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HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF
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HEADQUARTERS, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION, VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND
RELATED AGENCIES
OF THE
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
ON
QUALITY OF LIFE
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U.S. Marine Corps Priorities

Introduction & Current Operations

Chairwoman Wasserman-Schultz, Ranking Member Carter, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I am honored to speak to you today on behalf of our United States Marines. Your care and attention to our Marines and our family is not lost on me. I am grateful to speak to you, our elected officials, and to all of our taxpayers on the state of your Marine Corps.

“Marines are different.” Here’s why:

Warfighting is the single most important thing we do. And time after time, we’ve proven how deeply invested we are in training, fighting, and winning.

As required, and because we’re the most ready, the Marine Corps has been synonymous with crisis response force. Since I’ve last met with this committee, the Marine Corps has achieved milestone successes in training and during real-world operations in support of our national interests.

From aboard amphibious ships with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit and with Special Marine Air-Ground Task Force – Central Command, your Marines deployed to Afghanistan in August to conduct a noncombatant evacuation operation. Combined Task Force 51, under the command of a Marine general, was tasked with supporting the transition of American citizens out of Hamid Karzai International Airport.

These Marines executed the largest ever noncombatant evacuation conducted by the U.S. military. In the final hours of the mission, the Marines were attacked by a suicide bomber. 11 Marines, one Navy corpsman and one Army soldier were killed during this operation. 16 Marines were wounded in action. Marines continued with the operation, completed the mission, and more than 100,000 people were evacuated from Afghanistan.

Following the evacuation, the Marine Corps established two temporary housing locations in Virginia to sustain and support the transition of Afghan refugees to the United States. The Marines provided shelter, security and care for the Afghan people under appropriate COVID-19 and health precautions.

Simultaneously in August, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, devastating the country with extensive damage. Our Marines responded immediately when called upon, deploying from aboard the amphibious vessel *USS Arlington* to support with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts. The Marine task force provided security and assisted with the movement of more than 113,000 pounds of aid to the people of Haiti.

Early last year, the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, again aboard amphibious ships, rapidly shifted from the Central Command area of responsibility to Africa Command's to support Operation Octave Quartz, providing full combat and logistics support to a joint task force while simultaneously maintaining its crisis response capabilities to both combatant commanders for two geographical regions.

The 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard amphibious ships completed its two patrols in the Indo-Pacific area of responsibility while reinforcing its partnership with Japan and Thailand during Exercise Cobra Gold.

The Marines continued their longstanding commitment to our partners in the Southern Command area of responsibility by teaming up with the Navy to participate in Exercise Unitas. This is the longest-running, multinational, maritime exercise involving Marine and Navy units from 19 partner nations to enhance security cooperation within this hemisphere.

And just recently, more than 3,000 Marines from II Marine Expeditionary Force executed Exercise Cold Response in Norway, strengthening partnerships and alliances in Europe and promoting interoperability. A Marine general was the commander of landing forces for NATO's amphibious task force aboard an Italian carrier.

Today, at this very moment, we have more than 30,000 Marines abroad. Our Marines are currently engaged with our partners and allies at every corner of all geographical commands. We have four Marine Expeditionary Units underway, which is the benchmark for our forward operating crisis response force.

The National Defense Strategy prescribes our attention to be on our competitive adversaries. Your Marines are training in South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Guam, Timor-Leste, Australia and all long the littorals in the Indo-Pacific region.

As the world continues to focus on the atrocities happening in Ukraine, your Marines are in Europe, supporting a Combined Task Force. From Italy to Norway, and as close as Romania and Lithuania, you will find Marines.

As warfighters, we train. We fight. We win. This hasn't changed since the existence of the Corps. This is our collective character as Marines. This is the role and function Congress has shaped us for. And let me emphasize this: Today, we stand ready.

Today's Marines are more than ever capable of fighting and winning, but we cannot stop there.

Striving for improvements and innovation begins with our most valuable resource – the centerpiece of our core – our Marines.

In addition to the stressors that are associated with being warfighters, Marines are subject to the same life stressors as all Americans.

Human Performance

We must focus and invest in the human capital – our Marines and families. Human Performance is key in supporting the commandant's vision. We're after strong and healthy families, healthy homes, maturity among our ranks – both professionally and socially – longevity in careers, healthy behaviors, cognitive fitness, and resiliency.

By focusing on Human Performance – physical, mental, social, and spiritual fitness – we are better able to manage talent and to attract, incentivize, grow, and retain the elite warriors and families we need to accomplish the mission.

The Marine Corps, like all the services, loses Marines for any number of reasons outside the normal end-of-active-service (EAS) or retirement.

Known as non-EAS attrition, the vast majority of losses are all contributed to Human Performance factors. These include mental health, social and relationship issues, drugs and alcohol abuse, and poor nutrition and sleep habits – all affecting job performance. Additionally, these factors have significant impacts on the quality of life for our service members and our families.

We benefit from all of the support from this Congress. As a result, over the past year, the Marine Corps has produced a strategy that provides Human Performance holistic care across the force. That strategy is focused on our people.

