you actually signaled to veterans across the country, that they may be actually denied the care that they need. So, Mr. Secretary, if you insist these categories are already covered by Federal law, and therefore your changes do not provide openings for discrimination, will you commit then to reinstating the previous policy?

Secretary COLLINS. Senator, this is exactly what—and I appreciate you taking my own words because it's about time that somebody up here actually decided that they were not going to continue to repeat false things that keep people and veterans from actually trusting the VA.

And by bringing this up again, which was a Guardian article, which by the way, two major publications, The Post and Times, others who looked into this said, there's nothing there. But the Guardian who wanted clickbait decided to run with something, and then it was amplified, is scaring veterans. And if they're concerned, because also—

Senator MURRAY. But you took words out—

Secretary COLLINS. Understand something. No, may I finish this because this is important, because I've been accused of this. It's not scaring, nothing was changed that actually affected it. This is the problem we're seeing. Title 5, U.S. Code 2302, prevent discrimination based on marital status, political affiliation. 7102, participa-

tion rights and barring interference with those rights, all there. VHA directive 1019, governing all medical services provided by VA and prohibits discrimination on the basis of marital status or political affiliation. There's nothing changed.

By the way, our bylaws also don't say that we have to feed our patients three times a day. Should we put that in there specifically? No, I'm not going to let you get away with this.

Senator MURRAY. Well, Mr. Secretary, I have the floor for a second—

Secretary COLLINS. No, you're not being truthful with this.

Senator MURRAY. What I'm telling you is what veterans hear and what Americans hear. Please listen. When you take something out, it says that's been eliminated. Period.

Secretary COLLINS. No, it does not.

Senator MURRAY. Well, it does.

Secretary COLLINS. Only when you have a cheap magazine like The Guardian who wants to put it out there and put it in a position, and then have actually people of your stature and others who amplified it. How can it be that something that doesn't change anything, that fact checkers have already said doesn't change anything.

Senator MURRAY. Okay, your position is, it doesn't change anything. I hear you.

Secretary COLLINS. It doesn't. There is no position. It is the fact.

Senator MURRAY. Well, do you think it's possible to be eligible for care and still be discriminated against when you try to access healthcare?

Secretary COLLINS. No one is discriminated against at the VA. And by simply repeating that, could keep somebody from getting the critical mental health care that they need. And that would be on you and anybody else that wants to repeat it.

Senator MURRAY. Well, Mr. Secretary, in fact, many of us have heard from women veterans—

Secretary COLLINS. Then did you help correct them?

Senator MURRAY. Mr. Secretary—

Secretary COLLINS. Did you help correct them, or did you put on the line?

Senator MURRAY. Did you? You took the words out. I did not.

Secretary COLLINS. I did. I've been on TV. I've put out videos, I've done everything because of a false article. I cannot believe we're still going down this route.

Senator MURRAY. Well, I can believe it.

Secretary COLLINS. It's amazing.

Senator MURRAY. I can believe it when you take words out that people hear them, and I'm telling you that, Mr. Secretary, I'm simply telling you, when you took those words out, people heard it in a specific way. Therefore, I'm asking you, why don't you put them back in and eliminate—

Secretary COLLINS. No, they heard it in a specific way because a reporter who looked for clicks decided to write an article that he knew was false.

Senator MURRAY. Again, I have heard from women veterans about experiences, which is why I have—

Secretary COLLINS. Do you have an example that you can give to me? Because I'll make sure it's created. Nobody is to be discriminated against.

Senator MURRAY. Well, if you're going to call each individual woman in the country and tell them they're not going to be discriminated against.

Secretary COLLINS. There's not every woman in the country that's done this because, number 1, we only serve veterans.

Senator MURRAY. Let me move on. Let me move on. I want to ask you about the Toxic Exposure Fund; this is really critical. Congress has already appropriated funding for medical care, which has been passed into law. Your budget request proposes to cancel \$18 billion of that money and shift it over to the Toxic Exposures Fund. I am supportive of putting funds where they're needed, but I do want to make sure that you are aware there are specific limitations for the use of those funds that are in statute.

These are guardrails to prevent misuse and address concerns. We put that in because of concerns from my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, who were very concerned about turning that into a slush fund. So, can you commit to us that you will abide by those limitations for all the funds being spent from the TEF, to include agreements made with the committee about what expenses, incident to delivery of care, means?

Secretary COLLINS. We're committed to following the law and this stuff that we're supposed to in this. And I know this was a concern from the previous Administration because the previous Secretary to my seat actually said he could do whatever he wanted to with those funds. I'm willing to work with this committee, as I have said and told you before, I'll work with this committee to follow the rules on that.

Senator MURRAY. All I'm asking is, you're asking to move \$18 billion into that fund. Are you committed to following the guardrails, the statute language that surrounds those funds? Because Mr. Secretary, if that is true, then how can you commit that the veterans who were not eligible for care that is unrelated to toxic exposures will not have their care cutoff or limited because of the \$18 billion, dollar decrease to funds?

Secretary COLLINS. Because just as we look at our budgets and we do take the monies that are coming in, we're going to meet the needs of the veterans who come before us.

Senator MURRAY. Well, I find it really challenging to think that you can take \$18 billion out of general medical care, put it into the TEF fund, and I have no problems with the TEF fund as long as we live by the limitations. But that is care that other veterans will not see.

And let me just ask you—Mr. Chairman, if I have time one final question. I have repeatedly raised concerns over the direction VA is taking with the research program. And now it was reported that VA officials are ordering physicians and scientists to not publish their work without seeking approval from Trump's political appointees.

According to a VA official, this policy is specifically in place to prevent, "negative national exposure." So, Mr. Secretary, if a research finding would advance veterans health but does not align

with the Administration priorities, will you allow it to be published?

Secretary COLLINS. I not familiar with the question you have. I am not going to answer a hypothetical, but I don't foresee anything. We've not done anything to restrict our researchers in going forward.

Senator MURRAY. Well, this is on your website.

Secretary COLLINS. Okay. We're not restricting our researchers. I mean, I don't know how else to answer the question.

Senator MURRAY. If you are ordering physicians and scientists to not publish their work without seeking approval, you can answer that in a forced way by saying yes, of course, we're not going to say no.

Secretary COLLINS. That had nothing to, I think we're if at best, and I'm not even sure this is at best, but I'm going to reach here and say this is also discussing a policy that had nothing to do with research and publishing research. It had a media—talking to media on other issues. But I'm happy to take this and see what you're actually discussing. But nothing has changed as far as we know. So, no, the researchers can do their research.

Senator MURRAY. But then, I—all researchers? You will not deny a researcher that shows that this whatever helps veterans?

Secretary COLLINS. Again, hypotheticals. We can go down all that. I can't answer a question if we don't have an exact end to a question, this researcher or that researcher.

Senator MURRAY. I'm sorry—that arbitrarily you're going to say no to any kind of that leaves me very curious about how you're going to move forward on research.

Secretary COLLINS. At this point, I'm not saying either way, Senator. I'm sitting here saying that we're not restricting it.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Chair Collins.

Senator COLLINS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Welcome, Mr. Secretary. Maine has one of the highest percentages of veterans in the entire country, something about which we are very proud. We are also one of the most rural states in the country. So, the work done by the Office of Rural Health is essential in our state and other rural states. The VA received \$15 million in fiscal year 2025 to support the Highly Rural Transportation Grant program, yet many rural veterans in Maine still lack options for getting themselves to the VA Medical Center in Augusta.

Just to give you an example, from my hometown of Caribou, Maine, it is an eight-hour, 500-mile round trip to drive to get to the Togas hospital, the VA hospital in Augusta and back. Current rules are really strange. They limit the eligibility to counties with fewer than seven people per square mile.

Now, even in one of the most rural states in the country, Maine, that means that only one county, Piscataquis County, of our 16 counties, is eligible to receive a grant. So, I joined with several of my colleagues to introduce a bipartisan bill that would change this formula and expand eligibility for this grant program. Do you think that this is a bill that you could work with us on, to make sure that our rural veterans can get to the VA hospital, of which we have only one in the state of Maine?

Secretary COLLINS. Right. And it is a beautiful state and a beautiful facility, Senator, it's good to see you as well. Yes. I've come from not as rural of an area that is as your beautiful state, but also my North Georgia was very rural as well. I think the Ranking Member will agree that, that as we have a say, and probably down our way, your way as well, you just can't get there from here. It just doesn't work. But our veterans need it.

And so, we're looking at everything from a perspective of how we do this. But I'll say, we, the VA supports this bill. There are a few amendments that we'd like to work with you on that we think could make it better going forward, but we support that. And of course, the availability of appropriations to make it happen.

Because the worst thing in the world is to have a veteran who can't get the help that they need and being able to do that. So yes, we're going to be working with you. Love to work with your staff, further on that, if we can find ways. I know Senator Murkowski as well. Alaska is a little bit rural. Correct?

Senator MURKOWSKI. We don't have those roads.

[Laughter.]

Secretary COLLINS. You got the airplanes, so there we go. But anyway, yes, we'll be much willing to look into it with you.

Senator COLLINS. Thank you. The next issue I want to turn to are our state veterans homes. They are critical to ensuring that our nation's veterans have access to long-term care that they earned in service to our country. My own father spent the last part of his life at the veteran's home in Caribou. And the care was absolutely wonderful. In 2022, however, due to financial constraints, Maine actually considered closing two of its state's veterans' homes. One in my hometown of Caribou, the other in Machias, Maine.

Although the VA has raised its per diem rates in 2023, this increase has not begun to keep pace with rising costs. The VA's per diem for skilled nursing care in a state veteran's home is \$262, while the rate for a private sector nursing home is \$424. What can the VA do to provide more financial support to state veterans homes that are having real difficulties in meeting costs and even staying open?

Secretary COLLINS. Senator, this is becoming a reoccurring theme, I think with a lot of these questions, especially with our elder care from across the states as we look forward. I met with the state Veterans homes folks yesterday. As a matter of fact, they were in my office. And we were discussing these issues.

There's a lot of things out there that we're looking to cut. Some of the they're a partner with us, and I think sometimes they've not been treated probably as the partnership that they are. And I want to see that get better, as we look at it. They also bring a lot of things to the table on ideas for that they can do that actually enhance the veteran experience, that enhance the aging experience as well.

So, we're willing to look at the per diem rates. We're looking at the issues. These are all, again, budgetary constrictions that we have to look at. But how can we maybe remove some of the constrictions that have bound them in certain ways? Might be also another way to look at it. Maybe not the direct financial, but it could free up funds if they weren't having to do other things.

So that's something we're willing to look at. But I've met with them and continue to meet with them on an ongoing basis, because I think they're just a vital cog in the system of what we have between our private-public and then our state homes as well.

Senator COLLINS. Thank you. I'm delighted to learn that you're meeting with them personally. I think that it's really important, they play such a critical role. And what I noticed at the Veteran's Home was the devotion of the staff to serving veterans and the programming that they had on special days, like Veterans Day, Memorial Day, 4th of July. It truly made me feel so good about the care that was being provided.

