

Department of the Air Force

Testimony

Before the House Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction



Senior Enlisted Leader Perspective

Witness Statement of
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March 20, 2024

Quality of Life in the Military

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Introduction

Chairman Carter, Ranking Member Wasserman-Schultz, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, thank you for your continued interest and support in the quality of life of the women and men who serve our great Nation. I am honored for this opportunity to join my fellow service senior enlisted advisors to address the needs of our military, as well as speak with you, specifically, on the issues impacting the lives of our Airmen and their families.

Throughout our history, Airmen have pioneered change across seminal moments which shaped the trajectory of our military and our Nation. From launching aircraft off the deck of ships to constructing a convoy of aircraft large enough to supply an entire city for a year, to accomplishing the largest Noncombatant Evacuation Operation in history, our Airmen have been there.

While we do not know what our next seminal moment will be, we do know we are serving in a time of consequence. Even as the People's Republic of China (PRC) may be our most significant pacing challenge, we also remain clear-eyed about the acute threat Russia plays in attempting to upend the rules-based international order.

The character and landscape of the strategic environment has rapidly changed in a very short period of time. As multi-domain warfare becomes integrated with more autonomous weapon systems, cyber-attacks, information warfare, and artificial intelligence, the threat to our systems and our Airmen is ever-increasing. The need for America's military to outpace and deter, and if necessary, prevail across all domains, has never been higher.

We need to accept the fact that U.S. Air Force dominance is no longer assured; we must follow through on harnessing the innovative talent and spirit existing across our service in order to solve key Air Force challenges. The longer we wait, the further we fall behind. Now, more than ever, we need Airmen who can meet these complex challenges and develop solutions, allowing us to retain our competitive advantage. This is our time of consequence. The decisions we make, and the actions we take today, will empower our Airmen of tomorrow and define the next seminal event in our history.

I am honored to be the voice of our Airmen. The work we do to support our Nation is critical. For more than 76 years, we have answered our Nation's call, without hesitation, and without fail. It falls on us to ensure our Airmen are organized, trained, and equipped to continue

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to successfully execute our assigned mission during this time of consequence, as we reoptimize our force to meet the demands of the PRC pacing challenge.

This is no easy task and will have impacts to our Airmen and their families. To be the Air Force our Nation needs, we must prioritize the quality of life of our service members and their families. Our Air Force and Airmen must always remain ready, willing, and able to deliver airpower anytime, anywhere. There are countless examples of the more than 665,652 Total Force Airmen working extremely hard to follow through on the changes our Air Force needs. Our Airmen understand the rapidly evolving challenges, and the new domains of warfare, such as: cyber, space and information, defining future-state operations. For our service members to focus on this mission, we owe them quality of life valuing their service on a winning team.

Our Airmen remain steadfast and committed to the defense of our Nation. We cannot have them distracted by whether they are able to live in safe and quality housing and dormitories, have access to affordable childcare and healthcare, all while enduring higher rates of spousal unemployment, and many other challenges as a result of accepting the call to serve our Nation. We must ensure adequate compensation of our service members, and care for their families, to be able to recruit and retain the talent our Air Force needs to maintain our advantage in the future. Quality of life is a readiness issue and influences our ability to recruit and retain the best America has to offer. Our Airmen continue to answer our Nation's call, and we must ensure the care and welfare of our service members remains an undisputed priority. These things are integral to who we are and imperative to our future success. Continuing to take on these issues demonstrates our commitment to our service members and their families, and ultimately builds trust in our great institution. It has never been more critical to maintain the quality of life of our all-volunteer force.

We will continue to work with you, our willing partners, in developing actionable solutions to build trust and care for our Airmen, and our families, to ensure our Airmen achieve the Air Force mission.

Years of competing priorities and fiscal constraints have forced us to manage risk, creating quality-of-life challenges and hardships for our Airmen. The need to modernize and equip our Air Force for Great Power Competition is greater than ever. We must look at how our

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service members are impacted by these quality-of-life issues, and we must care for them with the same intensity as we approach the mission.

