

NOT FOR PUBLICATION  
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION  
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  
MAY 18, 2022**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Chairwoman Wasserman-Schultz, Ranking Member Carter and distinguished members of the subcommittee - I am honored to speak to you today on behalf of the amazing Sailors who serve our United States Navy. I have greatly appreciated this opportunity each time it has been afforded over the past four years, and I am grateful for this final opportunity to do so today. This process of testimony has been the most daunting challenge that I will miss; it is singularly unique to this position as an enlisted Sailor that I'm given the opportunity, able to speak directly to those who control resourcing and support to our beloved Navy. Allowing me to speak in unexpurgated form with unambiguous language about where we are doing well, and more importantly, where we remain perilously short, is a monumental undertaking. Our budget request will allow us to continue sharpening our skills and combat readiness, better preparing us to take on any one of our near-peer competitors in the maritime environment. Four hundred thousand (400,000) active duty and reserve Sailors are counting on me to deliver – and are hopeful you will listen.

Throughout the COVID 19 pandemic, the Navy continuously recruited, trained, prepared and deployed combat ready forces, as our nation requires. As we begin to emerge from pandemic conditions, made possible by the vaccine that relegated COVID to non-lethal status, we face some of the same challenges that I have brought to you perennially – child care shortfalls that threaten war fighting capacity, advanced education opportunities necessary to successfully fight in high-end combat, mental and physical health shortfalls that risk too many of our people, while they serve and long after, just to highlight a few. But the post-COVID environment has left us with a new norm that presents some new challenges as well, most formidable in which recruiting future Sailors. What COVID developed in our military-bound population with regards to

expectations of an optimal work environment - options such as frequent telecommuting – create a true challenge to find men and women to serve in a vocation that cannot be done virtually. The abundance of altruism our young people have is the reason I’m confident we will continue to find what we need – but the cost of that endeavor is, like the inflation that plagues our Navy family and every citizen in our nation, skyrocketing.

The geopolitical environment is becoming less stable as each day goes by, creating more demands on our Navy than ever before, and without sustained adequate funding, we risk failing at a time when our nation can least afford it. I have vigorously noted in previous testimonies that our people are the “x-factor” – the decisive advantage that cannot be seen in the comparison of forces on paper. Please understand – we are at the precipice of failure in this area, as we’ve slowly and consistently “done more with less” since I first joined the Navy nearly 34 years ago. If we are to continue to attract and retain a capable and agile fighting force, we must invest in them on par with what we invest in aircraft, ships, submarines and other hardware we are asking them to operate. Our citizens and the Congress, as their appointed representatives, absolutely expect something more, and our Sailors want to deliver more – but we need some critical tools and support to do so.

From my fleet engagements with Sailors and their families, mental health resources, childcare, competitive pay compensation, and retention are the issues at the forefront of their minds. Having an approved budget when we begin the year directly contributes to maintaining our competitive edge; conversely, operating under a Continuing Resolution, for even part of the year, has a detrimental effect on an already pressurized and fiscally constrained environment – we lose

billions of dollars in spending power, and that hurts our junior Sailors the most. I ask you to consider when prioritizing how vital our people are – it is only when Sailors rush forward into the hull of a newly commissioned ship that it has been “brought to life.” Quality of life, Sailor living and working conditions and related programs directly equate to combat readiness, every bit as much as technical training, parts availability and funding those “sets and reps” that we need to prepare for the fight.

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

The pandemic has emphasized the critical need for greater mental health support and resources; I am aware that this is not just a struggle for the Navy, but for all of America and while we have been able to satisfy some of our gaps with creative approaches, we are struggling – and losing far too often – in this battle for our Sailors. We are in desperate need of providers, as wait times for all but the most egregious cases – those at the precipice of suicide – is averaging five to six weeks for an appointment. This lack of capacity and resulting wait times is something I can personally attest to, as I sought care last spring and had to move forward with seeing a civilian provider at my own expense – something our Sailors cannot afford, and should not have to endure.

Maximizing our efficiency, Navy Medicine expanded virtual health capabilities to ships and has provided web-based tools to the shore establishment. In previous testimony I’ve discussed the San Diego-based the Mental Health Operational Outreach Division Clinic – the MHOOD is a “comprehensive intake” process which serves as a hub for resources in the region; they facilitate robust collaboration between medical treatment facilities, Fleet and Family Support Center, and

embedded medical assets to provide urgent care for an average of 100 walk-ins weekly. The Naval Submarine Support Center Bangor Embedded Mental Health Program has engaged the Chief's Mess, training them as "care extenders" to provide additional resources for Sailors in the area. The Sailor Resiliency Center in Rota, Spain, offers convenient, pier side support services for our forward-deployed destroyers and local staffs, significantly reducing medevacs out of the theater. Our Fleet and Family Support Centers have historically been a great resource for our service members and their families, and recently have seen a decrease in clinical counseling services demand - due in part to the Sailor Assistance and Intercept for Life program, as well as filling 22 of the 42 Deployed Resiliency Counselor positions on our large amphibious ships and aircraft carriers. These DRCs provide short-term non-medical counseling, a model that has proven successful in reducing the number of medical evacuations during ship operations due to mental health, and yet finding candidates to fill out the remaining 50% of these billets has so far been unsuccessful. So while it's important to recognize that we have had some success in the mental health struggle by making these adjustments and improvements, there are very few outcomes that remain to be achieved through efficiencies alone.

