

Department of the Air Force

Testimony

Before the House Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies



Senior Enlisted Leader Perspective

Witness Statement of
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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 to join my fellow service Senior Enlisted Advisors to address issues impacting the lives of our Airmen and their families.

America's national interests are under attack around the world. China remains our pacing challenge, continuing to expand its military and intimidate our allies and partners. This threat is compounded by Russia, Iran, and North Korea, who are developing and fielding more advanced military capabilities. To face these threats, we must leverage our greatest strength, our Airmen, to continue to outcompete our adversaries. We cannot afford for our Airmen to be distracted by housing challenges, lack of access to childcare and healthcare, or other quality of life issues. Yet years of continuing resolutions and fiscal constraints have forced the Air Force to manage increased risk, creating hardships for our Airmen. We ask for your continued partnership to overcome these challenges and to ensure our Airmen can focus on their main thing—defending the Nation.

Aging Fleet and Excess Infrastructure

Since the end of the Cold War, the average age of our aircraft fleet increased from 17 to almost 32 years old. Our older aircraft retain their lethality, but require more maintenance, with maintenance actions per aircraft more than doubling from 1997 to 2024, and the average time for each action also increasing, putting an ever-growing strain on our Airmen. Excess infrastructure poses a similar challenge. Since the 1990s, the Air Force experienced a 60% reduction in fighter squadrons, a 40% reduction in Airmen, but only a 15% reduction in basing in the continental United States. Our Airmen are using limited resources to maintain infrastructure we do not need.

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) identified 1,200 vacant buildings across our installations, which could be demolished to reallocate funds towards maintaining our mission essential infrastructure.

Support to Families

Families are a source of support and stability, and despite all the stress and strain we put them through they do not get paid a dime. We must ensure our families have access to affordable, available, quality childcare programs to keep our Airmen focused on the mission. Child Development Center direct staffing levels increased to 86% in December 2024 compared to only 72% in October 2022. The childcare fee discount initiated for employees of our Child and Youth Programs helped drive this increase.

Military Family Housing and Dormitories

Every Airman requires safe and affordable housing, whether they live in dormitories, privatized military housing, or government-owned housing. Our current dormitory inventory consists of 58,476 permanent party beds with an additional 45,612 beds for Airmen in basic military and technical training. To combat aging infrastructure and less than desirable living conditions for some, the DAF is investing an estimated \$1.1B from FY22-FY26 in Facilities Sustainment, Restoration and Modernization (FSRM) funds, the largest FSRM investment in permanent party dorms in more than a decade.

There is also a need to add new dormitory capacity at many installations. As of late February of this year, three bases had dormitory bed deficits of at least 300 beds, and Nellis Air Force Base had a deficit of 590 beds. While the quality of life requirements for permanent party dorms established in the FY22 NDAA will be met, the need for new dormitories to expand capacity is clear. We must continue to invest in the Military Construction required to house our Airmen.

For FY25, we are investing \$550M in privatized and government-owned housing. The DAF's privatized housing inventory includes 52,181 units at 63 installations. For some of our privatized housing projects, economics of the deals failed to meet expectations. We plan to restructure some of these deals to prevent defaults on existing loans and to ensure the condition of these homes remains acceptable.

The DAF's FY25 government-owned housing inventory includes 15,271 units, but this inventory is being challenged by slow declines in quality as the housing inventory ages. We have \$78M in Family Housing Construction funds for FY25, and the DAF is working to prioritize needs and plan construction for future years of the Family Housing Construction program.

Access to Quality Healthcare

The Defense Health Agency's (DHA) recent consolidation of all military treatment facilities, though well-intentioned, has encountered obstacles, including long wait times, for both routine and specialized care, forcing some to seek off-base care and shoulder out-of-pocket expenses, delaying care and degrading readiness. To address systemic hurdles in the Military Health System, DHA and military branches are committed to identifying specialties and locations where access standards are not being met and collaborating with managed care contractors to develop and execute plans for bringing those provider networks up to standard. However, achieving this goal is complicated by the Military Health System's lower reimbursement rates for civilian providers relative to private insurers. This creates reluctance for some healthcare providers to accept military patients, further stressing already limited networks of providers in some areas.

Mental Health

Mental health continues to be a priority to ensure our Airmen are equipped to handle the stress and challenges inherent in the Profession of Arms. We are prioritizing training for all Airmen to recognize and manage the most common mental health challenges faced in forward operating environments. Historically, mental health issues have been a significant driver of in-theater evacuations.

There is a national shortage of mental health providers, and Airmen are not exempt from this shortfall. We do not have enough mental health clinicians to meet growing demand, which has averaged 36,000 new patients a year across the DAF. Additionally, current staffing ratios of 80% active duty and 20% civilian do not afford active-duty clinicians time to manage their direct-care case load and satisfy their own readiness requirements. Furthermore, the nationwide shortage of civilian clinicians makes it difficult to fill these positions.

Suicide Prevention

We are taking a data-driven, public-health approach, informed by best practices from academia, industry, and recommendations from a DoD-chartered independent review committee to prevent any Airmen from ever making the choice to end their life. The Wingman Guardian Connect program is one prime example of this approach. The program focuses on building connections in small peer networks and establishing healthy group norms. Implementation began in the third quarter of FY24 at nine high-risk Air Force installations. It is leveraging continuous process improvement and data collection to ensure positive impact as it expands to more locations. Full DAF implementation is anticipated to be completed in CY27.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

We insist on a culture where Airmen refuse to accept harassment and assault within our ranks. We see this change actively occurring because while reporting increased, prevalence

decreased—meaning our Airmen are supporting each other and trusting the system to do what it was designed to achieve. We are on track with Independent Review Commission directives to establish Congressionally mandated Sexual Assault and Response and Integrated Primary Prevention Workforces by FY27. We have currently hired 80% of the 630 positions, with 341 of 387 Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce positions filled and 165 of 243 Sexual Assault Response Workforce positions filled. These personnel are essential to improving care and developing preventative culture for our Airmen and our Air Force.

Enlisted Pay & Compensation

Enlisted pay is directly linked to readiness, retention and quality of life. Thank you for supporting the 4.5% pay increase. This raise increases our ability to compete with the private sector for talent. The 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation found regular military compensation remains strong, but it recommended that DOD continue efforts in childcare and spouse employment initiatives, to remain competitive with non-military employment options.

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. Our Airmen, backed by these incredible families and supportive communities, stand ready, but we cannot maintain our lethal and ready force without your help to increase our funding and divest excess infrastructure. My fellow service senior enlisted advisors and I are honored to provide insight into the quality of life issues impacting our service. The decisions we make today, will directly influence our ability to defend our Nation for generations to come.