

United States Space Force



Testimony Before the
House Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction
and Veterans Affairs

Quality of Life in the Military

Witness Statement of
CMSSF John F. Bentivegna
Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force

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COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

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Chairman Carter, Ranking Member Wasserman-Schultz, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, thank you for your continued promotion of, and dedication to the Quality of Life of your Guardians and their loved ones. I am honored by this opportunity to highlight the successes, challenges, and concerns of your Space Force. You have my greatest appreciation for your enduring and steadfast support of our country and our service members.

Your consideration of Quality of Life initiatives leads to improvements in the experience of service for all members and their loved ones and is directly linked to our continued ability to recruit and retain our warfighting advantage: our Guardians. For example, we are grateful for your support of the recent increases in Guardian Basic Pay and for Congressional support of the Space Force Personnel Management Act.

With the new model of service provided by the personnel flexibilities granted through this legislation, we can integrate active-component Guardians and Air Force Reservists serving in space-focused career fields into one unified service that offers both full and part-time options for uniformed members. This allows the service to manage our force more effectively by attracting and retaining critical talent, capitalizing on skill sets and perspectives developed outside of the military, and improving overall Quality of Life for our members. Allowing part-time Guardians to continue serving after they begin their civilian careers is a good start, but only a start, in attracting and retaining the most talented Guardian force our nation needs. Modernizing talent management is one of many efforts the Space Force is undertaking as a critical component of our Guardian Value Proposition.

The Guardian Value Proposition is how we describe the ecosystem of all those things we do for, or provide to, Guardians which incentivize their continued service. From targeted pay and compensation to the Quality of Life of our Guardians and their families, we are looking at this ecosystem from all angles and are committed to getting this right for our members serving today and for future generations to come. However, for these benefits to serve as attractors for service, we need to ensure that the support provided is both good and accessible.

The Guardian experience begins with our comprehensive selection process. Thousands of Americans seek opportunities to enlist in the Space Force each year, going through deliberate screenings, capabilities assessments, and a selection board process that prioritizes the talent we value and our warfighting needs. In FY23, we connected with more than 4,000 candidates

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eligible to enlist. Of those 4,000 aspiring Guardians, we selected 517 and are again on track to meet our goal of 659 more in FY24. While our recruiting efforts have been strong, we recognize that the American public's propensity to serve in the military remains a challenge, and that as we grow, we must continue to evolve how we recruit to remain competitive with the innovative and technologically savvy talent our Space Force requires.

What has historically attracted young Americans to military service in the past is not necessarily what will attract or retain them in the future. Many in the commercial industry have learned from our model and evolved their value proposition for new talent to now include many of the same benefits which were unique to military service. In addition, Space Force recruits tend to be older than other Services' recruits with the average age of an Enlisted Guardian recruit at 22.1 years and with 8% of accessions in FY23 aged between 28-40. They have higher levels of education with 19% entering service with an Associate's degree, 16% with a Bachelor's degree, and approximately 5% with a Master's degree. A more mature and educated cohort requires a recruiting and retention model that will properly incentivize potential recruits and reward fully trained Guardians. A modern recruiting and retention approach that draws in and retains talent is crucial to maintain our competitive advantage during this period of Great Power Competition, something our Department of the Air Force has significantly pivoted toward. This focus is required to initiate change and stay ahead of our strategic competitors while simultaneously retaining the force our service requires.

Retention remains one of our critical focus areas and directly impacts the Space Force's ability to accomplish its mission. It takes years and significant investment to fully cultivate space-minded warfighters in high demand competencies such as Intelligence, Cyber, and Satellite Operations. By the time a Guardian completes their initial pipeline of Basic Military Training, Initial Skills Training, and Mission Qualification Training, the Space Force has invested between \$98,000-\$167,000 toward their professional development. When combined with the on-the-job experience gained during a member's service commitment, and in many cases the attainment of industry recognized certifications, our Guardians become highly sought after STEM professionals. The growing competition for space-competent talent requires us to take a deeper look at targeted ways to compensate Guardians and ensure we retain the talent we need and the talent we have already invested much in.