Secretary COLLINS. Well, it was great. The state home folks from New York we actually had, and we were all over, had New York there yesterday, had Vermont, we had Tennessee and Idaho was all there representing. I know they were up here probably on the Hill as well. But look, it's just a mosaic of how we need to take care of those in our—especially our elderly veterans from my perspective, and how we provide that service working in partnerships. And we're re-strengthening our state partnerships, our local partnerships across the board. And I think that's going to pay off well.

Senator COLLINS. I'm almost out of time, but I do want to mention that the Elizabeth Dole Act authorized a pilot program to look at providing VA funded assisted living services to veterans. And this is supposed to be located in two geographically diverse service networks to include facilities that are serving rural or highly rural veterans and state veterans homes.

This is small in scope, but it's created a great deal of excitement among veterans who rely on long-term care facilities. What are your thoughts on expanding VA funded long-term care initiatives, and when will the VA initiate the pilot programs created in the Elizabeth Dole Act?

Secretary COLLINS. Thanks, Senator. As far as an actual date on initiating, I'll have to get back on that specific program. But just in general, on the Elizabeth Dole Act, which was brought in at the start, we're looking at that is 51 of the implementations on track, 10 have been fully implemented, 9 are behind schedule. There are some funding challenges we're having to look at that. A couple not started, so 72 total.

So, we're moving down the road on getting that implemented. We believe it is a good thing. And we've worked with the former Senator as well—she is, the Dole Foundation has been great. And continue to probably look to you for help as far as funding issues on this as well.

Senator COLLINS. Thank You.

Senator BOOZMAN. Senator Gillibrand.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Collins, in March, I wrote you a letter about the impact that the Trump Administration's return-to-office policy, which makes it harder for veterans to receive mental healthcare. Because of this policy, many VA psychiatrists and therapists were forced to conduct sensitive telehealth appointments from crowded offices, violating ethics regulations and standards of care.

Do you agree that veterans in need of mental health care deserve easily accessible treatment, from qualified professionals with a guarantee of confidentiality?

Secretary COLLINS. Every veteran, no matter what their care is, deserves the best treatment they can. But any of our telehealth workers or anybody that was treating or even talking to someone in a facility like that, was going against our policy and shouldn't have been in that position to start with.

And if you have specifics, we would love to address that because the supervisors know that should have not been done. That was against our policy.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Okay. I will give you more details and facts to see how to remedy that.

Secretary COLLINS. Thank you.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Are you hearing anything about harms related to the return to office policy, with regard to space, specifically for mental health practitioners?

Secretary COLLINS. No, we've actually—what we're doing is there's a lot—just because of space in some of the buildings/facilities over the past few years has been gone. So, there's a lot that we still have not brought back in, and we're exempting certain areas. If they can't come back in, we're exempting those, because again, if it's in the policy we're going to make sure the policy's followed, and if it's not, I want to know that. So right now, it's working.

There's still a lot out there left to be done. But we're making this adjustment because we want the best healthcare. We also want the employees to have the best workplace.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Well, I would urge you to look specifically for the mental health providers because when they can do offer their counseling services from home, it's entirely confidential. There's no one in the cubicle next to them. There's no one overhearing the problems.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes. And I agree with that. And as someone who is a chaplain in the military, who's confidentiality issues I've known a lot before look, we believe that it's best served in a facility such as a hospital, which is secure. I'm not going to question anyone's home environment, but also, there is a possibility there at home if it's not secure, you have anybody walking in, family or others coming into that as well.

So, we believe that the best places for them is in a VA facility working in tandem. So, I agree with you, we want to do that. But we also need to make sure it's not just in an employee convenience, but it's also best for the veteran as well.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Right. So, then you should do a full analysis of your space allotments for mental health. Because as a chaplain, you wouldn't expect to be giving people faith advice, when someone can overhear your whole conversation.

Secretary COLLINS. And that's why in fact, we've done that. I'll be happy to have our staff come and show you what we have done on our office space environment, what has been done across the country, or what space are available and not available. And like I said, any place you have Senator and I want you to know this, right?

Senator GILLIBRAND. We've heard many, many reports.

Secretary COLLINS. If there's a—someone brings forth something that is, well—then, please bring it to us because that's against policy and I can't go against that.

Senator GILLIBRAND. So, in addition to us getting you facts, I would like you to prepare a letter for this committee, about what is the staffing that you have allotted for mental health and what is the office construction for mental health providers in your major facilities. I can't ask you to do for every facility across the United States, but if you could pick a few that would be helpful, so that we as a committee can understand why this is an impediment to the health that our veterans need.

Secretary COLLINS. Okay. We'll definitely do that. I'll tell you what would be great to have, I'll have someone back from my office come by in your office to just tell exactly what you're looking for. We'll make sure we can see if we can—

Senator GILLIBRAND. But I'd like it for the whole committee, a letter for the committee.

Secretary COLLINS. And we'll do it for everybody, but if you can just sort of clarify that. Because like I said, and let me just emphasize here, just for clarity, there should be no area, even if you've gotten these complaints. I think the problem is this hearing complaint that could be rectified the day you get the complaint.

I mean, if there's actually something to be said about this, not just, I don't like it, or there's just a convenience issue, but if there's actual real issues with a confidentiality, there's an issue with this space, then we need to know about that because it's not what's been reported up. And everyone is supposed to be reporting issues that they have.

And believe me, we've had a ton of issues that we've had to work through. That's why not everybody has come back in, and we're taking it case by case, and we are providing exemptions where need be.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Okay. In the VA's fiscal year 2026 Budget Highlights submitted to Congress, you provide a broad outline for how \$52.7 billion requested by the VA for the Toxic Exposure Fund would be used if fully appropriated. Could you please go into greater detail about how the VA intends to use this funding for the Toxic Exposure Fund?

Secretary COLLINS. We will be providing the committee much more in depth on that. That is, as you know, the delay in the year, and we talked about this with the Chairman and the Ranking Member earlier. We'll be providing more of that to come after this and be happy to discuss it further.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Murkowski.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And Secretary Collins, welcome.

To follow on Senator Collins' comments about our rural veterans, you kind of pointed out that Alaska's in that same bucket. I'm just going to say we're bigger, we're better, we're just more complicated, as you know. And we're very proud to host more veterans per capita in Alaska than anywhere else out there.

And so, how we do outreach to our rural veterans has long been a challenge. You and I have had an opportunity to talk about that. But it's everything from traveling the long distances, we're not going to be able to put that veteran in a car. More likely than not, it's going to be travel that requires flying. It may be trying to access them through telehealth. But when you have limited broadband, that's a problem.

Then, we have shortages of local healthcare providers. So, it's complicated in many ways. But all of our veterans deserve this care, and I think we recognize that. So, know that I along with Senator Collins, am very interested in any strategies that you are looking to advance, to maintain and expand services in our rural communities.

I have talked about establishing an outreach program that would send teams to rural areas that are off the road system, to just kind of let them know about their benefits, about the services that are made available. We can't necessarily do everything, but we can at least let you know, this is what your VA can do for you. And I would hope that you'd work with us to support that kind of an event.

Secretary COLLINS. I definitely would and, if you'd allow me to expand just a minute on that. I think this is one of the issues that—I want us to break out of the model in many ways. And I say this in a very generic fashion. I want us to break out the model that everything has to be the way we've always done it.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Right.

Secretary COLLINS. We have to go to a brick and mortar. We have to go to this, where there's a clinic.

One of the things, and it just highlighted recently, we had to close our ambulatory clinic. And this is not a rural issue, but it sort of applies to the issue. We had to close our ambulatory clinic in LA, because of the riots and other things going on in LA. We had interrupted almost 1800 appointments. And some were telehealth, some we were able to move to others.

But for the most part, we had folks who aren't getting care. Very familiar if you were in the middle of a rural state or Alaska or anywhere else, you're not getting it. So, we were already beginning to see how we could bring in mobile clinics and others, even in that area, in a safe area, where our appointments could be kept.

So, for me, if we have those kinds of resources, can we do those in states such as Alaska and others, instead of always just defaulting to something, as you said, like a telehealth model or a visiting doctor. Maybe have regular roundabouts like we have, that have our health teams go out with these mobile vehicles that could actually do and provide primary care and others.

And of course, if they need to go elsewhere, we could do that. I'm willing to think outside the box to do that. It could work in a very rural state. It could work in a state like, you know, New York, Georgia, anywhere else. The other thing—

Senator MURKOWSKI. If I can interrupt on that. Just you've kind of picked my brain. We provide, or there are some non-profits and some for-profits that provide, mobile mammography units that go out, you put them on a barge, you go up the river. It has provided access to women in rural parts of the state that would never be

able to get this kind of screening. You can do that kind of teaming. But you do have to be willing to think outside the box a little bit. And I appreciate that you're looking into that. Let me ask you here about the tribal health side.

Secretary COLLINS. Ok.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I'm pleased that IHS and VA have entered into a reimbursement agreement as we're trying to figure out how we access some of the unique challenges in VA services.

Office of Tribal Government Relations. This is an office that has proven to be important. I would like to know if you think that that government relations office will continue. And then the VA Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs, this is another VA advisory body. This is under review.

Know that the committee really does play a vital role in ensuring that Native voices are represented when VA policies are developed. We think that it's good, it helps to advance culturally competent care, strengthens tribal consultation, and helps the VA fulfill its commitment.

So, I don't know if you can give me an update on the current status of this committee, and whether its work will continue uninterrupted. And then if you can share with me whether or not you think the Office of Tribal Government Relations will continue.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes. That's a yes to both. They're both going to be continuing and also, we're continuing to outreach as well through—and as I said earlier, we're making sure our intergovernmental offices, working with different organizations is strengthening. We brought in our caseload to make sure that we're reaching out to states, tribes, and others to—that is being a part of what we do. So, they're both increasing.

And also, I'm looking forward to being, I think, if my schedule if they've told me correctly, I'll be up there in October, I think around some of these issues that'll be going on with the tribes.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Great. Hopefully you're coinciding or you're scheduling that trip to coincide with the Alaska Federation of Natives conference in October.

Secretary COLLINS. I believe it is, yes.

Senator MURKOWSKI. That's great. Mr. Chairman, I've got a couple questions that I'm going to submit for the record. One is on the roof of the Palmer Pioneer Home. I can't let a hearing go by without mentioning that, as well as the Electronic Health Record roll out. As you know, the Alaska VA system is going to get the rollout of this technology in 2026. There's a lot of people anxious about that because previous rollouts have not exactly been fun. So, you will see those questions submitted for the record.

Secretary COLLINS. I look forward to that and maybe later on we'll discuss that and I look forward. Electronic Health Record is very important.

Senator MURKOWSKI. That'd be excellent. Yes, it sure is. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Baldwin.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good to have you here, Secretary Collins.

Secretary COLLINS. It's good to see you, Senator.

