

United States Air Force



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

Quality of Life in the Military

Witness Statement of
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March 25, 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Carter, Ranking Member Wasserman Shultz, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. It is an honor to represent the Airmen of the United States Air Force and the families who are the bedrock of our ability to defend the Nation. The appropriations provided by this subcommittee have played a meaningful role in shaping our military readiness, and I appreciate your sustained support for the people who execute the mission every day.

My focus as the 21st Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force is on ensuring our Airmen are trained, equipped, and ready to win today and in the future. Our Airmen are our most lethal and adaptable weapon system. But that weapon system requires maintenance. When an Airman is focused on concerns surrounding the quality of their housing, the stability of their family, or their access to care, they are not fully focused on the mission. They become distracted. In the Profession of Arms, distractions have serious consequences. A lapse in focus is a risk we cannot afford.

Our job is to remove those distractions. My testimony today is an honest accounting of how we are taking care of our people, where friction points exist, and where we require your continued support and investment.

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT: PEOPLE, PLATFORMS, AND LETHALITY

Secretary Meink has made it clear: Our Air Force cannot choose between people and platforms. We need both. A 6th-generation fighter will sit on the runway without an Airman to fly, fix, and support it. The most advanced hardware is worthless if we do not have the skilled and focused talent to dominate the fight with it. Providing a 6th-generation quality of life is a direct investment in lethality and the defense of our Nation.

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SUPPORT TO FAMILIES: READINESS STARTS AT HOME

Our Airmen do not serve alone. Behind every one of them is a family, and the stressors they face are a direct tax on our readiness and lethality, reminding us that warfighting readiness truly begins at home. These pressures impact our families in several critical areas, from accessing reliable healthcare and childcare, to managing household finances.

Childcare is a critical readiness issue. The Department of the Air Force's 2023 Child and Youth Facility Master Plan identified 35 MILCON requirements to address capacity shortfalls. The Air Force greatly appreciates the Congressional support to address the shortfalls, and to date, 17 of these requirements have been funded which will add 2,780 spaces and reduce the overall capacity shortfall to 1,620 spaces.

Access to medical care is a critical readiness issue as well. Some private sector providers may be reluctant to accept TRICARE patients, which can limit healthcare options for our military families. Other factors also impact access to care, such as local or national provider shortages.

Ultimately, we cannot ask our Airmen to serve their nation without providing the right support for their family. Taking care of our families is foundational to readiness and essential to retaining the talent we need in our force.

MILITARY FAMILY HOUSING AND DORMITORIES

A safe, clean, and comfortable place to live is foundational to the success of our Airmen. Following the Barracks Task Force, we put eyes on our dorm rooms to ensure we understood the scope of how our Airmen are living. The Air Force is meeting the Department's standards, but we view those standards as the floor, not the ceiling. There is more work to be done.

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We are grateful to the members of this subcommittee for their support for the FY26 Military Construction (MILCON) appropriations bill. We are continuing to execute our largest Facilities, Sustainment, Restoration and Modernization (FSRM) investment in permanent party dorms in over a decade, an estimated \$1.1 billion since FY22. This investment has funded 149 projects in the last few years, with an additional 31 projects planned for FY26. These are part of a larger portfolio of projects at installations across the force, including Joint Base San Antonio, Texas; Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico; Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas; and Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico. Commanders and enlisted leaders are heavily involved in this process, leveraging Dorm Leaders to oversee each installation's dorm campus and ensure our junior enlisted reside in safe and comfortable facilities.

For our families in privatized housing, the message is equally clear: we are holding our partners accountable. We have invested considerable resources over the last five years to ensure that we hold our privatized project owners accountable. This includes meaningful changes such as the Tenant Bill of Rights, the Dispute Resolution processes, and the implementation of additional feedback mechanisms to ensure that our families receive quality customer service and maintenance services. We take housing concerns seriously, and we will continue to hold our Project Owners accountable with a focus on enhanced oversight, resident satisfaction and proper maintenance of homes. We are also committed to investing in and providing safe, quality and well-maintained government-owned homes, primarily at our overseas locations.

RECRUITING, RETENTION, AND TALENT MANAGEMENT

The Air Force met our recruiting goals in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025. Although we are proud of this accomplishment, our focus must shift to retention in critical fields. We have a moral

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obligation to ensure the talented force we recruit is not broken by the strain of an aging fleet and undermanned career fields. The average age of our aircraft fleet has increased from 17 to nearly 32 years since the Gulf War, more than doubling the maintenance actions required per aircraft. We cannot bring the best and brightest into our Air Force and then watch them struggle as they maintain an aging fleet, serve in undermanned career fields, and live and work in aging infrastructures across our installations. Our maintainers are working miracles on the flight line every single day. To out-pace threats, we must modernize our equipment and provide the environment necessary for our Airmen to remain the world's greatest Air Force.

We are working hard to keep the edge, and we are using every tool to acquire and retain talent. This includes leveraging our new Artificial Intelligence (AI) Action Team to examine solvable problems our Air Force faces and create solutions to make the lives of Airmen better. We have also had to make tough calls, prioritizing our combat squadrons at the expense of the units that train our next generation. Yours and the Administration's support for bonuses and other incentives is critical to retaining our most skilled personnel across every career field in the Air Force.

TOTAL FORCE CONSIDERATIONS

We are one Air Force. Our Guard and Reserve Airmen are in the fight every day. However, they face challenges the active duty does not. They are required to navigate a complex system of roughly 30 different duty statuses that create pay problems and significant administrative burdens. This friction is a self-inflicted wound to our readiness. I look forward to working with members of this committee to find innovative ways to streamline these processes.

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ELIMINATING CORROSIVES TO THE FORCE

Our Air Force is a professional organization built on a foundation of trust. Sexual assault is a corrosive issue that attacks this trust. Our primary effort against sexual assault is to forge a healthy command climate where such acts are not tolerated and where every Airman feels empowered to intervene. We are seeing tangible results from this focus on creating a healthy culture, including a decrease in estimated sexual assault prevalence in the active force in Fiscal Year 2023 for the first time in nearly 10 years.

The foundation of these efforts is the Integrated Primary Prevention and Sexual Assault Response Workforces – dedicated professionals whose primary mission is to empower leaders with the data to make decisions and ensure access to tools that will strengthen our culture, build resilience, and reduce the stigma associated with seeking support, whether for prevention or response. We remain committed to overcoming challenges to stand up the Integrated Primary Prevention and Sexual Assault Response workforces to fully staff these vital roles.

We must also address the effects of suicide on our Airmen and their units. Every loss is a tragedy that impacts our entire force. The foundation of this effort is a robust system of prevention, clinical care, and postvention. Although we are facing a national shortage of providers, we are working in a variety of ways to aid our Airmen with their mental health needs. Embedding mental health staff directly in our squadrons enables early intervention, allowing these experts to guide Airmen in need of mental care to military medical treatment facilities. Building peer-support networks is also a key part of our efforts. Your continued partnership is critical to ensuring the Air Force and the entirety of the Military Health System can provide timely access to care for our Airmen.

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CONCLUSION

Chairman Carter, Ranking Member Wasserman Schultz, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, we are making the tough calls necessary to build a force that can win. Taking care of our Airmen is not separate from readiness; it *is* readiness. I look forward to working with you to give our people and their families the support they have earned, so they can continue to do what they do best: fly, fight, and win. Thank you.