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Another key to retention and quality of life is job satisfaction. During a recent forum with Guardians, they raised frustration with incomplete models, simulations, and trainers to prepare them for the high-end threat our near peer adversaries pose. This expression of concern demonstrated the passion our Guardians have for their missions, and we owe it to them to ensure they have the tools they need to replace their uncertainty with readiness. Congress has been a consistent supporter of our Operations Testing and Training Infrastructure efforts over the last two fiscal years, and in the FY25 Budget, we have requested \$438.7 million to continue developments in investments in digital twin simulation technology, high-fidelity mission trainers, and realistic threat-replicated aggressor forces. We are redesigning career paths to produce Guardians that meet our high-tech operational demands, to include increasing our investment in Initial Skills Training programs (\$2.1M in FY25) to bolster our training capacity throughput. Our ability to properly organize, train, and equip Guardians with the most advanced, realistic, and relevant training and technology is key to their ability to **secure our Nation's interest in, from, and to space.**

Quality of Life as it pertains to pay and compensation, childcare, housing and dormitories, health care, and spouse employment are also major USSF focus areas. As CMSSF, I have visited several Space Force installations in high-cost living areas and spoken with our Guardians who have highlighted additional stressors such as increased wait times at off-base medical centers, long commutes, and wait lists to access childcare. We are actively working to address these challenges and minimize related disruptions to our Guardians and their families, but more work remains. Anxiety and stress over financial and Quality of Life concerns must be mitigated, minimized, or eliminated for our Guardians to remain mission focused and ready to fight in an increasingly congested, contested, and competitive Space domain.

One way our service is working to improve Quality of Life are our initiatives to address Guardian health in a holistic manner. The Space Force is taking an innovative, science-based Holistic Health Approach to wellness that emphasizes total-fitness, to include continuous physical activity, preventive medicine, education, and skill-building to promote positive behaviors. Increasing readiness, reducing absenteeism, and giving Guardians flexibility when it comes to their personal health and fitness are paramount to us as a mainly employed-in-place warfighting force.

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Guardian Resilience Teams (GRT) are a noteworthy component of the Holistic Health Approach program and are comprised of subject matter experts on human performance, to include a Holistic Health Integrator responsible for coordinating all GRT activities, a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist, a Licensed Mental Health Provider, and a Physical Therapist. These teams are located at Space Force bases and will also provide support to our geographically separated units. To date, we onboarded 26 Guardian Resilience Team members, to include ten Holistic Health Integrators, nine Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialists, three Licensed Mental Health Providers, four Physical Therapists, and are actively working to hire 14 additional GRT positions across our installations. In addition, the Space Force, in partnership with the Air Force Research Lab, began a two-year study of our service's Continuous Fitness Assessment. Nearly 7,000 of our uniformed Guardians, representing 85% of our total force, registered to participate in the study.

In addition, our installations are working to address some of the limitations in healthcare availability for families. For example, Vandenberg Space Force Base in California partnered with Santa Barbara County to provide on-base occupational and speech therapy at their Child Development Centers. Peterson and Schriever Space Force Bases have also taken similar measures and Patrick Space Force Base in Florida partnered with an on-site Behavioral Therapist who supports children with special care needs, integrating this much needed support into the childcare setting.

With regards to childcare, we continue to struggle with capacity limitations as we work to recruit and retain staff at our childcare facilities. We are happy to share that Buckley Space Force Base recently hosted a hiring event that resulted in a vacancy reduction of 25% and reduced average days to hire direct care staff members from 44 to 14 days. Patrick Space Force Child Development Center increased capacity for children ages 6-12 years old but continues to seek qualified individuals to fill 10 staff vacancies to improve availability for younger children. These vacancies prevent approximately 50 additional children from attending. Unfortunately, we are finding installation leaders are routinely needing to find balance between rising childcare center costs and other key Morale Welfare and Recreation expenses that are essential to the wellbeing of our Guardians. Make no mistake, childcare availability has a measurable and direct impact on our operational readiness.