Senator BALDWIN. I want you to be aware that in 2014, Jason Simcakoski of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, tragically died at a VA hospital due to a physician prescribing deadly amounts of opioids to treat his pain. Jason's loss led to the passage of the Jason Simcakoski Memorial and Promise Act, a law to put in place standards and safeguards for providers who manage veterans chronic or acute pain.

So, Mr. Secretary, do you agree that veterans deserve to have access to safe and comprehensive pain management?

Secretary COLLINS. Yes, Senator.

Senator BALDWIN. I'm glad you agree.

Secretary COLLINS. Yeah, I do. And that's an easy one because, and also as we talked in your office, that Jason's Law, and also being specifically named in the budget, is important to us as well and we'll continue to do that.

Senator BALDWIN. Yes, indeed. So, do you agree that ensuring this access for veterans is a critical part of the VA's mission to care for those who have served our nation?

Secretary COLLINS. Of course. In any activity—can I say something on this, because I think, and you brought this up, and it means a lot to you, and it means a lot to me as well. As part of the question that was asked earlier, we were discussing the death by suicide issue. And my concern, and I've heard this from—

Senator BALDWIN. I have questions on that too.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes. And maybe I can help here. Because one of the questions that comes, and we're hearing this a lot from veterans, because I do go to town halls. I also do work and take questions from the field on this. And there is a large concern of medication and unfortunately going straight to medication and unfortunately, in some of these cases, instead of maybe other things that work such as counseling or non-opioid kind of issues. So, this is something important to me. It's something I want to continue to see us get away from.

Senator BALDWIN. But that was the power of Jason's Law, was that there was a retraining of all prescribers in the VA, about the addictive nature of opiates. Lots of people go through their training, their medical training, and others, with very little emphasis on this. And that's beginning to change and the VA took a lead. And I want to make sure that commitment is still there.

In fact, Mr. Secretary, Jason's Law has saved lives. The VA has seen a 67 percent decline in prescription rates of opioids over the last decade due to the diligent efforts to implement both Jason's Law and the broader Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016.

But I want to talk about the focus at the same time that we're seeing staff reductions. So, the law requires each VA medical facility to have a pain management team. A recent Inspector General report identifies the need for additional oversight and coordination from the office that manages this program, and also describes obstacles to hiring pain management staff, including delays in the hiring process.

So, Mr. Secretary, I want to ask for your commitment to work with me and this committee to improve veterans access to safe and effective pain management. But I'm struggling to see how that will

be possible given your request to reduce staff by over 2,000 in the fiscal year 2026 budget, and your earlier comments that total staff at the VA may be reduced by 15 percent.

You've insisted that clinicians will not be impacted by your staffing cuts at the VA. But the 83,000 staff you plan to eliminate will have to be drawn from program staff, oversight staff, administrative staff, and other support personnel.

So, Mr. Secretary, how do you plan to continue to make progress on the implementations of programs such as Jason's Law, and how do you plan to protect veterans' rights to safe and effective pain management, if you intend to reduce the administrative staff who run these programs?

Secretary COLLINS. Well, Senator, I appreciate the concern. I think it's about who we do—and I think this is the issue here, and I've said this all along, not in this committee because I haven't had a chance to be here before. The 83,000 number is if you put out anything from an administrative perspective was a total look, by the way which right now, there is nothing going on in RIF as far as this goes. It has been—the courts have held that up and we're fulfilling our—we're not doing anything in regard to RIF, and no one has been let go.

The issue here is you've brought up several issues that I have. This is direct care and oversight and management of our patients. This is something we've always said it's not a part of anything that we're looking at to get rid of, because it actually makes a difference in the lives of veterans. You've made that very clear and I've made that very clear as well.

So, again, part of the issue here is when you look at a restructuring, and I'm not sure, and I've listened to this, to the bodies up here, and I've been a part of it, I don't think anybody would say, because I have both sides of the aisle saying we need to be more efficient at the VA, there needs to be you know, better use of our money. All of that has been true in all the things we're saying.

But I've also made the commitment, because we've exempted 350,000 positions at this point that are not even discussed in any of the things that we're actually looking at for direct patient care. So, you have my commitment that we're going to continue to make sure these jobs are protected.

And I do want to, I know we we're out of time here, but I just wanted to take one last thing. I'm also struggling with the issue of hiring. Not in the sense of hiring freezes or anything else, because doctors and all these can be hired right now, we can get that done. Part of our issue is twofold. Number one, we have a very onerous process of bringing people on as compared to private and public medical centers. We've got to get better at that. I've talked to our VHA folks about that. That is one of the things that we've got to do.

The other issue, and from the Chairman, Ranking Member, and anybody else here, we have a real issue on our caps for doctor and nurse and other pay. This is something I need—I'm bringing as a secretary, but also someone who served, I need us to look at that, because it is very much affecting in markets such as growing markets of Georgia, Florida, Texas, others.

I mean, I have professionals who can go down the street basically and have \$3–\$400,000 starting salaries. It's hard to compete in those kinds of environments. So, I'm very sympathetic to what we're having here and what we're having to do and get this. So, I would love to partner with you to continue this process because I do believe we're—opioid hit very hard in my state and very much in my Congressional district at the time. And so, it's something that's very much I want to continue to work with you on.

Senator BALDWIN. I would just add one comment about the recruitment and retention of physicians and nurses. You know, I've heard from a lot of the VA practitioners in my state, that when they begin to be doing the jobs of several others who have been dismissed, nurses doing the work of CNAs, and if they want to start an IV, having to also do the logistics of getting the IV pole and the IV. They're doing the work of several people beyond the additional overtime implications of their job. And so, working conditions as well as salaries need to be looked at. You don't have to comment. I just wanted you to hear that from me.

Secretary COLLINS. No, I need to and I appreciate that, Senator, but I need to comment because it's not been let go. We're not firing anyone. So, for them to say that—

Senator BALDWIN. You're firing the people underneath who support them.

Secretary COLLINS. No, we're not firing anybody. I mean, it's not from RIF, it's not from any—if they're being fired, they're being fired for a cause issue in the facility they're at. We're not—

Senator BALDWIN. They're let go, and I'm talking to the nurses—

Secretary COLLINS. But they're not from things we've done.

Senator BALDWIN. Since you started.

Secretary COLLINS. No, I mean, tell me where they were, but it's not happening. I mean, the RIF was, this RIF has been stopped—

Senator BALDWIN. I'd be happy to follow-up with you with the examples.

Secretary COLLINS. If they've taken early retirement, that's not firing.

Senator BALDWIN. They're not there. And so, you have to face that in order to keep your nurses and doctors who aren't being supported.

Secretary COLLINS. Ok. I appreciate that. Senator, I'll be happy to work with you, but there's no one being fired. They may have left for other reasons, but they're not being fired.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Peters.

Senator PETERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Secretary, welcome to the committee.

I want to follow-up on Senator Murkowski. She brought up an issue concern in Alaska, that was at the end of her time. But I want to bring up the beginning of my time.

In December of last year, the VA announced that it was beginning work to deploy the Electronic Health Record or EHR system to four Michigan facilities, Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, Detroit, and Saginaw, in mid-2026. That announcement came, as you know,

after an 18-month pause in EHR deployments, during which the VA made some critical improvements to the system.

During that period, veteran trust in the VA healthcare facilities where EHR had already been deployed increased, outages in the ER system dramatically decreased. And the number of interruptions for clinicians also decreased.

I reacted with some nervousness then when the VA announced in March that it would complete deployment of EHR at an additional 9 facilities next year, bringing the total to 13. The announcement came just after it was reported that VA plans to cut 80,000 employees in the coming months, as well. Mr. Secretary, EHR deployment has been a complex endeavor. You now plan to deploy it across 13 facilities next year, including four in Michigan. And all this will happen during a planned downsizing of VA's workforce.

How will you ensure that outages, slowdowns, and disruptions to veterans' care will not occur once again under this new EHR deployment plan?

Secretary COLLINS. Thank you, Senator. And I'm glad to have your state being the tip of the spear on this reorganization. If you would allow me, and I'll try to do this very quickly. I've been told that I talk fast, but let me talk real fast here.

What happened when I got there was, I took a complete shutdown of this program. The previous Administration, for whatever reason, I'll leave it with them, it just shut down the system, and they were not moving forward. When I came in, I promised the committee when I was confirmed that this will be something we're going to look at.

So, really what I did was my first week I took our staff that were working on this, Dr. Neil Evans, had been the head of it for a long time. We sat them down and I said, okay, what's the problems? The next day, I brought in Oracle, who is handling the implementation here. And I sat down, okay, so what's the problems, where we can do this? There were differences of opinion.

The next week, I set them both down, basically had a match, in which they went at each other complaining because they never were talking directly to each other. After that meeting, I said, we're going to start standardization. We're going to look at other things to make this clear.

We had, I believe it was eight committees on our side that everybody had to go through to get approval to do a standardization or something, dealing with the health records, which caused delays, caused cost overruns, and caused what we saw in Washington State, in which we have six facilities that are basically not functional.

They then got in a room, and this is our professionals, our careers, and their and Oracle's folks, and they got in a room for two days and they spent nothing but how do we do this? And how do we plan?

And what happened was, is we come back from our position and say like, standardization, we're going to take the Oracle standardization for coding and those kinds of things, and we had about a 10 percent gap to where VA would have our uniqueness, which we have that other hospitals don't.

What they came up with, not I, or anybody else, but that committee and this group of high level from Oracle and from us said, here's what we can add. That's how this is going to go about.

That's why the funding for this is so vitally important because I can't emphasize enough if we do not transform this system, it hurts our community care process, because our doctors cannot communicate with the community, our doctors internally—if we go back to what Senator Baldwin and I were talking about, retention, you're using a system that's costing us literally hundreds of millions of dollars that's used nowhere else in the world except the VA.

So, we need to move forward on this. I do believe we have a fact that is safe, that is effective and will be cost effective because Oracle understands that they've got to provide this. They're now in the position of a vendor again and not anything else. So, I apologize for the longer answer, but I needed you to hear it.

Senator PETERS. That's good. But we do want to have more efficiency, but you have to make sure we don't have undue disruptions. Last month in my role as a Ranking Member of the Senate, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, I released a report showing that the 19 Inspector Generals fired earlier this year by President Trump identified billions of dollars more in potential savings to taxpayers than the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE. They did a much better job of what DOGE did, and yet they were fired.

The report found that the VA IG, Michael Missal, before being fired, had over six and a half billion dollars in monetary impact and the potential for nearly 1.7 billion more in savings if the VA were to implement all open recommendations from the VA OIG. That's a 28 to 1 return on investment, one of the highest ROIs of IGs all across government.

VA OIG successes are widespread. And just as one example, along with the Michigan Attorney General, the VA OIG investigated an individual who was ordered to pay back nearly a half a million dollars for posing as the spouse of multiple deceased veterans and fraudulently attained benefits. So, Mr. Secretary, I think we can agree that this is in the taxpayer's interest to continue to implement these recommendations.