Military Pay and Compensation

At the beginning of this year, Department of Defense Military basic pay increased by 5.2%, the basic allowance for housing by 5.4% on average and the basic allowance for subsistence by 1.7%. These increases are very much appreciated and essential to our service members when it comes to the standard of living, and we look forward to the FY25 basic pay 4.5%, 4.2% average housing allowance, and 3.4% subsistence increases. While the basic pay increase is appreciated, it does still present some military members and their families with challenges associated with the national inflation average of 3.4% and 6.3% rising housing costs, as referenced in the Federal Housing Finance Agency House Price Index. I am eager and grateful for the much-anticipated work being conducted through the 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation which will dive deep in assessing challenges unique to a military lifestyle, and access to affordable childcare and quality housing.

While the QRMC will inform long-range decisions, and we look forward to its recommendations, our service members need short-term, impactful attention and focus now, which is why I support and appreciate the specific focus on quality of life.

Access to Quality Healthcare

I'm also appreciative of the work our military medical community of providers and administrators do every day, yet more must be done when it comes to ensuring access to high quality healthcare. In February 2022, the Military Health System completed its transition of authority, direction, and control of all military treatment facilities from the various services to the Defense Health Agency. This transition has not been without its challenges. During visits to the INDOPACOM Area of Responsibility in May and June 2023, the DoD Inspector General, as referenced in a recent report, was repeatedly informed by senior leaders of difficulties with accessing healthcare.

The Inspector General report data shows some TRICARE networks are not adequate in meeting the needs of beneficiaries, often manifesting as concerns from service members and

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their families about obtaining in-network care. This includes reports of wait times for routine and specialty appointments extending several months, resulting in some beneficiaries seeking off-base care and paying out-of-pocket.

We believe there are systemic challenges within the MHS, one of which is the national shortage of (health providers and its subsequent impacts on abilities to access and retain these critical clinicians within our MHS-Active Duty, Federal Civilian, and contractor. Moving forward, we are confident the DHA and Services will address these challenges by identifying clinical specialties, by location, where the managed care support contractor provider network is not meeting DoD access to care standards, and, in coordination with the managed care support contractors, develop and implement a plan to bring those provider networks into compliance. The Air Force is committed to working with the DHA on behalf of our Airmen and their families.

Health, wellness, and resiliency of our Airmen and their families is a top priority. We have rolled out an integrated “Spectrum of Resilience” model designed to reinforce the power of connectedness and leverage it as one of the greatest sources of strength for meeting the unique challenges associated with military life. Our Fortify the Force Initiative Team has been working hard, in conjunction with the DAF Cross Functional Team, to help overcome the barriers and stigmas Airmen face when seeking mental health care. We have also partnered with the DHA to examine, refine, and expand options for care. We are enhancing our culture where Airmen are valued, connected to a purpose, and if they need help, the resources are there.

Suicide Prevention

A cornerstone of our integrated resilience model we strive to build is one where we work together, at all levels and across all organizations, to prevent any Airman from seeing no other option than to end their own life. Suicide prevention remains a Department of the Air Force priority at every level. According to the Department of Defense Annual Report on Suicide in the Military Calendar year 2022, released 30 October 2023, suicide rates in the Air Force declined from a rate of 25.1 per 100,000 Active Component service members, in calendar year 2019, to 24.3 in CY20, and 15.3 in CY21. In CY22 this number saw a slight increase to 19.7 per 100,000, consistent with the average rate over the past five years. We must keep our intent and goal on

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reducing this rate to zero. We are focused on four areas and aligning them with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's public health approach to reducing suicide: building connections, detecting risk, promoting protective environments, and equipping our Airmen and our families with the best resources available. Our intent is to take a leadership-driven public-health approach, informed by data and partnerships with academia, industry, and sister services to leverage diverse ideas and innovate prevention activities.

The Fortify the Force Initiative Team has been working to identify the barriers in place, hindering the success of any initiatives, and recommending solutions to best help our Airmen and their families. Looking to the future, the continued funding for expansion of resiliency and suicide prevention programs is essential to ensuring our Airmen have direct access to the care they need, when they need it. I am confident in the level of effort we continue to provide and expect we will see positive results.

Military Family Housing & Dormitories

Ensuring the health and safety of our Airmen and their families living in dormitories or military family housing is a leadership imperative for our Air Force and must be treated with the same seriousness as we treat our weapon systems. We are deliberately empowering our tenants and commanders, through working groups, to address housing challenges at our bases, while continuing to take action to ensure safe and habitable housing for service members and their families.