Providing close access to support services optimizes the readiness of our fighting force, and facilitates an increase of trust with commanders, connectedness with unit members, and a willingness to seek care by reinforcing that there is "no wrong door" for our Sailors to get help. These programs are in their infancy and must continue to receive support. We also need to continue efforts to recruit and retain mental providers, and recognize as we do so that we are in competition with the civilian sector for this unique talent. Finally, we note that the "no wrong door" concept is also just one of many recommendations from the Independent Review

Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military that the Navy is working to implement, recognizing the significant toll that these harmful, readiness detracting behaviors have on sailors' quality of life.

## **CHILDCARE**

A shortage of affordable, quality child care has also been a long-standing issue for our nation. The pandemic exacerbated this crisis, shrinking available options and commanding exorbitant prices for care. We need to continue to work together to elevate this service barrier before it costs our Navy valuable talent and future combat readiness.

Currently, the Navy accounts for 36 percent of the overall DoD shortfall. Although this is a four percent decrease from last year, it is still not enough of an improvement. The demand far outstrips the supply, with a shortage in fleet concentration areas of over 4700 spots for children and infants under three, leading to an average of 128 days on the Child Development Center (CDC) waitlist.

With prices for private care solutions often as high as a mortgage payment or a month's rent, our leaders do their best to find unique solutions to accommodate Sailors with childcare issues. Among the challenges the Navy faces caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and recurring continuing resolutions are prolonged backlogs at our Child Development Centers, which has forced working parents/dual-working couples to accept situations fraught with risk, creating a significant financial burden that also threatens Sailor readiness

Some solutions have eased the financial burden, such as increasing the child care fee subsidy assistance program fee cap to \$1,500. In our fleet concentration areas, families are benefiting from the Department of Defense “In-Home Child Care” pilot program. In addition, the construction of a new childcare development center at Point Loma, California, was included in the FY23 budget. Our pursuit of private partnerships in local communities over the last two years has yielded minimal success; a lack of interest, available capacity, or financial cost of the benefit has left local communities hesitant or unable to help.

We will continue to pursue solutions such as repurposing aging facilities and procuring mobile learning centers to increase capacity, as well as expanding available subsidy fee assistance spaces by 1,000. And yet even as we do this, we face another hurdle - retaining qualified child care providers. Staff turnover has exceeded 30 percent in some areas, the result of a lack of comparable pay and compensation in competition with the private sector. To help reduce this, the CDC has established a new competitive entry-level pay rate, and established a marketing campaign to promote awareness in the community of job opportunities and employment benefits. The stress of being a working parent has never been higher; demand outweighs the supply, and the price outweighs income. Every year I advocate for continued support for the Navy, but all working parents need and depend on this resource; perhaps it is a mutually beneficial solution you can consider, one which might also benefit your civilian constituency.

## **RETENTION**

A critical component of our combat readiness is the ability to retain our exceptional force of highly skilled and trained professionals. Continued support of the US Navy Community College (USNCC) is key to this, and will provide an excellent return on investment by increasing

knowledge and critical thinking skills, advancing fleet performance and providing decisive war-fighting advantages. Pilot One, in partnership with five accredited educational institutions, resulted in an 84 percent completion rate; ahead of becoming an accredited institution in its own right, the USNCC is helping the maritime services forge a path to higher education, degrees and certifications. Pilot Two will bring even greater student success, by considering lessons learned as we implement an additional nine associate degree programs, including nuclear engineering technology, maritime focused logistics, and three programs for cybersecurity and information assurance.

Along with education, another factor contributing to retention success has been improvements to our assignment and advancement processes. The Detailing Market Place Assignment Policy places a greater emphasis on Sailor desire, set against available billets, with optimal assignment timelines and – eventually – pay and compensation that more directly follows alignment to the assignment. In our advancement system, we are providing greater advantage to the nuances of performance as a part of our “multiple”- the algorithm comprised of evaluations, testing and other performance metrics. This encourages our Sailor workforce by recognizing and promoting talent, decreasing frustration by our best performers and incentivizing those “best and fully qualified” to both advance and stay Navy.

## **CONCLUSION**

Quality of life issues have become increasingly important over the past 30 years; to recruit and retain a world-class fighting force, we must endeavor to support our people in a manner befitting what we may someday ask of them – that they render the ultimate sacrifice to keep our nation



free. Combat readiness, and the ability to win across the maritime domain will always be the Navy's number one priority; that priority is given the greatest advantage by ensuring our Sailors are trained and equipped, and that their critical needs met so they can focus on preparing for the fight. The ships, submarines, aircraft and other equipment that the Navy uses to inflict damage on an enemy and provide a decisive naval victory are inanimate and incapable without the people who operate them. This critical component, the "X-factor" in our fight against an enemy of superior numbers, cannot be taken for granted; with our all-volunteer force, the FY23 budget request will keep those Sailors in our ranks, trained and ready to fight.

Years from now, I believe we will look back and understand this time to be an inflection point for the Navy, because as I've stated implicitly and explicitly, we are truly at the precipice of an unmanageable situation in regards to what we have in resourcing, set against what the nation asks of us. The idea that we can continue to "do more with less" has ceased to be a viable, continuing course of action, and it is on the backs of our most junior Sailors that the weight of that course will be carried.

It is an honor to be here before you for my final time representing our Sailors, and I thank you for your unwavering support for the men and women of the United States Navy.