Will you commit today to doing all in your power to continue to implement the remaining open recommendations from the VA OIG, and encourage the IG'S office to continue each of the investigations that were ongoing when the IG was fired by President Trump?

And turning to the fiscal year 2026 budget proposal, I'm certainly disappointed to see you're going to cut the IGs by 10 percent. And I would hope that you understand how important that office is to reducing fraud, waste, and abuse. So, if you could address both of those issues.

Secretary COLLINS. Yeah, we look forward to working with them and they'll have the adequate resources to do what they need. And I look forward to continue working with them, I made that clear in the Acting. We have a regular meeting with the IG, and we're going to implement the proposals, because again, to be efficient and to be a part of this system, we need to be it. So, you have my commitment to continue.

Senator PETERS. Great. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Hagerty.

Senator HAGERTY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member Ossoff. And Secretary Collins, welcome. Let's turn the mic on, that might help a little bit.

Secretary, as Members of Congress, we've had an obligation to uphold promises made to America's service members, the men and women who have protected our nation and defended our freedoms through their courageous service and tremendous sacrifice. While many issues demand our attention, few of them are as important as the responsibility that we owe to our veterans.

I hear regularly from veterans in Tennessee and their families, and I suspect you're hearing the same thing nationally, that the transition to civilian life is still too often plagued by inadequate support, bureaucratic delays, and frankly, a failure to deliver high quality care. This committee has consistently increased the funding for the VA, demonstrating our deep commitment to veterans.

However, and despite years of increased funding for the VA, the investment often fails to meet expectations. Wait times are too long, care quality varies and bureaucratic hurdles have only gotten worse, not better.

Secretary Collins, I appreciate your acknowledgement that reform is necessary. You and I would agree that making targeted, pragmatic cuts to wasteful and non-critical VA services, without compromising direct benefits or quality of care, is both necessary and achievable.

And let me be clear, these goals are not mutually exclusive. Supporting our veterans requires more than just throwing funding at the Department year after year. It requires accountability, effective leadership, and real results. Every dollar appropriated should translate into real improvements for those who are served.

For far too long, veterans have asked for the VA that's more efficient, more accountable, and more transparent. And I think it's past time that we deliver on that promise. We must build a system that works for veterans, not against them. I want to thank you for your leadership and your commitment to the critical mission of strengthening the VA.

Mr. Secretary, you've been in position now several months, but could you just walk me through what you saw your first day on the job, in terms of how veterans were being treated?

Secretary COLLINS. I think at the core, the veterans. Senator, I appreciate you and our relationship, that of working together—I think what we've seen is a veterans' employees that want to do a good job. I think that's the overwhelming sentiment. I think over time though, any organization that becomes a little more focused on its own organization loses track of its mission. And that's why I say we put veterans first, not the organization.

Senator HAGERTY. Yes.

Secretary COLLINS. And you made it clear in your statement right there, that just oftentimes funds and people are not the solutions to the problem. It's the organizational processes.

Just to show you, and Chairman, this is something I've mentioned before, about a little over a week into the job, I asked for a headcount of our employees. Our HR person couldn't give me one.

Senator HAGERTY. You've got to be kidding me.

Secretary COLLINS. It took a week and a half to get a head count. And we didn't have it.

Senator HAGERTY. That's amazing.

Secretary COLLINS. About a week or so later, we were trying to double check this, and we went to payroll and said, okay, well, we at least can find out from payroll how many we're paying. They came back with a number of 230,000. Well, obviously right off the top of the head, that's not the number we have.

And so, come to find out, is when it was supposed to all be consolidated, and I think this committee and SVAC committee and others would've known this, when it's supposed to be consolidated, there was a permissive attitude that if you don't want to consolidate, that's okay. And we had about 60 facilities that were still doing their own payroll, which accounted for almost half of our employees.

Senator HAGERTY. Wow.

Secretary COLLINS. So when we discuss issues like this, and I know it's been a lot of discussion today about employees and reorganization, the question is, we have hundreds of employees doing jobs in our individual hospitals and other areas like for payroll, for contracting, for HR services, stuff that are important, but do not have to be done, as you know, from your business experience, are probably wasted in the sense of how we're doing that in an individualized, siloed setup.

So, this is what we found when we came in. I want to use every dollar that this committee and this Congress gives us to help our veterans. But what we don't need to do is continue to propagate a system in which we've not seen the results that we need.

Senator HAGERTY. You've been to my home state of Tennessee.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes.

Senator HAGERTY. And even within my home state, we have a huge disparity, in terms of the way our VA facilities are run and operated and the efficiency with which they're operated. And that disparity manifests itself in one of the lowest performing, maybe the lowest performing system in your lowest performing VA hospital in your system, versus one of the highest performing.

And I can see that you're working on finding opportunities to standardize on best observed practices, to utilize basic business principles to bring up the standard of care across the nation. I'd love to hear you comment just a little bit more about your operational focus and your priorities as you address that.

Secretary COLLINS. Well, the operational focus is doing whatever it takes to take care of veterans and cutting down the bureaucracy. And I was saying earlier, I've been to almost 50 of our facilities, probably over close to 15 or 16 of our VAMCs, our hospitals, or more there. And what we're finding is everybody gets in a rut. It's just like in Senate; it's just like in the House. It's like in any job you get into a rut of doing the same thing the same way all the time.

And so, I'm encouraging them to find new ways. I've told all of our senior leadership teams, when I go in the directors and others, I say, look, you are senior leaders. I need you 5 percent of the time or 10 percent of your time thinking about ways to improve your fa-

cilities. That's a whole different way of thinking. They've just sort of been isolated on their own.

I think now, if we're able to give them that encouragement to be leaders and if we're calling them senior leaders, and paying them to be senior leaders, and putting them in charge, they need to be senior leaders. And which means that they hold accountable their employees, they hold accountable to their budgets.

And it's why you see in your state that you have different discrepancies in facilities. You're not the only state that has that. I can name at least one to two more states, just off the top of my head, that within relatively a hundred miles, you have two facilities that are operated completely different.

I'm trying to bring a VA mindset that says all of our 170-plus VAMCs, our hospitals are VA hospitals, they're not individual hospitals. They're VA, they can combine the power of the VA, combine our resources, combine our greatness, and be better for our veterans.

Senator HAGERTY. Well, you used the word leadership and I applaud that. I applaud your leadership. You mentioned the employees, the vast majority of them wanting to do the best possible job they can. And by empowering your local leadership to do just that, to focus on the right things. I very much applaud that focus and effort, and thank you for making certain that our veterans are treated with the respect that they deserve. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. I just want to follow-up on one thing, and then Senator Ossoff has a few things he'd like to ask. But in regard to the EHRM, which I know is so important to you and something you're really focusing on, which we all appreciate. You've been a battle of that for many years, like the rest of us. But I understand that your budget request is going to be about three and a half billion dollars.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes.

Senator BOOZMAN. The House is marking up to \$2.5 billion. So, there's a pretty good delta there. If you wind up with a billion dollars less, what's that going to do as far as implementation, site selection, potential cost overrun in the future, if we don't go forward and get this thing done?

Secretary COLLINS. It could slow it down as it has now. We've already wasted billions of dollars on this project to start with. Anything going further would just exasperate that problem.

Senator BOOZMAN. Good to know. I just wanted an official, from the Secretary.

Secretary COLLINS. Again, we've been very blessed with the budget, the President's increase. But this is an issue and I understand the hesitancy here. I get it. Ok, this started when I was still in Congress. It's been here for as long as you have, and we've wasted billions of dollars and we've had six sites opened.

So again, we want to continue to make it happen, but to do that, we need to finish the job because there's not an easy fix to just say, okay, we're not going to do this. We're going to do that. There's no easy fix here at this point, but I think we've got a good path moving forward.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Senator Ossoff.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, first of all, Dublin. You and I discussed Dublin yesterday.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes.

Senator OSSOFF. And as you're aware, predating your tenure, very significant sterilization failures that led to the potential exposure of thousands of Georgia veterans to bloodborne diseases. And indeed, some of those who may have been exposed later tested positive for HIV and Hepatitis. In March of this year, the Inspector General conducted an additional inspection of facilities at Dublin and found continued egregious failures.

Can you assure the subcommittee and Georgia veterans that these issues at Dublin have been resolved?

Secretary COLLINS. Yes. I've actually been to Dublin. I was there about 2 months ago, and we've gotten a report since then, this was about the time, and Dr. Lieberman, who is our chief doctor who is over VHA, has confirmed this as well, that those have been replaced. The problem there was, and it's a conversation we just had a few minutes ago about leadership, and that's what we're trying to correct.

Right now, we're trying to get permanent leadership into the Dublin facility. And for those who may not know the Dublin facility, this is a facility, it's a great part of the state of Georgia. That's my sort of—I got a lot of friends and family down there, but it's harder to recruit down there. It's harder to get folks to come into that facility and want to be there long-term. So, we're trying to work that out because I think this is a leadership problem that—

Senator OSSOFF. And forgive me, Mr. Secretary, I want to get to the leadership at Dublin. But just to be clear, in order to ensure that we're informing the public, your testimony is that these issues have resolved at Dublin?

Secretary COLLINS. Yes.

Senator OSSOFF. And does that include all of the outstanding Inspector General recommendations that were found in March? The March 6th report says that there were significant failures to resolve previous OIG-identified deficiencies, failure to fully implement CensiTrac (which is an electronic surgical instrument tracking system), failure to address concerns of the CensiTrac coordinator's performance on implementation, failures to resolve concerns related to sterilization facilities.

Have all of the Inspector General recommendations with respect to Dublin sterilization, which were not yet implemented in March, now been implemented?

Secretary COLLINS. One moment.

Senator OSSOFF. No problem.

Secretary COLLINS. To my understanding, yes. You and I both in Georgia, I'll be happy to go back and look at that again. My understanding is yes, Dr. Lieberman said it has. But I'll be happy to go back and look at that and make sure.

Senator OSSOFF. And that same March inspection, in addition to the not yet completed or implemented recommendations from the past OIG report, again at Dublin, this is March, the OIG determined that sterilization and operating room staff failed to remove

non-conforming surgical instruments from the rectal tray. OIG found additional surgical instruments in non-conforming condition.

And that contrary to policy, staff reprocessed and used nonconforming instruments at the facility, a range of other failures. That was in March. So, your assurance that the Inspector General's recommendations have been implemented is appreciated. And I would welcome any follow up you can provide as soon as possible so that we can reassure folks who are served by this Dublin facility that they're safe getting care there.

Secretary COLLINS. I will definitely do that. And not to give away, there's some issues that Dublin, especially with this, as you well know probably before your tenure as well, and mine as well. Dublin has had this—there's been some issues down there before. We're going to make sure we're staying on top of it. But I will again correct you. I'll get you some information.

Senator OSSOFF. I think and you mentioned that at Dublin leadership is a major issue.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes.