The Department of the Air Force Military Housing Privatization Initiative inventory contains 52,181 homes with 31 projects across 63 installations. The high cost of construction continues to present challenges to improve DoD-owned family housing. Combined, the family housing operations and maintenance and construction programs will ensure continued support for the housing needs of Airmen, Guardians, their families, as well as our Army, Navy, and Marine Corps teammates living in DoD-owned and privatized family housing.

Additionally, the Department of the Air Force dormitory inventory contains 640 permanent party dorms comprising 57,051 beds, and 155 training dorms with 48,653 beds. Of the two dorm inventory facilities assessed, only 200 permanent party beds fell below the facility condition standard set by OSD. Despite the high overall dorm condition rating, the department

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recognizes the need to focus Military Construction funds to replace dormitories beyond their useful lives and installations with dormitory deficits. In FY22-23 the DAF funded 67 projects totaling \$341M in dorm renovations and repairs. The DAF plans to spend approximately \$216 million, across 31 projects, in FY24 and is planning for another \$300M in FY25 for Facility Sustainment Restoration and Modernization funds to repair and improve the condition of the current inventory of dormitories.

Access to Affordable Childcare

Available, affordable, and quality childcare programs are an essential workforce enabler for our Airmen, the Guardians we support, and their spouses. Our focus to improve access to childcare includes staffing initiatives for our centers, adding family childcare providers, and increasing community-based fee assistance along with targeted construction investments. These programs ensure the care and support of family members, which allows our service members to clearly focus on training and mission accomplishment. We currently have 269 child development, School Age care and youth centers on our installations. We also offer expanded childcare programs, utilizing a variety of approaches to meet the needs of Airmen and Guardians who require nontraditional care for irregular duty hours. Unfortunately, this still does not meet the demand for the care our service members need. As of 1 January 2024, there were 3,224 children, ages 0-5, on a waiting list for on-base childcare – with an average wait time of more than 137 days. That is a decrease of 1,563 children from 1 December 2022. To continue combatting this gap between needs and capability, we are working to maximize the spaces and childcare options currently available, pursue initiatives to expand childcare options, and leverage feedback from Airmen, and their families, to make the programs better. We have increased availability and affordability of the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood program, which pays for a portion of childcare fees. This program supports Airmen living in areas where on-base childcare is not available, or there is an extensive waitlist. In FY23, we provided more than \$28M in assistance across 4,400 spaces for 6,752 DAF children. In May 2023, we launched a pilot program to expand MCCYN fee assistance to DAF civilians living and working in the National Capital Region. Currently, we are tracking participation and costs to determine other locations to include in this pilot program. Of the 644 CDC direct care hires during FY23 Q4,

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318, roughly 49%, received the childcare fee discount. Currently, 31% of DAF CDC direct care providers receive this discount, with the total FY23 Q4 value of the reduced fees for direct care staff being more than \$3.1M.

As we continue to leverage these programs, we must also remain conscious of the increasing demand for affordable, and quality childcare. This directly impacts the readiness and retention of our Airmen and their families. We must also remember it supports spouse employment and, in turn, overall financial stability for our families. It is more than just a quality-of-life initiative, it is a force multiplier essential to mission success.

Spousal Employment

The modern military family is more diverse than it has ever been. In order to recruit the high-quality talent to the Air Force, we have embraced policy enabling members to ensure their families are cared for while also serving their country.

Currently, roughly 21% of active-duty military spouses are either unemployed. Additionally, 41% of DAF spouses said they experienced moderate to very large challenges in finding employment following a permanent change of station. Furthermore, of the military spouses who recently permanently changed duty locations, 34% of them required a state license for employment, and 18% of those spouses said they had difficulty obtaining it.

Given these challenges, the DAF is committed to continue improving spousal employment opportunities and license portability. Taking care of all families is an essential foundation of the quality of life of our Airmen.

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Conclusion

Chairman Carter, Ranking Member Wasserman-Schultz, and members of this Subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity to represent our incredible service members and their families. Your Airmen, supported by some of the strongest families, and greatest

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Americans, our Nation will ever know, stand ready. We fully understand the role we play in employing and enabling Airpower around the world.

My fellow senior enlisted advisors and I are honored for the opportunity to provide insight into the quality of service and quality of life of our service members, which directly affects our force. For more than 50 years, our all-volunteer force has proudly answered the call to serve. Today, service matters more than ever. It is our responsibility to ensure our people remain our most competitive advantage. The decisions we make now, the actions we take and the Airmen we develop will have implications on our Nation for generations to come.