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Childcare access is compounded by the complexity our Guardians face with being a primarily 24/7 Employed-in-Place force. The preponderance of the force executes their warfighting mission from their home installations. Guardians supporting shift work struggle with finding childcare outside of normal business hours and on weekends. While there are several fee assistance programs available to military families, the process to secure these services can be cumbersome, time consuming, and lengthy. While the Department is working continually with the program administrator to identify ways to improve customer service response times, and develop a more streamlined application process., current conditions lead to financial strain and have a negative impact on spouse employment opportunities. The Space Force sees childcare as a mission readiness issue and not just a benefit. Without resourced and easily accessible options for quality care that align to our non-traditional work schedules, Guardians are left with few options which, in many cases, impacts their ability to work and continue to serve. This holds true for our Guardian spouses as well. They should not have to choose between a meaningful career and the service of their Guardian. We must continue to create pathways to employment for all our Guardian spouses who desire to work.

While childcare is an issue for our Guardians with families, where they live is a concern for all members. Many of our youngest and most financially vulnerable Guardians, those who are not married and have no dependents, live in dormitories. We are looking at several dormitory projects to maintain, restore, and improve conditions as outlined in our FY22 Dormitory Master Plan Investment Strategy. In FY25, we are investing \$4.1 million towards dormitory modernization and restoration. Our current average Building Condition Index across our military and training dormitories is 82 of 100 representing an overall 'good' score. However, we have several projects ongoing and continue to look at areas in need of modernization through our governance process to ensure the housing we furnish is safe and secure. Simultaneously, privatized housing project owners ensure the 3,372 family housing units across our installations meet the needs of our Guardians and their families.

Improving on-base housing options is a good start but taken alone is not enough. Many Guardians and their families live in local communities with highly competitive and expensive housing and rental markets. Rising housing and rent prices create several challenges that require a re-look at all facets of compensation. In addition to a volatile real-estate market, several of our

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installations are in high cost of living areas. I recently visited Los Angeles Air Force Base, the home of our Space Systems Command. The only available military housing is on Fort MacArthur which, during rush hour, is easily 45-50 minutes away from duty stations. The Commissary is also located on LA AFB which makes after hours or weekend shopping trips inconvenient and financially challenging when considering the average price of gas in the local area in March 2024 was \$4.93 per gallon.

The value our Guardians bring to the Nation, our Joint Force, and our Partners and Allies cannot be overstated. That's why we are grateful to Congress for your interest in understanding how our service members are compensated and cared for, including looking at quality-of-life issues beyond compensation, such as housing, childcare access and cost, and military spouse unemployment. The USSF is a modernized military organization born in the digital age. Our missions and systems require an advanced degree of skillsets and competencies that are very STEM focused. We must look to modernize the compensation model, or we risk not being able to attract and retain the talent required to win in an era of Great Power Competition.

Thank you again for this opportunity to represent our incredible Guardians and their families. I am extremely proud to serve as a voice for all our Guardians and their loved ones. I have heard many stories throughout my visits, all of which reflect that our Guardians are very proud to serve in your Space Force. Ensuring that they and their loved ones are well taken care of affects their abilities and readiness. Their focus must remain on ensuring our Nation and our joint warfighters always have the advantage in Space.

Our Guardians are the ones who protect and defend our Nation in Space and caring for them and their families must remain a priority for all of us. They are the reason that America's interests, and those of our joint partners and allies, can thrive in an uncertain and increasingly congested, contested, and competitive domain. We owe the Guardians our best, so they continue to give their best. We just turned four, and it will be decisions we make today that will ensure the Space Force remains postured to protect the Nation's interests in space and safeguard our free and peaceful access to the Space domain. We look forward to working with Congress as you work to enact the FY25 appropriations to ensure our fifth year as a service is a bright one. Thank you for your time and attention on these important topics.