Senator OSSOFF. And as of—we got this report in May. So as of May 9th, we received a report that the recruitment of a new medical director at Dublin was on hold due to the hiring freeze. Now, I know you have faced substantial pushback on the effects of that hiring freeze. Can you confirm that you've changed course and you've exempted that position now from the hiring freeze so we can get somebody into Dublin?

Secretary COLLINS. Those are exempted, yes. As I shared yesterday on the phone, those are exempted, yes.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. And when was that exemption made? Because we got this on May 9th, said that recruitment of a new Dublin Director—

Secretary COLLINS. May 15th.

Senator OSSOFF. May 15th. Okay. Thank you very much.

Secretary COLLINS. So that would've been after.

Senator OSSOFF. Atlanta. Recent Inspector General report focused on Atlanta. This is a June 12th report on staffing shortages among other issues. Now, and I think you know this Mr. Secretary, for years, the wait times at the VA Medical Center in Atlanta have been driven in large part by staffing shortages. I've heard it from the leadership there year after year.

This Inspector General report found, as of June 12th, 208 vacancies at the Atlanta VA, including 67 provider, 42 registered nurse, 32 licensed practical nurse, 49 medical support assistant, and 18 pharmacist positions short at the Atlanta VA. What is your goal, the date that you'd like to bring the Atlanta VA up to full staffing, please?

Secretary COLLINS. To hire them all. And, if you've got any—

Senator OSSOFF. And by when, is my question?

Secretary COLLINS. As soon as possible. I mean there's no delay here, in this. And I think if we would also look at the Atlanta market as well in healthcare, we'd also see other at Piedmont, also at Northside, also at the St. Joe's and others having similar shortages in their staffing. Atlanta is a market like a lot of other markets, in which healthcare, especially CNAs, LPNs, or RNs, are in great

demand. They're the ones that are controlling the market, so are doctors as well.

Senator OSSOFF. And the wait times, as you know, in Atlanta are a particular issue. Of course, there are wait times at other facilities as well.

Secretary COLLINS. But there is nothing stopping us hiring.

Senator OSSOFF. But I appreciate the ambition of "as soon as possible," but I'd like to know, I mean, we'd like to work toward a deadline. So, can you give me a date by which you'd like to ensure the Atlanta VA is fully staffed?

Secretary COLLINS. Well, Senator, I think you know that that's not something I can give you, but I'd be happy to do a health fair with you. And I'd come down and you and I could recruit these workers.

Senator OSSOFF. Well, I'll tell you what, why don't you.

Secretary COLLINS. I'd be happy—we'd be happy to work with you, I'm not trying to be funny here. I want to do this, I really want to.

Senator OSSOFF. No, no, that's fine. I'd love to work with you to make sure we recruit those healthcare workers. What I'd also like you to do is to get with your staff, get with the VISN, get with the leadership at the Atlanta VA, and come back to me and the subcommittee with a date by which you believe you can fill those open positions. Can you do that?

Secretary COLLINS. We'll, I would definitely get the information to see what their goals and targets are.

Senator OSSOFF. Well, we got to have a goal.

Secretary COLLINS. Yeah. And I agree with you. So, we'll get with that, and we'll see what we can.

Senator OSSOFF. So, you'll come back with a date?

Secretary COLLINS. I'm not sure we'll get a date. I'll have to talk to Atlanta. I mean, we'll see what their actual recruitment is. Because I mean, again—

Senator OSSOFF. That's what I'm saying. I want you to talk to the leadership in Atlanta, I want you to talk to VISN. I want to talk to your staff, and I want you to present me and the subcommittee with a date by which you think it's feasible to fill those spots.

Secretary COLLINS. I'll be happy to present you a plan, but also, you're also setting up a date, in which I understand you're trying to do, to set up a date that may or may not be capable, because you couldn't get the same answer from Northside CEO, or Piedmont CEO, or anyone else to fill theirs.

Senator OSSOFF. I just know that deadline-driven work is often the most efficient and determined work.

Secretary COLLINS. I agree with you completely. I agree.

Senator OSSOFF. And I want something that's fair to hold you accountable to. So, will you get a target date?

Secretary COLLINS. We'll work together to see where it's at.

Senator OSSOFF. Mr. Secretary, it's not a—

Secretary COLLINS. Look, I'm not going to play the game. Ok?

Senator OSSOFF. What game?

Secretary COLLINS. Because it is not a game, because there's no other health—there's no other facility in the world that will say, "By X date we're going to definitely have people hired."

Senator OSSOFF. I didn't say you'd definitely. I'm looking for a goal. You don't think leadership at other healthcare facilities set goals when they're going to fill open medical slots and other personnel?

Secretary COLLINS. I think they fill them as quickly as they possibly can. We hire over 1,000 people a month.

Senator OSSOFF. So, you will not present a target date?

Secretary COLLINS. I would like to have them filled by the end of the fiscal year, that'd be great.

Senator OSSOFF. By the end of the Fiscal Year.

Secretary COLLINS. Now, will it be filled? I'm not going to say they'll be filled because there's a lot of other factors in there that I can't control.

Senator OSSOFF. Mr. Secretary, and I know we're belaboring this, Mr. Chairman, but this isn't a gotcha. What I'm saying—this is just good management practice.

Secretary COLLINS. I get you.

Senator OSSOFF. I just want to know when you believe it can be done. I tell you what? Let's put it that way.

Secretary COLLINS. Hopeful.

Senator OSSOFF. No, you don't need to tell me right now. I'm not even trying to put you—why don't you talk to the VISN, talk to the facility, talk to your staff, and come back and let me know by when you think it can be done. Will you do that?

Secretary COLLINS. I look forward to the conversation.

Senator OSSOFF. Yes.

Secretary COLLINS. I mean, I look forward to the conversation.

Senator OSSOFF. Will you let me know?

Secretary COLLINS. You're asking for me an answer that I can't give you because I've not talked to the other people you just asked me to talk to.

Senator OSSOFF. I'm not asking for the date, I'm asking if you can give me a target date.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes. We can look toward giving you a target, yes.

Senator OSSOFF. Ok. That's all I needed on Atlanta, Mr. Secretary. Thank you.

Secretary COLLINS. Alright. Thank you

Senator OSSOFF. I just got some additional questions about a letter that I sent you at the beginning of this Congress, but first, Augusta. WRDW, WJBF Augusta reported this month, an IG report that says VA Augusta leaders fostered a, "culture of fear," with a, "threatening and abusive communication style," and allegedly retaliated against employees who shared concerns.

I know the acting director was put on leave pending an investigation, and I think that's a positive step. We spoke yesterday, Mr. Secretary, you confirmed you were recruiting for leadership at both of these facilities. Can you confirm that it's among your highest priorities to get a permanent new leadership staff in at Augusta?

Secretary COLLINS. Yes, and I'm—to further elaborate without trying to belabor this because I know where we're at, but there's

actually two incidents here that I'm going to report. The one that you just mentioned was done earlier, if not right before I came in. And that was the workplace issue.

The leadership issue, that person actually was, I called, "failed up," and was put in the VISN and administrative role. I made the call that we needed to put that person on administrative leave because if the reports had already shown that there was a toxic workplace, putting our veteran employees and our VA employees in a bad place in a workplace. So that one was out. That was the issue we did then.

So, then there's another that we tried to replace that one with that. Unfortunately, I can't speak in open setting for personnel issues and reasons here, but has been removed as well. And that's when, as I told you yesterday on the phone, we now have another acting. I think he is in now, correct? There's another acting in Augusta. And we are looking—to finish your question, I just wanted to give you the total picture—we are looking for permanent. That should be one of our flagship hospitals in our system. And so yes, we're looking for someone to take that permanently.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. Final issue, and thank you Mr. Chairman for indulging the questions. I sent you a letter February 13th, a number of members of the appropriations committee, asking some basic questions about DOGE engagement with the VA. It had 13 specific oversight questions.

You and I then spoke on May 6th. So, we hadn't gotten any kind of meaningful response. You committed to get me meaningful responses, still have not gotten responses to these questions. And I think this is an opportunity to bring transparency to an issue about which there's been a lot of public controversy and concern.

So, I haven't gotten answers to these questions that I asked and a number of members asked in February. So, I want to ask you now, which DOGE personnel have visited VA facilities?

Secretary COLLINS. I don't understand the question.

Senator OSSOFF. Ok. Which DOGE personnel, so personnel who are acting under the auspices or authority of the Department of Government Efficiency, have visited, let's start with VA headquarters?

Secretary COLLINS. We have are you talking about our liaisons who actually work for the VA? We have three.

Senator OSSOFF. I'm asking which DOGE personnel have visited VA headquarters?

Secretary COLLINS. The ones that work for us.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. What are their positions?

Secretary COLLINS. They are advisors. They're looking through our contracts and stuff like that.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. Are they still doing that?

Secretary COLLINS. Yes.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. Have they accessed VA patient medical records?

Secretary COLLINS. They are acting in their role as a normal VA employee would do and are authorized to do anything that they're currently doing. So, and I'll be happy to take these further for the record if you like.

Senator OSSOFF. Well, Mr. Secretary, I asked you these questions on February 13th in a letter.

Secretary COLLINS. Ok.

Senator OSSOFF. It's the end of June. I mean, you were a member of Congress, would that be satisfactory to you?

Secretary COLLINS. If I'm offering you a solution, yes.

Senator OSSOFF. Well, we spoke in May—

Secretary COLLINS. And I'm offering you a solution.

Senator OSSOFF. No, come on, Mr. Secretary. I asked you these questions in February. We spoke in May. You said you'd get me the answers. And here you're saying you'll take it for the record.

Secretary COLLINS. And in all fairness, you just asked me a question about who DOGE employees walked into my facility.

Senator OSSOFF. A question I first asked you in February.

Secretary COLLINS. Don't tell me you're trying to be serious about this. I mean, what DOGE employees? I mean, again, Mr. Chairman—

Senator OSSOFF. No, what I just asked you was, have DOGE personnel accessed the medical records of veterans in the VA database.

Secretary COLLINS. I'll be happy—and I have told you that they are acting in the roles under everything that they're supposed to be doing at the VA.

Senator OSSOFF. There would be a lot less concern about this if the answers weren't so cagey on it all.

Secretary COLLINS. There's no cageyness to it. Any VA employee who has access to anything and work at the VA is totally responsible and trained to do what they do.

Senator OSSOFF. Let's work together, Mr. Chairman, to get some clarity on this because I'm not satisfied. It's been months. I don't know why there is such a lack of willingness to engage on this topic. We will follow up. Mr. Secretary.

Secretary COLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Senator BOOZMAN. One thing that's really important, you mentioned the—I'm an optometrist and eye doctor, and practiced with nine other doctors with the surgery center. And I really am very familiar with the medical aspect as far as how difficult it is to get people right now. But it all goes back to your caps.

And as far as filling positions, these critical positions, leadership positions, they simply aren't going to do that because they work for a fraction of the pay you know, doing very important things at the VA. The similar roles in private sector, they'd probably make twice the money. That's just a number, but significantly more.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes.

