

The Status of Military Recruiting and Retention Efforts Across the Department of Defense

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Statement of

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With Respect To

“The Status of Military Recruiting and Retention Efforts Across the Department of Defense”

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Chairwoman Gillibrand, Ranking Member Tillis, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this vital topic.

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Today's hearing is about people. Our military is often discussed in terms of its overwhelming strength and ability to deter adversaries around the world. The United States Armed Forces serve simultaneously as the world's police force in the face of aggression as well as its humanitarian response team in the aftermath of disaster. Recruiting advertisements showcasing our ships, airplanes, and advanced weapons systems regularly cross our electronic screens. Yet, it is the *people* of our military who give it its strength and its reputation as a force of consequence. Without the brave Americans who step forward to employ these resources, the effectiveness of our military will inevitably wane. The people of our military are its greatest asset and must be prioritized accordingly.

Who Serves?

A 2022 survey conducted by the National Military Family Association (NMFA) and Bloom revealed that forty-four percent of military teens intend to serve in the military. This is in stark contrast to just ten percent of the general population between the ages of sixteen to twenty-one identified by a Department of Defense (DOD) survey roughly a year prior. With these findings in mind, it is vital that DOD focuses not only on attracting non-military-affiliated recruits, but also nurturing the future recruits within today's military families.

The DOD *Fall 2021 Propensity Update* data show that the inclination to serve among the nation's youth is at a low not seen since 2007. Survey respondents indicated that the top three of ten reasons to serve are monetary compensation, having future education paid for, and travel opportunities. Conversely, the lowest reported factor was the desire to impact one's community. Overall, eight out of the ten primary reasons to serve were individual, predominantly tangible benefits, while the remaining two reasons were intangible benefits rooted in altruism. Accordingly, while an ideal recruit might be drawn to the military out of a sense of duty and selfless service, most are attracted by the benefits of service that enable self-development and sustainment.

In consideration of the prevalent factors that attract recruits, the VFW believes Congress must ensure military benefits such as pay, health care, tuition assistance, and retirement are competitive with the private sector, continuously improved, and come without cost increases to members and families as applicable. The fact that DOD relies upon and

regularly offers recruitment and retention bonuses to maintain its ranks indicates basic pay scales are not sufficiently attractive.

Quality of Life

Equally important to the tangible benefits of military service is quality of life. Like any occupation, benefit packages will always fall short if individuals' basic needs, or those of their family members, are inconsistently satisfied. Not only do quality of life issues affect the retention decisions of those currently serving, but negative experiences and public perceptions also affect recruitment of future generations.

As previously highlighted, children of military personnel are more likely to serve than their civilian peers. Accordingly, it is to DOD's advantage to ensure military children do not experience avoidable negative circumstances during childhood. The VFW believes Congress and DOD must fervently address and improve factors that affect personnel and family quality of life.

Sexual Assault and Harassment

Last year's sweeping Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) reforms represented a tremendous step forward in the efforts to eradicate sexual assault and harassment from the ranks. However, this is still a major issue as seen in DOD's *Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military*. DOD's *Fall 2021 Propensity Update* data revealed that nearly a third of potential recruits worried about possible sexual assault and/or harassment if they were to join the military. This is unconscionable. The VFW understands that the UCMJ reforms and recommendations of the 2021 Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military will take time to implement. We urge Congress to fully fund these efforts on time, exercise stringent oversight, and identify early implementation opportunities where feasible.

Housing

Military housing quality is inconsistent and unreliable. Highlighted in the news as recently as last week, unsafe living conditions like black mold continue to plague our service members in both unaccompanied and family housing. Lack of hot water, fuel-tainted drinking water, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning issues have also surfaced recently. These challenges are widespread across the services and globe, including permanent duty stations overseas. With prominent well-being and health implications for service members and families, substandard housing is an urgent readiness issue. Service members cannot focus wholly on the mission if they or their loved ones are suffering from medical conditions related to prolonged toxic exposure, cannot take hot showers, or lack air conditioning during hot weather.

The VFW understands various efforts are underway to renovate and rebuild affected military housing units. However, repairing or replacing the structures themselves is just one part of the equation. Military personnel and families should never be solely at the mercy of private companies or military leadership to resolve their housing problems. Without quality, consistent, and prompt attention and resources committed to housing issues across the board, service members and families must have an alternative way to communicate housing issues to those in positions of power.

Currently, no military member has a trusted, centralized third-party option to report poor housing conditions. This means that when maintenance and complaint protocols at the lowest levels fail, issues can go unresolved with little to no recourse for those affected. As a result, service members have found that posting to social media or online message boards can be a more effective means of getting results. This is completely unacceptable.

Through Section 3016 of Public Law 116–92, *National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2020*, Congress mandated that DOD establish a public-facing complaint database for those residing in privatized military housing units. This database has yet to come to fruition even though it is urgently needed. Moreover, while the VFW believes this is a step in the right direction, the law does not include single service members living in unaccompanied housing such as barracks. About forty-seven percent of military personnel are single without dependents, which largely precludes them from moving out of barracks. Therefore, a significant portion of service members will be prohibited from using this

database even though they experience many of the same living conditions as those seen in privatized family units. This creates a glaring inequity among military personnel experiencing housing problems. Being married or having dependents should not dictate whether or not a complaint can be reported.

The VFW urges Congress to either amend Section 3016 of Public Law 116–92 to include unaccompanied housing, or pass legislation like H.R. 7144 to create a public-facing complaint database that all service members can use, regardless of whether they live in barracks or privatized family housing.

Food Security

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life. A 2021 Military Family Advisory Network survey showed that 18.4 percent of currently serving military families experienced low or very low food security in the twelve months prior to the survey. A separate 2020 study by Blue Star Families (BSF) revealed that junior enlisted families (ranks E1–E4) were the most impacted group at twenty-nine percent, though enlisted families of all ranks reported some level of food insecurity.

