

RECORD VERSION

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE

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RELATED AGENCIES COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**

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OVERSIGHT HEARING - QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE MILITARY

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Introduction: 250 Years of the American Soldier

The Army's motto, "This We'll Defend," is an unwavering promise we make to the American people every day. For 250 years, the American Soldier has been the underwriter of that promise, standing as the bedrock of our nation's defense.

Our commitment to our people is yielding tangible results, especially when it comes to our most valuable asset, our people.

Recruiting

I am proud to report that the United States Army is growing stronger every day. Our most fundamental responsibility in delivering combat-ready formations begins with attracting the right talent. On that front, we have a significant success story to share.

Fueled by the patriotism of America's youth and the work of our incredible recruiting professionals, we saw a dramatic turnaround. While 2024 recruiting numbers reached 55,150 of a 55,000 goal, in 2025 we surpassed our ambitious goal of 61,000, bringing in 62,050 new Soldiers four months ahead of schedule. This success is not a signal to relax; it is proof that our strategy is working, and we are committed to sustaining this momentum into the future.

Retention

Of course, attracting new talent is only half the battle. Last year, we exceeded our retention goals, proving that when Soldiers serve in the Army, they see the value in our mission and our way of life. Strengthening the Army profession is fundamentally about retention, and we are transforming our strategies to ensure we have the right talent, with the right skills, where and when the nation needs them.

This transformation is data-driven. For our enlisted force, we are using new metrics to identify our top performers, allowing us to precisely target incentives and resources to retain the very best. For our officers, programs like the Voluntary Transfer Incentive Program, or VTIP, give them unprecedented flexibility to align their career path with their skills and passions, which is critical for retaining our highly valuable mid-career leaders where we need them most. We are also making targeted investments to retain the Army's technical experts, our warrant officers, through specialized training and retention bonuses.

These initiatives are working. In 2025, we achieved 110% of our retention goal. By offering longer-term reenlistment options for stability, providing flexible career paths, and using data to

manage our talent, we are proving our commitment to managing careers, not just numbers. Every experienced NCO and officer we retain represents a massive return on the nation's investment. Their skills, leadership, and institutional knowledge are irreplaceable assets that we cannot afford to lose.

Quality of Life

Our successes in recruiting and retention are directly tied to a simple truth: Americans join the Army to be Soldiers. They volunteer to be part of a lethal team, to be brilliant at the basics, and to defend this nation. When we meet that expectation, we succeed. But when we force them to divert their focus from the mission to fight battles against bureaucratic inefficiency, or poor living conditions, we risk failing them. The Army's relentless pursuit of Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) is not possible without addressing those matters that directly impact their well-being. Specifically, quality of life for servicemembers, their families, and the broader defense community depends significantly on the quality, suitability, and condition of their living and workspaces. Quality of life cannot be an afterthought, we must set conditions to promote Soldier and family cognitive, physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being and optimal performance.

Housing

It all starts with where our Soldiers live. We cannot expect them to be mentally and physically lethal on the battlefield if their barracks suffer from chronic maintenance issues. We are prioritizing this challenge and rapidly executing Secretary Hegseth's directed comprehensive review of the entire force. But we are not waiting for the results to act. In Fiscal Year 2026, the Army is making a significant, multifaceted investment across our entire barracks portfolio. We are building for the future, investing in Military Construction projects to provide new and modernized bed spaces. On October 6, Secretary Hegseth created the Barracks Task Force to ensure that all Service members live in clean, comfortable, and safe barracks. A "find and fix" approach is underway to address and relocate Service members from substandard living conditions and to fix defective door locks, windows, lighting, etc. Also underway is the contracting process for FSRM projects to address HVAC, plumbing, electrical and other structural upgrades. Simultaneously, we are fully funding 100% of our barracks sustainment requirements. This comprehensive approach is essential, as taking care of our Soldiers is fundamental to maintaining a ready and lethal force. However, we are fighting an uphill battle to decrease our facilities maintenance backlog amid unpredictable funding and government

shutdowns. A deferred maintenance issue doesn't just impact morale; it incurs higher costs later and potentially exposes our Warfighters to health and performance threats. A repair that costs thousands today can become a multi-million-dollar renovation if neglected due to unpredictable funding. A Soldier's focus must be on their mission, not on a work order that can't be filled.

Separate from the challenge of maintenance is the fundamental problem of new construction. We are ruthlessly prioritizing our resources; however, regulations often make it nearly 70% more expensive to build on an installation as opposed to right outside the gate. We are exploring every avenue to solve this, and we are not waiting. This year, we will open our first fully privatized apartments at Fort Irwin, California. This pilot program is a critical learning opportunity, and we are applying the hard-won lessons from past family housing privatization to ensure this new effort has stringent oversight and accountability. Our goal is to find the most efficient and effective ways to build the modern facilities our Soldiers require to live, train, and focus on their warfighting mission.