Senator BOOZMAN. So, if you would work with our staffs regarding a proposal with the caps, I think that would be really helpful.

Secretary COLLINS. Would love to.

Senator BOOZMAN. And that's something that—we talk about deadlines and we talk about all this other stuff. This is a very doable thing.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes. I agree.

Senator BOOZMAN. This is something that we can work together, and I know you're really interested in solving the problem, but that's the way to solve it. It's as you pointed out; it's a huge prob-

lem throughout not only the VA but just in medicine in general as we look at our major facilities throughout the country.

Secretary COLLINS. Yes, Chairman. I see, I hear it everywhere I go. And you and the ranking member, that's one of those that, and I've worked bipartisan in this place, I think that's something we could definitely work on. It would at least help get us to the point where we can hire better. So, I thank you for that, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BOOZMAN. So, give us some ideas and then we'll move forward. Thank you so much for being here. We appreciate your service and dedication. And again, it's so important we work together to provide the care for those who defended us in uniform, as you are in that case also.

ADDITIONAL COMMITTEE QUESTIONS

So, for members of the subcommittee, any questions for the record should be turned into the subcommittee staff no later than the close of business on Tuesday, July 1st. And as always, we appreciate the staffs on both sides that work so hard to make these things possible. With that we're adjourned.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO HON. DOUGLAS A. COLLINS

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JACK REED

Question. Rates of mental health conditions and suicide are much higher among Veterans than the general population. Yet, Veteran-specific assistance through the 988 Suicide Prevention Lifeline could be severely impacted as the Department's Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 budget request proposes a 17.4 percent cut to VA medical services, which includes the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL). Is the VCL fully staffed? If not, how many staff positions are open and what are you doing to actively fill those positions?

Question. The VCL Presidential Budget line-item funding increased by 2% in FY 2026. There are currently 564 vacancies and the VCL is actively recruiting all vacant positions. The VCL continues to provide exceptional services, including an industry leading average call response time of less than 9 seconds and a Veteran call satisfaction rate of 97% (as of October 2025).

Question. What is the average wait time for callers to the VCL? How has that wait time changed since January 2025?

Answer. The VCL average speed of answer (ASA) for FY 2025 was 8.63 seconds. The ASA for January 2025 was 8.52 seconds. In FY 2025, VCL maintained an ASA of under 9 seconds.

Question. What is the current rate of hang-ups to VCL callers, before they are connected to a responder? How has the hang-up rate changed since January 2025?

Answer. The VCL abandonment rate for FY 2025 was 1.02%. The abandonment rate from January to September 2025 was 1.03%, with the lowest abandonment rate in January 2025 of 0.98% and the highest abandonment rate in August 2025 of 1.12%.

Question. About 800,000 non-elderly Veterans get care through Medicaid and that may be at risk with the bill Republicans are putting up for a vote this week in the Senate under the so-called "One Big Beautiful Bill Act." That's to say nothing of the three million children of Veterans and servicemembers who are covered by Medicaid. In addition, I expect many caregivers of Veterans may need to go back to work and be unable to serve as caregiver due to the Medicaid work requirements or other Medicaid cuts. How does your budget request account for the many Veterans who may lose access to health care because of the massive cuts to Medicaid that President Trump and Congressional Republicans are proposing?

Answer. The 2026 President's Budget requests sufficient funding to meet the estimated health care needs of enrolled Veterans as of May 2025 when the FY 2026 budget was released.

Question. Has the VA analyzed how many caregivers of Veterans and family members may no longer be able to care for their loved ones?

Answer. Based on the information in Question 2a, VA interprets this question as asking about the number of caregivers of Veterans and family members who may

no longer be able to care for their Veteran loved one due to returning to the workforce pursuant to changes to Medicaid eligibility. VA has not analyzed this and is unable to do so. VA does not track Medicaid eligibility of caregivers and family members of Veterans. VA reviews Medicaid eligibility only when such information is necessary for determination of eligibility for a VA program or service.

Question. Is the VA prepared to take on those Veterans in Veteran Homes?

Answer. States own, operate, manage, and finance State Veterans Homes (SVH). Each SVH has its own admission criteria and the autonomy to choose which admissions they accept. As of September 10, 2025, there were over 30,000 recognized beds with an average daily census of 21,345. VA provides financial support to SVHs through per diem grants, nurse retention grants, and State Home Construction grants. Per diem grants are provided to SVHs that comply with VA's policies, procedures, standards, and regulations and that provide nursing home care, domiciliary care, or adult day health care to eligible Veterans. Nurse retention grants provide the mechanism for a State to obtain payments to assist a SVH in the hiring and retention of nurses (Registered Nurse, Licensed Practical Nurse, Licensed Vocational Nurse, and Certified Nursing Assistant) to reduce nursing shortages at that SVH. The State Home Construction Grant Program sets forth the mechanism for a State to obtain a grant to construct State home facilities for furnishing domiciliary or nursing care to Veterans, and to expand, remodel, or alter existing buildings for furnishing domiciliary, nursing home, adult day health, or hospital care to Veterans in SVHs.

VA owns and operates 133 Community Living Centers (CLCs) in every State except Alaska, Rhode Island, Utah, and Vermont. CLCs serve as homes for Veterans who may need either short- or long-term facility-based rehabilitation services, restorative care, continuing care, mental health recovery, skilled nursing care, spinal cord injury and disorder care, dementia care, and hospice and palliative care. As of October 3, 2025, there were over 10,000 operational beds in CLCs, with an average daily census of 7,654 Veterans. The most frequently used services in CLCs across the country include short-stay rehabilitation, hospice care, and short-stay skilled nursing care.

Question. Community care plays an important role in ensuring Veterans receive timely and appropriate services when care is unavailable within the VA. However, the Administration's proposed 50 percent increase in community care funding—paired with reductions in VA staffing and services—raises concerns about a broader shift toward privatization of the VA health system. Is the Department pursuing or planning any form of VA health care privatization, either partial or full? If not, what specific actions is VA taking to preserve and strengthen its internal capacity?

Answer. VA is implementing President Donald J. Trump's executive order entitled "Keeping Promises to Veterans and Establishing a National Center for Warrior Independence." As part of this work, VA is focusing on improving access to care with more streamlined clinic operations to ensure efficiencies and expanding access to care with extended-hours clinics and Veteran self-scheduling.

VA has multiple safeguards in place to maintain Veteran care and benefits despite staff reductions. All VA mission-critical positions are exempt from the Deferred Resignation Program and the Voluntary Early Retirement Authority, and more than 350,000 positions are exempt from the Federal hiring freeze.

VA is exploring reforms to improve operational efficiency and service to Veterans, including:

- Centralizing or restructuring administrative functions of the Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, and National Cemetery Administration that are duplicative and costly so each Administration can focus on their core missions of health care, benefits, and burial services, respectively. To that end, VA is reviewing the centralization of support functions to streamline operations and improve support to Veterans, including areas such as police, procurement, construction, IT, and financial management.
- Consolidating the payroll processing for approximately 50 VA medical centers (VAMCs) into VA's proven payroll system that processes paychecks for more than 200,000 VA employees. Continuing consolidation of payroll for all employees into VA's Financial Services Center will save time, money, and other resources.

Question. The 2024 GAO report on Veterans health care identified serious weaknesses in the Department's oversight of community care contracts, issuing 27 recommendations, of which only 9 have been implemented. What is the Department's plan and timeline to address the remaining recommendations?

Answer. The 2024 Government Accountability Office (GAO) summary report titled "Veterans Health Care: Opportunities to Improve Access to Care Through the Vet-

erans Community Care Program” (GAO–25–108101) includes insights and recommendations from several prior GAO reports, specifically:

- GAO–18–281 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO–18–281> (10 recommendations),
- GAO–20–643 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO–20–643> (3 recommendations),
- GAO–23–105290 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO–23–105290> (2 recommendations),
- GAO–23–105617 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO–23–105617> (3 recommendations) only 2 of the 3 were included in GAO–25–108101),
- GAO–24–106410 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO–24–106410> (2 recommendations),
- GAO–24–106390 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO–24–106390> (3 recommendations), and
- GAO–25–106678 at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO–25–106678> (5 recommendations).

As of August 21, 2025, VA successfully implemented 14 recommendations. GAO closed one recommendation as not implemented because it was no longer valid given changes in VA. Out of the 13 recommendations remaining open, VA is awaiting GAO’s acceptance of closure requests for 6 recommendations.

VA’s Plan and Timeline to Address Remaining Recommendations:

- GAO–18–281: VA is actively advocating for closure due to challenges such as the lack of standardized wait time metrics in community health care. VA will continue using network adequacy standards through Third Party Administrators and evaluating these metrics. Recommendation 10 is contingent upon the finalization of the Veteran Community Care Program Directive. VA expects to finalize this directive soon; however, the specific timeline is to be determined.
- GAO–20–643: Similar to the GAO–18–281 recommendations, VA is pushing for closure, emphasizing the complexities associated with non-standardized wait time metrics and individual provider reporting. VA partially addressed Recommendation 3 and is pursuing a way forward by incorporating a reporting tool into the Community Care Staffing tool to document facilities risks related to community care scheduling.
- GAO–23–105290: VA implemented both recommendations included in the report.
- GAO–23–105617: Only two of three recommendations were included in the GAO–25–108101 report, but VA implemented all three of the original recommendations.
- GAO–24–106410: VA partially addressed Recommendation 1 and plans to request full closure by the end of 2025. Recommendation 2 is pending GAO acceptance for closure.
- GAO–24–106390: VA implemented Recommendations 1 and 2. VA completed evidence of implementation for Recommendation 3, and it is pending submission to GAO.

Question. How is VA ensuring that expanded use of community care does not undermine the quality or continuity of care for Veterans—particularly in States like Rhode Island where the Providence VA Medical Center is a vital hub for regional care and specialized services?

Answer. For each Veteran referral, VA reviews the available health care options with the Veteran based on standards of the John S. McCain III, Daniel K. Akaka, and Samuel R. Johnson VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018, or the VA MISSION Act of 2018. This review includes discussing where health care can be provided (such as at the Veteran’s home, VA facility, or nearby in-network community provider), when it can be provided (including wait times for various options), and how the care can be delivered (for example, in-person or via telehealth). VA addresses any questions Veterans may have to help them choose the most appropriate care option for their specific needs.

Due to Rhode Island’s small size, there are relatively fewer patients eligible for community care based on drive time compared to larger States. The Providence VAMC and surrounding Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) offer a wide range of services within the designated access standards to include drive times of 30 minutes for Primary Care and 60 minutes for Specialty Care. VA ensures that community care providers work closely with VA providers to maintain seamless communication and coordination of care.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR BRIAN SCHATZ

Question. Under Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2024 (Public Law 118–42), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is permitted to provide care to Veterans residing in the Freely Associated States (FAS). The FAS consists of three sovereign nations—the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands—which have unique Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the United States. The COFA agreements and our relationship with the FAS are critical to our National security. The U.S. military actively recruits in the FAS and FAS citizens serve in our Nation’s armed forces at some of the highest volunteer rates per capita. Public Law 118–42 specifically authorized the VA to provide health and medical services to Veterans living in the FAS, and directed the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to coordinate with the Secretary of State to enter into agreements to carry out these services. According to a memo dated April 11, Secretary Collins decided to maintain the status quo and not expand care to Veterans in the FAS. What analysis did the VA conduct in deciding not to expand additional VA services to Veterans living in the FAS?