With the continued help from this committee and the resources requested, we will better prepare our force to persevere in the face of adversity and win in all future conflicts.

Our Marines and our families are the driving force behind our success on and off the battlefield, and the legacy of our American values. My top priority is progressively building the healthy quality of life that's required for our Marines and their families.

Quality of Life

Our true strategic advantage over our adversaries is our people, our Marines, and we must strive to increase the quality of life for our Marines as we would other modernization resources, any program of record or any high dollar weapon system. Simply put, your Marines *are* the weapon systems.

We thank this Congress for supporting our past, ongoing and future construction projects that have improved life at home. This includes the 16 barracks renovations we've provided to our unaccompanied Marines in FY21, along with the 12 current barracks renovation projects, and the 12 more projected for FY 23. One of the top reasons Marines leave the Corps is because of poor living conditions and these investments will positively impact Marines living in the barracks. The Marine Corps will continue to make these quality of life improvements a priority and I respectfully request your support.

There's a saying in the Marine Corps: We recruit a Marine and we retain a family.

Caring for our Marines includes their families, and we understand it's a packaged deal. The Marine Corps is planning to invest more than \$230 million in family housing construction, which will positively impact our families.

Deployments and changes of permanent duty stations, and all issues associated with building a healthy family are some of the nuances Marines experience during their service in the Corps.

A change of duty station can be an imposition to a spouse who has established a license or certification to practice a specialty in one state, and may require a recertification in another after a PCS to another state. The Marine Corps reimburses Marines for qualified state relicensing and recertification costs incurred by their spouse arising from a PCS to another state.

As tens of thousands Marine parents can attest to, high-quality care for our children is a family readiness priority. Child Development Centers and other quality-of-life programs are a very important way to influence retention and readiness of our Marines and families. In FY21, our child development programs served 19,391 children at 14 installations. Of this, we served 1,040 children in the off-base fee assistance program.

Our children from ages 6 weeks to 18 years have access to high quality Child and Youth Programs, which includes Child Development Programs, Youth Programming and the Off-Base Child Care Fee Assistance Program. We are thankful for the continued support we receive from Congress for our Child Development Centers to provide sustainable facilities across the installations.

All Child and Youth Programs have implemented the revised DoD Child Care Priorities and as the conditions of the pandemic evolve, all Child and Youth Programs have implemented the revised DoD Child Care Priorities by supplanting families of lower child care priorities. Our Marines and our families are the driving force behind our success on and off the battlefield, and the legacy of our American values. My top priority is progressively building the healthy quality of life that's required for our Marines and their families.

Talent Management 2030

The Marine Corps is thankful for Congress's support to Force Design and force modernization efforts. This is necessary to keep ahead of our pacing threats. The Marine Corps will continue to focus on Talent Management modernization as the very real means to ensure we develop and retain the most qualified and talented Marines.

Marines who are diverse in thought and intellect, who are creative problem solvers and capable of making advantageous decisions inside the weapons engagement zone provide us that warfighting edge you expect of your Marines.

The infantry is, and has always been, the Marine Corps' main effort. The Marine Corps is falling short of meeting the retention goals for first term infantrymen, but we're closing in. We've afforded more opportunities and incentives for our infantrymen, thanks to the work of leaders and peers alike. Increasing retention in these warfighters, at all reenlistment points across their careers, will drive our warfighting progression for the next twenty years and beyond – building our capacity for lethality throughout the continuum of time.

As empowered leaders of the enlisted force, NCOs and SNCOs are in the most advantageous position to influence, motivate, and develop Marines, so that they enthusiastically want to work toward and achieve the goals established by commanders.

The complex and rapidly changing environment calls for renewed attention to both training and education for the enlisted force. As leaders of the institution, NCOs and SNCOs are charged with fostering the growth among those they lead as the changes associated with the future of our nation continue to evolve.

Marines who are diverse in thought and intellect, who are creative problem solvers and capable of making advantageous decisions on the battlefield provide us that warfighting edge you expect of your Marines.

We thank Congress for the NDAA in support of the U.S. Naval Community College, which supports our Commandant's Training and Education priority. We encourage education, not to just gain the degrees and certifications, but to ensure we continue to have the most adaptable, relevant and capable Marines.

Recruitment and Retention

All Marine Corps recruiting efforts – officer, enlisted, regular, reserve, and prior-service – fall under the Marine Corps Recruiting Command. This is unique amongst the services. Operationally, this provides us with tremendous flexibility and unity of command, facilitating efforts to meet accession and end strength requirements.

We achieved our recruiting mission last year. However, FY22 has proved to be arguably the most challenging year in recruiting history. In addition to COVID-19, the growing disconnect and declining favorable view between the U.S. population and traditional institutions, labor shortages, high inflation, and a population of youth who do not see the value of military service also continue to strain recruiting

efforts and place the Marine Corps' accession mission at risk. Despite the challenges, the quality of your Marines remains exceptionally high.

