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SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION,  
VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

**STATEMENT OF**

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**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION,**

**VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES OF THE**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**

**QUALITY OF LIFE**

**MARCH 12, 2020**

Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, Ranking Member Carter, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I am honored to appear before you today to discuss some of the biggest challenges and opportunities that affect the service and quality of life of our Sailors and their families. As you know, I have the honor and privilege of advocating for over 400,000 Sailors, officers and enlisted, active duty and reserve, many of whom are forward deployed around the world to project a strong presence, deter aggression and vigorously defend our national interests when called upon.

This is a dynamic and challenging time in the world, with many capable navies that want a larger stake in using the seas, or denying its use to other responsible nations as they see fit. Our Navy must keep pace with these very capable, lethal competitors and potential adversaries, as the nation will lean heavily on our Navy - far more than it has in the last 30 years. Warfighting readiness is one of my top priorities; we owe our Sailors the resources and training to be agile, postured, and prepared when called to engage in a fight. With a deficit in comparative ship numbers against the pacing threat, we must be able to vigorously respond to battle damage – to save lives, affect casualty repairs, and return to the combat line quickly if we are to prevail when our nation needs us.

To that end, we continuously endeavor to keep Sailors focused on mission readiness, which includes quality of life issues. The stress of 18 years of war, coupled with increasing demands on our forces and a greater population of Sailors with families and dependents needing our attention, makes available solutions much more complex. Childcare continues to be a critical force enabler, every bit as important as materiel and infrastructure concerns. For example, if the technician to install a part on an aircraft cannot find suitable childcare, then I cannot get the Sailor there nor get the aircraft repaired; this has the same end result as if I had no repair part and represents a critical point of failure. Similarly, the stress of ongoing war and an increasing operational tempo on our Navy requires effective mental health services to retain and return Sailors to the fight. Our Sailors remain our greatest asset – the “x-factor” that comparisons between navies on paper will not reveal. As such, we need to invest in them on par with how we invest in aircraft, ships, submarines and the other equipment that will take us into the fight. There has likely never been a more critical time in our history to equip our Sailors with those skills of “toughness” of the mind, skills that will keep them steady during whatever lies ahead; we need each and every Sailor on-point and ready to respond.

While we have made some gains in these force enablers, there remains an absolute need and obligation to continue to commit resources and to remove hurdles that prevent Sailors from focusing on warfighting.

The obligation for appropriate funding, in a time where there are limited resources and difficult decisions to be made, can best be seen in extrapolating the end result - once we are in combat, a price once represented in dollars will now be paid for by the lives of America's sons and daughters. The more we do today, to invest with prudence and foresight, and to remove bureaucratic and administrative distractions, will increase our survivability and lethality and ensure we prevail in the most difficult times.

We appreciate the support each of you have provided to our men and women in uniform. It has had an incredible impact on their quality of life and quality of work, which in turn gives us a decisive advantage in projecting naval power with our Marine Corps partners. I hope we continue to maintain stable funding and strengthen support for our Sailors as they maintain security and stability around the globe.

## **CHILDCARE**

We know this is not just a Navy or Department of Defense issue, but it is especially difficult for the Navy; our families account for over half the overall shortfall across the department, as our footprint exists in areas where the need across our nation is the highest. Our fleet concentration areas exist in heavily populated communities where there is no capacity to support our need, or it is prohibitively expensive. We continue to suffer shortfalls in our Child and Youth Programs (CYP). There is simply not enough capacity in Navy-run Child Development Centers (CDCs), to include Navy-certified Family Child Care Homes. While we are exploring opportunities with potential commercial partners, there is not enough capacity or resources available to meet the demand for the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN), which provides off-post childcare options for Families who have Children 6 weeks - 12 years of age.

In 2017, the Department of Health and Human Services defined "affordable childcare" as 7 percent of an annual income. In our fleet concentration areas, the median childcare cost for one year is \$16,807. For an E-3 with an infant, that is 70 percent of their base pay. While that same Sailor might qualify for fee assistance from National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA), that would only reduce it to 50 percent. Furthermore, this fee assistance is provided on a first-come, first-served basis, meaning not everyone will be fortunate enough to receive this support.