Answer. Courses of action were reviewed following the completion of a comprehensive environmental scan done during the previous Administration that identified the medical and health care services available in the Freely Associated States (FAS) and the costs associated with providing these services to Veterans. This led to the decision outlined in the memo of April 11, 2025, and VA will continue to monitor and engage as necessary.

Question. Did the VA consult with other agencies, including the Department of State, Department of Interior, Department of Defense, and the National Security Council ahead of making this decision?

Answer. Representatives from the identified agencies, with the exception of the National Security Council, were involved in meetings with representatives from the FAS when the environmental scans were conducted during the prior Administration.

Question. What outreach activities has the VA conducted in the FAS since January 2025?

Answer. VA organized two in-person outreach events in the FAS. The first event took place in Yap State within the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) in June 2025, and the second was held on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands in July 2025. In addition, since January 2025, VA Manila conducted six virtual outreach events aimed at Palau and other locations within the FSM.

Question. Have senior VA officials met with the presidents or ambassadors from the FAS to discuss the challenges that Veterans in their nations face in accessing care through the Foreign Medical Program since January 2025?

Answer. VA senior leaders, ambassadors from the FAS, and other senior leaders participated in calls discussing and reviewing the results of the environmental scans during the previous Administration.

Question. Do you commit to working with Congress to implement the bipartisan intent of the Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2024?

Answer. VA is deeply committed to collaborating with Congress to ensure Veterans receive the highest quality health care possible. VA seeks to align efforts and policies with Congressional support to meet the evolving needs of the Veteran community.

Question. The VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) serves an estimated 50,000 Veterans throughout Hawaii and U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI), which includes the U.S. Pacific Island territories and the Freely Associated States. How many positions are currently open across VAPIHCS?

Answer. The VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) has a total of 493 vacant positions in the HR Smart position inventory for a vacancy rate of 20.66%. This rate is likely inflated by positions created over the last several years but never filled (150) and positions vacated without active recruitment actions or intention to fill (122 vacated prior to 2024). As of October 21, 2025, VAPIHCS had 77 active recruitment actions in progress, and 43 of those made a candidate selection.

Question. Is the VA currently offering hiring incentives to fill open positions in VAPIHCS? If so, which incentives are being offered and for which positions?

Answer. Yes, VAPIHCS uses relocation and recruitment incentives for hard-to-fill occupations. For highly experienced candidates, VA also uses incentives based on external and previous experience to place candidates in higher pay groups. General positions for which VA uses these incentives include physicians, nurse managers, housekeeping aides, and psychologists.

Question. Has the VA cut any contracts with companies based in Hawaii?

Answer. VA has not cut any Hawaii-based company contracts. There were no contracts terminated for Hawaii or Station 459 (VAPIHCS).

Question. What VA programs are currently targeted to help Veterans living in rural communities in Hawaii and what resources would be necessary to expand the scale of said programs?

Answer. The following VAPIHCS programs provide resources for Veterans to access care throughout the Pacific Islands:

- VAPIHCS has six active Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations sites and one Access Care station each strategically placed in rural locations in Guam, Saipan, Tinian, and Rota. These stations are equipped with the necessary technology to conduct secure, virtual appointments with VA health care providers, which helps to reduce travel time and increase access to health care services for Veterans who may otherwise face difficulties attending appointments in-person due to distance or mobility challenges.
- VAPIHCS sends VA specialists to the islands of Guam, the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and American Samoa on a rotating basis to provide direct patient care where it otherwise may be limited or unavailable.
- VAPIHCS installed a Melody Robotic Ultrasound System at the Hilo CBOC, which provides real-time diagnostic ultrasound imaging to remote communities without requiring the patient to travel to Oahu. This system can perform cardiac, abdominal, and prenatal ultrasound studies.

In addition, VA has the following Office of Rural Health-funded active projects:

- Social Work Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACT). The goal of this initiative is to increase access to social work services in PACT for Veterans living in rural communities. This project augments social work employees to sites where access, care coordination, case management, and other social work services are needed and not staffed appropriately according to the PACT Social Work Case Management Model.
- Physical Therapy (PT) in Rural PACT. By embedding PT in PACT, Veterans can access same day care for both musculoskeletal and mobility complaints, thereby reducing sequelae of delayed care. Earlier access to PT reduces primary care provider visits and referrals to specialty providers, improving access.

Resources needed to ensure the expansion and sustainment of these programs include secured ongoing funding for these positions to ensure retention in challenging localities, as well as exemption from hiring caps to enable successful growth and expansion of these pilot programs.

The Veteran Integrated Service Network (VISN) 21 Clinical Resource Hub (CRH) program provides contingency staffing and sustained clinical services in Primary Care, Mental Health, Surgery, and Medical Specialties to VAPIHCS, including Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, Tinian, Rota, and Saipan. While the CRH model is telehealth-forward, leveraging platforms such as VA Video Connect and Clinical Video Telehealth to reach Veterans in their homes and local clinics, it also includes in-person care through clinician travel. CRH providers travel to remote sites when hands-on care, direct coordination, or community engagement requires physical presence, thus offering a flexible hybrid care model.

CRHs represent a vital, adaptive solution to delivering high-quality VA care in geographically complex environments. With targeted investment and technological innovation, the program is well-positioned to close access gaps and enhance Veteran care across the Pacific Islands.

Program Fiscal Year Title	VHA VISN 21 Site Served	Project Fiscal Year Title
2025 Veterans Rural Health Resources Center (VRHRC)-Iowa City	459 Spark M. Matsunaga VAMC	2025 VRHRC-Iowa City: Telehealth Collaborative Care for Rural Veterans with HIV Infection (HIV-TCC)
2025 CRH	459 Spark M. Matsunaga VAMC	2025 CRH-VISN 21
2026 CRH	459GB Hilo VA Clinic	2025 CRH-VISN 21
2027 CRH	459GD Lihue VA Clinic	2025 CRH-VISN 21

Program Fiscal Year Title	VHA VISN 21 Site Served	Project Fiscal Year Title
028 CRH	459GE Guam VA Clinic	2025 CRH–VISN 21
029 CRH	459GF American Samoa VA Clinic	2025 CRH–VISN 21
030 CRH	459QB Molokai VA Clinic	2025 CRH–VISN 21
025 Social Work in PACT	459 Spark M. Matsunaga VAMC	2025 Social Work PACT–459
2025 Rural Interprofessional Faculty Development Initiative (RIFDI)	459 Spark M. Matsunaga VAMC	2025 RIFDI–459
2025 Rural Suicide Prevention	459GE Guam VA Clinic	2025 Rural Suicide Prevention-459GE-(96912) Guam-Guam Together with Veterans
025 Rural Suicide Prevention	459GB Hilo VA Clinic	2025 Rural Suicide Prevention-459GB-(96720) Southeast, Hawaii-Mental Restorations Foundation (Big Island)
025 VRHRC-Salt Lake City	459 Spark M. Matsunaga VAMC	2025 VRHRC–SLC: An Exploration of a Competency-Based Framework to Provide Clinical Supervision via the Video Telehealth Modality across Rural Psychology Training Programs
025 PT Embedded into Rural Primary Care PACT	459 Spark M. Matsunaga VAMC	2025 PT in Rural PACT–459

Question. How is the VA partnering with local colleges and universities to provide training opportunities in Hawaii?

Answer. VA's Office of Academic Affiliations manages the largest health professions education program in the United States. During the 2023–2024 academic year, more than 120,000 health professions trainees from more than 60 professions participated in VA training nationwide. VA and its academic partners are at the forefront of fulfilling VA's statutory mission of preparing and training new health care professionals to deliver exceptional care to Veterans and the Nation. This includes the VAPIHCS and instrumental local academic institutions.

VAPIHCS partnered with at least 45 academic institutions in the past 5 years. This partnership includes local academic institutions and others from across the country. Local partners include the Tripler Army Medical Center, the University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the University of Hawaii at Hilo, and Hawaii Pacific University.

VAPIHCS partners with local colleges and universities through VHA Affiliation Agreements with multiple local health care professions training programs at universities, community colleges, and other educational programs across Hawaii to offer clinical opportunities at VA clinics in the state. During the 2023–2024 academic year, local academic institutions and others partnered with VAPIHCS to train a total of 242 persons as health care professionals across multiple specialties.

Recently, VAPIHCS celebrated the 1-year anniversary of the Center for Pacific Islander Veterans Health (CPIVH) that serves Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islander Veterans in the Continental United States, Hawaii, and U.S. Territories. The CPIVH partners with the University of Hawaii and the University of Arkansas to manage and coordinate research to improve health outcomes for the Veteran population.

VA also partners with the Hawai'i State Approving Agency (<https://dod.hawaii.gov/hawai%CA%BBi-state-approving-agency/>), which is responsible for the approval of education and training programs in Hawaii. VA conducts routine compliance surveys on approved educational and training programs in Hawaii to ensure programs operate in accordance with the applicable GI Bill regulations.

VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment program, specifically the VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) initiative, is active at several colleges and universities in Hawaii. In addition, the Personalized Career Planning and Guidance program increased en-

gagements and outreach to colleges without VSOCs to spread awareness and utilization of this program. This coordinated effort provides comprehensive support and resources for student Veterans throughout Hawaii's higher education system.

Question. Who are the best points of contact for benefits enrollment for Veterans within the USAPI?

Answer. Veterans within the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI) who want additional information regarding using GI Bill benefits may contact VA representatives at the Education Call Center by telephone at 1-888-442-4551 from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Central Time, Monday-Friday, or electronically through Ask VA at <https://ask.va.gov/>.

Question. What is the process for Veterans in the USAPI to travel to Hawaii or elsewhere for care if they are unable to receive the medical care they need locally?

Answer. For health care benefits, Veterans in Guam, American Samoa, and the CNMI must be eligible for health care through VA. If specialized medical care is not available within their catchment area, their Primary Care provider places a consult for that medical care that needs to occur outside their catchment area. VA will coordinate the necessary travel arrangements to the closest location where the care is available, thus ensuring that Veterans have access to the required medical services.

In the FSM, Marshall Islands, or Palau, Veterans must have a service-connected disability to use the Foreign Medical Program. Under this program, eligible Veterans can receive reimbursement for medical services abroad for conditions related to their service-connected disabilities. In addition, these FAS-based Veterans, if enrolled in VA health care, have the option to pay out-of-pocket for travel to a VA location (such as in Guam) without reimbursement and then follow the same process for health care coordination as Veterans from Guam, America Samoa, and the CNMI.

