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SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

**STATEMENT OF  
JAMES HONEA  
MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER OF THE NAVY  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION,  
VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES OF THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS QUALITY OF LIFE  
MARCH 20, 2024**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Chairman Carter, Ranking Member Wasserman Schultz and distinguished members of the subcommittee, it is my privilege to speak with you once more on behalf of our Sailors and their families. Your Navy is busy generating credible combat power as a decision option for our Nation's leaders, and then when called upon, deliver exceptional results. This hard work is being done on the back of our Sailors and their families. To maintain a lethal fighting force, we must invest in their quality of life and mission critical infrastructure. I am excited to be here with you today having this important and hopefully rich discussion.

The Gates Commission was established to study the viability of creating the all-volunteer force that we have today. The commission highlighted five pillars that would be necessary to sustain the all-volunteer force; (1) adequate pay and compensation, (2) quality housing, (3) timely access to quality health care, (4) a retirement plan, and (5) ensuring the military remains a reflection of the American people we serve. The good work of Congress and the Department of Defense (DoD) over the last year has done a lot toward strengthening these pillars, but there is certainly more work to be done.

## **SPOUSAL EMPLOYMENT**

I also believe we should consider a sixth pillar to the Gates Commission: family readiness. A much greater preponderance of our force today are families compared to the all-volunteer force we created 50 years ago. We understand that for us to retain our Sailors, we need to retain their families as well. Family dynamics, such as spousal employment and childcare are key contributing factors to their retention.

To fully enjoy financial stability in today's economy, most families in America require dual income. Through a multitude of reasons and barriers, many of our military spouses are challenged in securing stable and adequate paying employment. The unemployment rate for our military spouses continues to remain too high. Without ample opportunities for our spouses to secure employment, progress in their own careers, or contribute to the financial stability of their families, many service members feel compelled to leave the Navy to better provide for their family. The work of Congress and the DoD in this area of concern has been tremendously supportive and helpful. Federal hiring authorities, licensure portability, fee reimbursements among other initiatives such as remote work options, have proven beneficial to military spouses to help during duty station transfers. I encourage us to continue considering stronger federal hiring opportunities for our spouses, along with spouse co-location in securing continued meaningful employment for those spouses whenever our service members need to relocate to a new duty station.

## **CHILDCARE**

The ability to secure and afford adequate childcare is one of the top stressors of Sailors and our families. The approved military construction (MILCON) projects to build child development centers (CDC) in fiscal year 2024 are needed and I am appreciative for your support and the appropriations necessary to begin these projects. While we wait for these CDCs to be built and then staffed, it is critical that we continue to look at all available options to tackle these shortfalls. Many of our CDCs are already in competition for staff with childcare facilities operating in the local communities and unable to reach full capacity due to staff shortages. However, we are finding great success with fee assistance pilots. An expansion of these pilots will make an immediate impact for Sailors and our families needing to secure childcare.

## **HOUSING**

Every Sailor deserves to have a private residence that allows for a healthy separation from work life and their home life, both physically and mentally, not just during a shipyard or maintenance period. The number one quality of life concern of Sailors E-3 and below onboard our ships is the availability and access to unaccompanied housing (UH) upon their return to homeport. While ships are considered government quarters for our most junior Sailors, it does not provide the much needed work-life balance. As such the Navy is unique from our sister services in providing adequate housing for our Sailors.

I ask that we continue to work together to allow for all E-3 and below Sailors to have a home to return to at the end of the workday that is not onboard the ship, and provide our Secretary the increased authority and flexibility to do so. The Navy continues to see the quality of life benefit of the two Private Partner Venture (PPV) UH pilots located in Hampton Roads, Virginia and San Diego. These pilots maintain a high standard for quality of life and facility conditions for junior enlisted Sailors. We should consider the expansion of the PPV UH pilot and authorities to additional locations. PPV will help us solve our UH issues faster and have a more immediate impact to our Sailors.

## **HEALTHCARE**

Last year, I testified to this committee that access to quality medical services and timely care is one of the top concerns across the Fleet. As I visit ships and shore commands throughout the Navy, I continue to hear the same concerns from our Sailors and families about access to timely healthcare in close proximity to where they live and work. This also includes, and is sometimes most greatly felt by limited access to specialty care such as obstetricians and mental health care.

In a great part, the transformation to the Defense Health Agency (DHA) has been reliant on the extended health network outside our military fence lines. In many places, the specialty care outside our fence lines is no longer available or accessible. I greatly appreciate that through the most recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), you have allowed the DoD to include licensing portability of non-medical mental health care providers through the Military and Family Life Counseling Program. This adopted provision has allowed for the continuation of care to our service members, despite their geographic location. This is an example of Congress working with the DoD in providing some coverage where we have gaps and I thank Congress for their continued work with the DoD to find creative, as well as conventional, solutions to the gaps in our military healthcare system.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

A continuous investment in our people and cultivating a culture of continuous learning, at sea or ashore, is a Department of the Navy (DoN) priority and imperative to the Navy's combat mission. Continuous learning creates professional warfighters, fostering an environment where people want to belong.

The United States Naval Community College (USNCC) provides a priceless warfighting skill for our enlisted service members that align with naval warfighting needs and will increase operational readiness. USNCC's naval-relevant degree programs focus on improving critical thinking skills and deliver operationally relevant education that is readily accessible, low cost, scalable, and fully transferable to four-year accredited academic institutions. Currently, the USNCC has over 3,500 students enrolled in eight different academic programs and plans to increase enrollment to 25,000 students by FY-27. Additional resources to continue this expansion will be critical in meeting the mission of the USNCC and realizing its impact to the

Fleet. Enhancing critical thinking and technical skills will better prepare our force to succeed in complex and uncertain future engagements. The USNCC provides a decisive advantage that allows our Sailors to outperform and outthink our adversaries.

## **PAY AND COMPENSATION**

We have highly-skilled young men and women standing watch in our combat information centers on our ships in the Bab-al-Mandeb today, who are deftly identifying threats, and determining which weapons to engage to neutralize those threats in highly trafficked waterways in a matter of seconds. Under these extremely stressful conditions, our Sailors are delivering prompt and precise action that with one wrong decision could lead to catastrophic loss of lives. The stakes are high and the responsibilities and expectations we have of these Sailors is just as high. In order to recruit and retain a highly qualified and professional force such as this, we must re-examine how we value the jobs of our service members and adequately compensate them commensurate with the scope of responsibilities and expectations that we have of them.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our Sailors and families face many challenges and experience many of the same barriers to service that have been constant since the creation of the all-volunteer force. When the quality of life needs and barriers to service for both our Sailors and our families are adequately addressed, our warfighters are better focused and are more positively connected to our Navy. As we continue to face difficult decisions, we must continue to ensure our warfighters are appropriately equipped, trained and postured to fight and win. We must also ensure their well-being is in mind, providing a quality of life commensurate with the scope of responsibilities placed on our Sailors and their families every day. I am proud and honored to represent the talented Sailors serving our

Navy today and with the support of our Navy families, I am confident we will remain the most dominant maritime force the world has ever seen. The work that you do enables us to remain ready for any situation. I thank you and I look forward to your questions.