Food insecurity within the ranks is an issue of national security since it directly impacts recruiting and retention. In general, lack of regular access to enough food can lead to poor long-term health outcomes such as chronic diseases, stress, and weight gain. For children, food insecurity can adversely impact childhood development, lead to more frequent hospitalizations, and create behavioral and mental health issues. As mentioned previously, military children exhibit a higher propensity to serve than their civilian counterparts. With so many enlisted families experiencing food insecurity, we must consider the likelihood that the physical eligibility of some of our most promising future recruits has been and is being compromised.

A 2022 NMFA survey of military teens found that forty-six percent of participants had some level of difficulty accessing food in the previous month. Without considering fitness for

military service, the experiences of this group may discourage them from joining as they seek alternative career paths with less perceived risk. More broadly, prospective recruits with families may not consider a military career if they are worried about potential food insecurity. Both instances result in the loss of prospective talent, undermining our nation's efforts to attract the best and brightest.

From a retention perspective, food insecurity has been associated with a decreased likelihood of staying in the military. While low base pay is an obvious variable, high rates of spouse un- and underemployment due to frequent relocations, licensing challenges, and child care issues also lead to lost household income and hampered spouse career growth both during and after service.

The VFW praises Congress' creation of a Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) for low-income military families as part of the FY 2022 NDAA. One area of concern, however, is the inclusion of Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) in the BNA eligibility calculation. While DOD can exempt all or part of BAH from the BNA calculation in "high cost" areas, there is no guarantee that all families in need will qualify. Per a 2021 Government Accountability Office report, BAH rates are not always accurate. Moreover, BAH is now paid at only ninety-five percent of calculated housing costs. Thus, even when BAH rates are set correctly, families must still partially pay out of pocket for housing, challenging low-income families who are on the verge of or are already experiencing food insecurity. The VFW urges Congress to ensure high cost areas are accurately identified, exempted, and periodically reviewed to ensure families in need of BNA receive it in a timely manner.

Complicating matters is the fact that many military families do not qualify for state and federal assistance benefits, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This occurs because USDA factors in BAH to determine families' benefit eligibility. The VFW urges Congress to pass S. 3781, which would exempt BAH from the USDA's SNAP eligibility calculation.

Personnel and Family Stability

While leaving one's home of record and deploying are inherent parts of military service, the

lifestyle of frequent moves between duty stations is challenging. A 2021 BSF survey of military families revealed that in addition to military pay, permanent changes of station are a top-five issue for active duty families. With regard to military children, frequent moves often mean difficulties maintaining relationships and challenges with education, which can negatively impact their well-being and increase stress on service members.

Many stressors are associated with moving such as out-of-pocket costs, changing of schools for children, finding new housing for those who qualify, transferring medical care, and seeking new employment for spouses. Relocations can be particularly difficult during periods of inflation and for families enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program. The VFW recommends expanding opportunities for homesteading across all services as a solution to this problem.

Not only would this decrease costs for DOD and service members, but it would help to mitigate the strain that relocations put on personnel and families. We believe this could also help ensure military children do not develop a negative view of service during their formative years, thereby maintaining or increasing the propensity to serve among this population.



Prioritizing Transition to Bolster Recruiting

Public perception of veterans in communities matters. At the September 2022 Military-Civilian Transition Summit, DOD's Military-Civilian Transition Office Director Mike Miller, remarked passionately about the importance of transition as it directly translates to military readiness. He illustrated the influential power that thriving veterans can have on younger generations' decisions to serve. When transitioned successfully, veterans at school, work, or social events are essentially ambassadors of the high-quality citizens the military develops and returns to communities.

The opposite is also true. Homeless veterans, as well as those exhibiting mental health crises, can serve as a deterrent to those considering military service. Following closely behind the prospect of injury or death, DOD's *Fall 2021 Propensity Update* data showed that the "possibility of PTSD or other emotional/psychological issues" is the second most

cited reason not to serve. It seems reasonable that persistent headlines around veteran suicide worsens this widely held concern of potential recruits, and likely that of their families. This means the services' presence on social media, creation of eye-catching content, and sustained recruiting efforts in communities will only take them so far.

Congress must ensure that DOD invests in service members' overall well-being and transition readiness throughout the whole life cycle of their career, whether it is four years or twenty years. This includes but is not limited to ensuring personnel receive appropriate certifications that translate directly to the civilian sector, are afforded the time and resources required by law to prepare for and attend all elements of the Transition Assistance Program, and are seamlessly connected to their veteran benefits after service. Transition preparation must be a career-long endeavor that is championed by all levels of DOD leadership, not just a series of boxes to be checked by a separation or retirement date. Our service members and their successors deserve no less.

Requirement to Live in Undesirable Locations

A condition of service is living where the needs of the military lie. However, Congress can strive to ensure that the needs of service members can be met equitably across the force. The VFW is concerned that recent divergences between state and federal policies could exacerbate one of the primary deterrents associated with volunteering for military service. DOD's *Fall 2021 Propensity Update* data highlighted that nearly a third of potential recruits are apprehensive about being placed in locations in which they do not want to live. As such, we will be monitoring the results of the 2022 propensity data to identify any shift in this statistic, and hope recent policy changes do not negatively affect recruitment.

As a nation reliant on an all-volunteer military force, efforts to address recruiting challenges must be comprehensive and methodical. Military service must be an attractive endeavor in terms of both benefits and quality of life. The experiences of past and present service members and families affect the decisions of those who might chose to follow them.

Chairwoman Gillibrand, Ranking Member Tillis, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.