To ensure that the process aligns with VA regulations and guidance, VA reviews the Veteran's eligibility for travel assistance in accordance with 38 C.F.R. part 70. This review includes ensuring that the Veteran meets all necessary criteria for travel benefits, such as the nature of the medical appointment and service-connected status. It is important to note that travel and associated support are only authorized for VA-directed appointments. VA will aid with travel logistics and cover allowable expenses only for scheduled medical care that VA providers have approved. VA authorizes Veterans to use their beneficiary travel benefits once they are in Guam or Hawaii, but they must pay for their travel to Guam or Hawaii on their own.

Question. Does the VA have any priority scheduling of medical appointments for Veterans traveling from part of the USAPI with none or limited VA services taking into account expensive and difficult travel logistics?

Answer. Veterans are scheduled for health care once the need is identified and according to the availability of clinic appointments. Medical appointment scheduling is initially predicated on the date the provider indicates due to acuity of clinical need.

VHA Directive 1230, Outpatient Scheduling, does not mention priority scheduling for Veterans traveling from parts of the USAPI with limited or no VA services. However, VHA Directive 1230 emphasizes the importance of managing outpatient health care appointment requests safely, timely, and accurately based on clinical need and Veterans' preferences.

Specifically related to Veterans in the FAS, registered Veterans are eligible to receive health care at their closest VA facility (for example, the Guam CBOC). Should a Veteran require a higher level of care and be eligible for beneficiary travel, VAPIHCS staff would assist with coordinating their travel and care from their established VA facility within the catchment area (for example, Guam) to the closest facility with the required care available. Please note that Veterans are responsible for travel costs to their closest VA facility from a FAS.

Question. What is the procedure for a Veteran living in the FAS to log into VA.gov or ID.me, considering the multifactor authentication system that allows Veterans to sign into these accounts does not send security codes to international phone numbers or addresses?

Answer. Whether a Veteran can create a Login.gov or ID.me account to sign in to VA.gov and other VA online services depends on the location of their permanent address, if they have a U.S. Social Security Number, and which identity documents they possess.

—If a Veteran has a valid, unexpired U.S. driver's license or state-issued identification, a U.S. Social Security Number, and a U.S. address, they should be able to create an account and verify their identity through either Login.gov or ID.me.

- Veterans can get more information, including step-by-step instructions and answers to questions about common support issues on these publicly available VA.gov webpages:
 - Creating an account for VA.gov at <https://www.va.gov/resources/creating-an-account-for-vagov/>.
 - Verifying your identity on VA.gov at <https://www.va.gov/resources/verifying-your-identity-on-vagov/>.
 - How to verify your identity your your Login.gov account at <https://www.va.gov/resources/how-to-verify-your-identity-for-your-logingov-account/#content>.
 - How to verify your identity for your ID.me account at <https://www.va.gov/resources/how-to-verify-your-identity-for-your-idme-account/#content>.
 - Support for common Login.gov and ID.me issues at <https://www.va.gov/resources/support-for-common-logingov-and-idme-issues/>.
- If a Veteran does not have a valid, unexpired U.S. driver’s license or state identification, a U.S. Social Security Number, or a U.S. address, they will need to verify through ID.me. VA also encourages Veterans to choose an ID.me account in certain other cases, including if the address on their driver’s license or state identification is a P.O. box or if their phone is on a plan that is not in their name and they want to verify their identity online.
- Veterans can get more information and instructions on these publicly available webpages:
 - Learn more about verifying your identity if you live outside the United States on the ID.me website at <https://help.id.me/hc/en-us/articles/4415907236375-What-if-I-don-t-live-in-the-United-States->.
 - Play a video on how to verify your identity while living outside the United States (YouTube) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LC9jkD1Dclo>.
 - Learn about primary and secondary identification documents on the ID.me website at <https://help.id.me/hc/en-us/articles/360017833054-What-is-a-Primary-or-Secondary-Identification-Document-Login.gov> and ID.me accounts offer several multifactor authentication (MFA) methods from which Veterans can choose. For example, Veterans who do not have access to text messages, whether because they are living abroad or because they do not have a cell phone, can use a security key or backup codes for MFA.

Veterans can learn more about their MFA options on these publicly available pages on the ID.me and Login.gov websites:

- ID.me: Getting started with MFA at <https://help.id.me/hc/en-us/articles/360018113053-Getting-started-with-multi-factor-authentication-MFA>.
- Login.gov authentication methods at <https://www.login.gov/help/get-started/authentication-methods/>.

Question. Does the VA have an active Indo-Pacific Working Group focused on the needs of Veterans throughout the region?

Answer. The Executive Director, Indo Pacific Veterans Affairs, focuses on all Veteran issues in the region to include working with senior leaders within the Department of State, Department of the Interior, Department of War, and with the leaders of the countries in the region.

Question. American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans do not pay copays when they receive health care and urgent care through VA. What barriers exist to expanding this policy to cover Native Hawaiian Veterans?

Answer. Current law at 38 U.S.C. §1730A prohibits the collection of copayments under sections 1710 and 1722A from Veterans who are catastrophically disabled and Veterans who are Indian or urban Indian, as those terms are defined in section 4 of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (25 U.S.C. § 1603), but does not include Native Hawaiians as defined in the Native Hawaiian Health Care Improvement Act (42 U.S.C. § 11701). Because of the lack of statutory authority, VA cannot exempt copayments for Native Hawaiian Veterans.

Question. The VA Indian Health Services/Tribal Health Programs/Urban Indian Organization Reimbursement Agreements Program provides VA reimbursement to Indian Health Services, Tribal Health Programs and Urban Indian Organization health facilities for services provided to eligible American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans. What barriers exist to expanding this program to cover the Native Hawaiian Health Care Systems?

Answer. Under 25 U.S.C. § 1645(a), the Department of Health and Human Services “may enter into (or expand) arrangements for the sharing of medical facilities

and services between the Service, Indian Tribes, urban Indian organizations, and Tribal organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense.” Native Hawaiian Veterans do not appear to be covered under this statute, which is part of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. The Native Hawaiian Health Care Improvement Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11701, which governs Native Hawaiian Health Care Systems, also does not contain such authorization.

Question. In December 2024, the VA announced that it will fund a study on Methylenedioxymethamphetamine-assisted, or MDMA-assisted, therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol use disorder among veterans. Is the VA moving forward with funding this study? If so, please provide additional information of the status of this study.

Answer. VA is moving forward with funding this study. VA researchers at the Providence VAMC will be conducting this clinical trial to evaluate the potential of methylenedioxymethamphetamine-assisted therapy as a treatment option for Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and alcohol use disorder. The study is in the clearance process for required compliance and oversight involving review and clearance by the local Institutional Review Board. VA anticipates the study will begin in January 2026.

Question. What additional research opportunities is the VA pursuing related to psychedelics?

Answer. VA is engaged in additional research opportunities related to psychedelics that fall into two broad categories: studies the VHA Office of Research and Development (ORD) funds and studies external entities fund (for example, pharmaceutical companies and private or community foundations).

With regards to the studies ORD funds, ORD issued a funding announcement (known as a Request for Applications) for psychedelic research in January 2024. More information is available at <https://news.va.gov/press-room/to-improve-care-for-veterans-va-to-fund-studies-on-new-therapies-for-treating-mental-health-conditions/>. ORD received the first round of study proposals in May 2024. As additional proposals come in, ORD is providing a scientific review on a rolling basis. From this first round of study proposals, ORD selected one clinical trial for funding through this mechanism (see response to Question 5a herein for additional details). ORD is considering other trials for funding.

ORD also selected a pre-clinical study for funding. VA researchers at the Baltimore VAMC are leading this study. The study examines how psilocybin affects the brain’s mitochondrial dynamics, with the goal of understanding how this psychedelic could potentially help Veterans with PTSD by making the brain more responsive to therapy.

Question. What challenges would the VA face in conducting clinical research studies into psychedelic-assisted therapy with Schedule 1 substances?

Answer. Psychedelic research presents complex regulatory issues given that the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) generally classifies them as Schedule I substances. Currently, medical research with Schedule I substances takes place legally through a process that involves the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reviewing the study protocol and the researchers obtaining a research registration from the DEA. ORD provides a Researcher Toolkit on ORD’s website to provide guidance to researchers on navigating this process at <https://vaww.research.va.gov/psychedelics-toolkit.cfm>.

VA researchers conducting clinical trials in VAMCs successfully navigated this process without significant challenges.

Question. If FDA approves a psychedelic as medicine, has the VA considered potential care delivery models to deliver psychedelic-assisted therapy for eligible Veterans at scale?

Answer. VA has been preparing potential care delivery models to deliver psychedelic-assisted therapy, if and when the FDA approves these agents. Care delivery models would include care delivered in VA facilities and through contracted community care providers.

Question. Researchers from the Ann Arbor VA Healthcare System collaborated to lead a VA Office of Research & Development-funded study titled, “Cannabis Use and Health among VHA Primary Care Patients,” the final outcomes of which have not yet been published. How is the VA using initial concerns raised in the study about the lack of data tracking Veterans’ cannabis use to inform VA screenings and services?

Answer. VA used the concerns raised in this initial study to prompt investments in follow-up work that is gathering information that will be foundational for guiding interventions for addressing gaps in health care. These include the follow-up study detailed in response to Question 6b, as well as the work detailed in Pravosud V.,

Lum E., Vali M., et al. "Cannabis Use Among Older Adults." JAMA Network Open. 2025;8(5): e2510173. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.10173.

In addition, VA researchers developed the Cannabis Use Disorder Identification Test-Revised (CUDIT-R), which is a simple 8-question survey that can be completed in less than 2 minutes, to accurately screen Veterans for general and pathological cannabis use. A score of =10 out of 32 is optimal for differentiating problematic from non-problematic cannabis use and is published in Myers M.G. et al. "Assessing the diagnostic utility of the Cannabis Use Disorder Identification Test-Revised (CUDIT-R) among veterans with medical and non-medical cannabis use." Drug Alcohol Depend. 2023, 247:109876. DOI: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2023.109876.

This screening tool can be implemented widely in VA primary care settings to enhance the health care services provided to Veterans Nationwide.

Question. What is the timeline for a potential follow-up study with a broader national sample of Veterans?

Answer. Researchers from the San Francisco VA Health Care System are conducting a follow-up study with a broader national sample of Veterans. Results are expected in 2028.

Question. What additional research opportunities is the VA pursuing related to medicinal and non-medicinal cannabis use?

Answer. VA offers research opportunities related to the use of medicinal cannabis to better understand the potential risks and benefits of cannabis, cannabinoids, or substances enhancing endocannabinoid signaling.

SUBCOMMITTEE RECESS

Senator BOOZMAN. [Whereupon, at 12:25 p.m., Tuesday, June 24, the subcommittee was recessed, to reconvene subject to the call of the Chair.]

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