Dining (Nutrition)

While housing presents a complex, long-term infrastructure challenge, we are simultaneously delivering transformative changes to our Soldiers' daily lives right now. A prime example of this is how we are revolutionizing Soldier dining.

The goal is simple: to feed our Soldiers like the warrior athletes they are. This transformation, known as campus-style dining, fundamentally changes how we fuel our force. It moves us away from a rigid, post-war model to a flexible system that gives Soldiers access to quality, nutritious food.

This isn't just about convenience; it is a warfighting imperative. A well-nourished Soldier is a more lethal Soldier. This initiative ensures that our formations, regardless of their work or training schedules, have access to the high-quality fuel they need to maintain peak physical and cognitive performance.

At key installations including Fort Hood, Fort Carson, Fort Bragg, Fort Stewart, and soon Fort Drum, we are piloting this new approach. The Army's priority is to get the model right at these select locations first. By focusing on providing greater flexibility and moving away from dated facilities with limited hours, we can refine the process. Once the initiative is proven, our intent is to scale it across the force.

Training

Taking care of our people is the foundation, but the purpose of that foundation is to support the structure of a lethal, combat-ready force. The lifeblood of that force is tough, realistic training. Our Soldiers join the Army to be part of a team and to master their craft. Job satisfaction, in many ways, equals quality of life. Our responsibility is to give them that opportunity, which means we must relentlessly identify and eliminate the inhibitors that get in the way of accomplishing this.

For too long, our commanders' and Soldiers' calendars have been crowded with mandatory requirements that pull them away from their core warfighting tasks. We have declared war on these distractors. We are executing a relentless campaign to identify and eliminate burdensome, ineffective, and duplicative requirements. Every hour a platoon sergeant or company commander spends on a redundant administrative task is an hour they are not training, mentoring, or leading their Soldiers. By removing these hurdles, we demonstrate trust in our leaders and free them to focus on what they do best: building lethal teams. Our goal is simple: to maximize the time and energy our small units spend on the range, in the field, and in simulations, mastering the fundamentals of shoot, move, and communicate.

But tough training is not cheap. It requires fuel, ammunition, and access to modern training areas. Our ability to execute realistic training depends on timely funding to apply those resources when needed. Delays in funding measures reduce training repetitions, limit realism, and force commanders to make risk-based tradeoffs that directly impact readiness. We are committed to being good stewards of every dollar, but our efforts are hampered. To be blunt, you cannot build readiness for large scale combat operations on a month-to-month budget.

We are actively transforming our training to reflect the brutal realities of the modern battlefield and evolving threats. Our Combat Training Centers at Fort Irwin and Fort Polk are replicating a multi-domain environment saturated with drones, relentless electronic warfare, and the challenges of contested logistics. We must ensure our Soldiers are training for the fight they face today, not the one they fought yesterday. The formula for a combat-ready unit is timeless: discipline, a mastery of the basics, and good leadership. General George has been clear that without a ruthless adherence to these fundamentals—marksmanship, physical fitness, and medical skills—units will face failure on the battlefield. Crucially, this proficiency must also be forged at home station. If a unit has to wait for a Combat Training Center rotation to become proficient, then we as an Army have failed them.

Finally, we must leverage technology like augmented and virtual reality simulators to give Soldiers more repetitions on everything from their core tasks to emerging skills like electronic warfare. But technology is not a replacement for training; it is an accelerant. As Secretary Driscoll has highlighted, when we put innovative equipment into the hands of Soldiers, they become our best innovators. We must create adaptive warriors who can thrive and win in any environment, against any threat.

Conclusion: An Unbreakable Promise

Our people are the heart of our Army. They are the engine of our combat power and our single greatest advantage on any battlefield. Our commitment to you, to the American people, and to them, is that we will continue to build a force worthy of their service. The Army's ongoing commitment to Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) requires a focus on the foundational, non-negotiable elements of Soldier well-being: sleep and nutrition. Well-maintained barracks and modern dining facilities are not just amenities; they are critical to ensuring our soldiers are rested, well-fed, and ready to fight. This acknowledgment of their needs along with concerted actions to drive change are powerful tools for retention, proving that when the Army invests in its people, its people will invest in the Army. We will provide them with the quality of life they need, the leadership they deserve, and the cutting-edge training required to dominate any adversary.

Our Soldiers are our credentials. They are the living embodiment of our motto, and they are the reason I can sit before you with absolute confidence and reaffirm our unbreakable promise: "This We'll Defend." To uphold this promise, we need your partnership. Your support in providing timely, predictable, and sustained funding is the single most important factor in ensuring we can provide our Soldiers with the quality of life they deserve and the readiness our nation requires.

Thank you.