Whenever I take questions from groups of Sailors during fleet engagements around the world, childcare is the single-most predominant concern they face – typically their first question. During one such fleet engagement last year, one young recruiter based near San Francisco expressed her despair about paying \$29,000 annually for childcare. Her story is one of many, repeated over and over in most locations I visit.

In FY20, the Navy's Child and Youth Program demand exceeded our capacity; 45.5 thousand available childcare spaces left us with an additional wait list of nearly 9,000 children. The Navy's PB21 request provides support for an additional 5,000 new spaces to meet demand – but there is much more to be done. Our Navy simply cannot afford to lose valuable production and training hours because of worry and uncertainty over whether their children are in a secure, safe and comfortable setting. We also cannot afford to lose skilled Sailors who decide, as some have already done, that the Navy is incompatible with having a family. We owe it to them to ensure their own families are taken care of, allowing them to focus on the mission at hand.

We ask for your continued support, as we work every option to alleviate this issue for our Single Sailors and families affected by this burden.

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

Mental health remains a pinnacle concern. We have seen far too many Sailors and dependents take their own lives. In 2019, the Navy saw a record 79 suicides across active and reserve forces; more than statistics, they were sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. Additionally, the DoD saw 186 reported suicides amongst family members in calendar year 2017. Those who are left behind after the loss of a loved one, struggle to cope with their loss, while also managing the continued challenges of deployments, training, and maintenance.

While Sailors deal with the daily stressors of their duties, families also incur the challenges of Permanent Changes of Station moves and subsequent family disruption, such as changing jobs and moving schools. In some instances, for the sake of family stability, Sailors choose not to uproot the family, but choose to serve away from the family's location. This separation and stress is not represented in OPTEMPO reports and proves challenging for spouses and children alike. All of this has placed a strain on our mental health system.

Bureau of Medicine and Surgery noted that as of October 2019, enterprise wide access to care for an initial mental health appointment averaged two weeks (12-13 days), while follow up appointment wait times averaged 4-5 days across Navy Military Treatment Facilities. The TRICARE standard for a specialty care appointment is 28 days. An appointment with a psychiatrist or psychologist is considered specialty care and thus falls under the 28-day window. The shortage of mental health care providers

hinders the evaluation of suitability and fitness for duty, and works against our efforts to maintain the lethality of our operating forces.

We currently leverage Deployed Resiliency Counselors, therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and licensed clinical social workers. Additionally, there are support services offered through Military OneSource, which can facilitate a short-term solution for someone in need. However, manning for our mental health care teams remains limited, leading to delays in care; this only serves to exacerbate the circumstances and worsen situations of mental health, potentially elevating something that was a mere difficulty to a matter of life or death. We embrace a “no wrong door” philosophy in regards to how Sailors, Marines, and their family members seek mental health care. That said, it is imperative that we give service members and their families’ adequate and improved access to direct care through the military health system to address more advanced needs, such as active suicidal or homicidal thoughts, reconciling sexual assault, combating alcohol and substance abuse, and other serious conditions.

Through innovation and process efficiencies, our medical system has made progress, finding ways to improve services in some areas around the fleet. Naval Medical Center San Diego’s Mental Health Operational Outreach Division program (MHOOD), once a pilot program, is now an established division at the hospital. They have expanded work spaces and reassigned staff from their outpatient clinics and their residency program, as well as their embedded virtual mental health program, in order to optimize their link with operational units while deployed. Although MHOOD is a local initiative, other military treatment facilities are using MHOOD as a model for their own operational outreach programs.