Once an individual has earned the title Marine, it is our duty to care for this Marine and dedicate the resources to build this Marine into a leader.

Our goal is to develop lethal warfighters capable of sustaining successful careers leading Marines. Investing in our Marines and their quality of life is paramount to this end.

Suicide Prevention

Suicide is an enterprise-wide concern that has lasting harmful effects on Marines, families, and the Marine Corps. Every leader focuses on building connections with each one of their Marines to recognize unhealthy stress responses, promoting an environment in which mental wellness is prioritized, and utilizing medical providers, counselors, chaplains, and other health and wellness resources throughout the Marine Corps. Access to mental health providers and resources is a priority and something with which we are very concerned. Ensuring adequate access is not just limited to the Marine Corps or Department of Defense—it is a nation-wide concern. Since 2011, the Marine Corps' suicide rate is generally comparable to the U.S. population.

Last year 42 Marines died by suicide and there were 371 attempts reported. The number of deaths by suicide decreased from two years ago, and the reported attempts increased. Since 2011, the Marine Corps' suicide rate is generally comparable to the U.S. population suicide rate for the same demographics.

Recently, we concluded a months-long summit including Marines from across the Corps to discuss the topic of mental health and suicide prevention. We focused on how to better use our resources to mitigate not just mental health challenges but also deaths by suicide and the associated harmful behaviors.

Their initial findings coincide with what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has been communicating – that a holistic approach to mental health challenges contributes to stabilizing healthier behaviors. This is the human performance mission – to achieve healthy, total fitness in all domains.

We train our women and men to find the signs associated with depression and harmful behaviors, and to preserve the life and well-being of our sisters and

brothers. I'd like to thank this Congress for your continued support in our prevention programs, which include Unit Marine Awareness and Prevention Integrated Training, Combat and Operational Stress Control Capability initiatives, Suicide Prevention Program Officers, the Marine Intercept Program, and the vital role our Chaplains and behavioral health specialists play in human performance.

Preserving life starts at the core of every human – the cognitive dimension. Mental health in our Marines takes a Marine Corps-wide effort, including policy, institutional and individual changes in how we view and prioritize mental health and the human capital.

The mind, body and spirit of a Marine – of all service members – require proper maintenance and long-term programs designed to provide life-stressors resiliency, lengthen their careers, and promote healthy behaviors they can pass on to their Marines and families. We can no longer attack the leaves of this tree by answering to deaths and ideations as they come. We must look at the root – the core – in order to progress.

Sexual Assault Prevention

Sexual assault is a malignant behavior that has no place in the Marine Corps. Sexual assault and harassment is an attack on Marines – something we will not tolerate. Sexual assault and harassment prevention and response are top priorities for the Marine Corps, and we strive to foster a culture of respect for all. We are investing in our people to improve prevention and response capabilities in support of our Marines. Sexual harassment complaints trended up from 2018 to 2020, but leveled off in 2021 with a modest 5% decrease from 2020 levels. Harassment substantiation rates remain relatively consistent about 50% of cases. In regard to sexual assaults, reporting fluctuates every year, but has remained fairly stable with no real trend. The CY21 report and data will be available and released in August. We are grateful for the Independent Review Commission efforts and look forward to implementing the recommendations as we strive to eradicate assault and harassment from our ranks.

The Marine Corps is engaged and progressing on time for the IRC recommendations. Services have primary responsibility for 49 of 82 recommendations and we began tier 1 recommendations in December 2021. One recommendation is complete and 18 are underway. We estimate the cost for full implementation at \$560M, which includes 723 civilian full-time equivalent and 103 military end strength for FY22 through FY27.

Currently we are undergoing a manpower study to inform best implementation of this new prevention workforce. I share Congress's goal to reduce not only sexual assault, but all victim-based crimes in the Marine Corps. Promoting healthy behaviors extend far beyond mental health. We're after healthy work climates where Marines can achieve successful careers and build strong teams along the way.

Conclusion

“Marines are different.”

This is the first sentence in The NCO and Petty Officer joint publication under the description of the Marine Corps' NCO.

We're different because we understand that warfighting is the single most important thing we do. Everything we do to train and educate ourselves and our Marines is all in preparation for warfighting.

This is why we're different. This is why you choose Marines to defend our embassies, deliver aid, and stand ready across the globe to fight and win. You know who we are.

I am committed to meeting the intent of our commandant: to amplify the activities that lead to training and educating our Marines; to ensure the Marine Corps maintains its prowess in standards by retaining our strongest and most talented performers; that Marines continue to serve with honor under our core values; to foster healthy commands with leaders of irreproachable character; and to make it known – to our friends and foes – that warfighting is what we do, what we do best and what we will continue to do when our nation calls.

We are Marines. We train. We fight. We win. Period.

Chairwoman Wasserman-Schultz, Ranking Member Carter, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity to represent our nation's finest, your United States Marines. I am grateful for your time and for the attention you're providing to the quality of life of our Marines and their families. Thank you for your unwavering support. Semper Fidelis.