To summarize, we must get ahead of the challenges our Sailors face by facilitating access before problems burgeon into crises, in order to return Sailors to the deckplates faster.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE**

Infrastructure continues to be a concern for our Sailors and their families. The buildings and facilities we base our Sailors in, such as base housing, hangars, dry docks, training centers, and support facilities, impact their health, safety, and well-being – all of which translates into readiness. When we fail to get it right, we lose the trust and confidence of our Sailors and their families. As we have discovered, in some cases, the condition of our government and Public-Private Venture (PPV) family housing on our installations is not where it should be. Our Navy families deserve quality living quarters.

The Navy has hired more housing management specialists, housing inspectors and quality assurance specialists, but that is just the beginning. Navy leaders are actively engaged in the PPV housing program in order to provide better oversight and help Sailors seek resolutions in a much more efficient manner. We are re-emphasizing the trust relationship with our Sailors and families, one that is easily lost through inaction or ambivalence. Communication is required on both sides, but we must keep the heavier burden of housing issues off the backs of our people, allowing Sailors individually to focus on mission requirements, and families as a whole to manage their careers, education, and other endeavors that make the greater Navy experience a tremendous one.

### **NAVY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

Part of our covenant with Sailors when we recruit them is that, in appreciation for their willingness to be part of the one percent that defends our nation, we return them to society better postured to find success in any endeavor. For example, amid other possibilities, they may choose to use skills gained in the Navy to assimilate directly into the workforce, or use the benefits they have earned to pursue higher education. A critical effort for the Department of the Navy under the Education for Seapower program is the Navy Community College (NCC), which is probably the most aggressive – yet achievable – endeavor Navy leadership has ever undertaken to fundamentally better our enlisted force. It will afford a vast majority of Sailors the opportunity to earn an associate’s degree in the beginning of their career, one that is a “stackable” and able to be used to pursue a baccalaureate degree with other institutions across the country. This investment by our Navy, to provide more critical thinkers and better capture the salient skills of an enlisted career, will return better educated citizens back to society. Sailors who choose to separate and those who choose to maintain a career with us have the opportunity to truly chart a new destination for themselves and their families.

By better capturing credit for skills performed, it will put classes in front of Sailors at a pace that is manageable, navigating them to a degree. This will push Tuition Assistance use to the right, allowing those who are career-minded to use it as they earn a bachelor’s degree; I predict it may result in some TA savings, but will absolutely allow us to receive a better return on investment for those who use it. Most importantly, it increases our lethality and allows junior Sailors to focus their attention more appropriately on the skills they will use to help us win in combat.

Eventually, the NCC will be an accredited institution with the ability to confer an associate's degree. In the meantime, the NCC will leverage relationships with select accredited major four-year public and private universities across the nation. This will enable us to more quickly realize advantages, such as filling a long-neglected gap in our educational continuum, while also providing a recruiting and retention incentive. The NCC will offer degrees in information technology and engineering to kick off the 2021 pilot program, with additional science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) options to follow. This will also advance our fleet performance, provide warfighting advantages, and ensure that development of our enlisted naval leaders remains a critical warfighting pillar in our national defense.

## **CLOSING**

The Navy is grateful for the sacrifice of your time and resources you employ to obtain granularity and clarity on the details of these decisions, using these experiences to thoughtfully sort through the myriad of priorities and apply our budget strategically. These decisions are not easy in a resource-constrained environment; however, I wholeheartedly believe that the issues I have advocated for on behalf of our Sailors should be in your final discussions as you reach those conclusions. With other militaries rivaling our own, the true advantage we maintain as the preeminent naval power is the one that is the hardest to find and impossible to replace – our people. Consistent, steady funding that results from a stable budget process is absolutely essential to the development, growth, and maturation of our forces. Complementing this growth with the resources to remove distractions, improve training, and enhance quality of life will have an exponential impact on that growth and maturation. When we do this and remain focused on being good stewards of the resources you entrust to us, it keeps Sailors focused and ready to fight when and where our nation needs us. Together, it leads to our ability to safeguard our shores and keep armed conflict away from those citizens we serve. I thank you for the opportunity to share my statement, and for your unwavering commitment to those of us in uniform.